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Help Thou My Unbelief: Exploring the Secular Sources of our Clients' Doubts

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Issues of faith and doubt are often at the heart of religious clients' psychological and emotional suffering. As such, they are a topic of genuine therapeutic interest. Latter-day Saint therapists have a unique responsibility to help our religious clients work through their psychological concerns, as well as help them address their religious doubts when relevant in the therapeutic setting. We argue that many of the concerns fueling client faith crises spring from taken-for-granted assumptions absorbed from our larger secular culture. Further, these assumptions are radically different from – indeed, typically antithetical to – the premises upon many of our fundamental beliefs as Latter-day Saints rest. Indeed, these unacknowledged secular assumptions are often the source of our client's religious doubts in the first place because they are in fact toxic to sustaining a vibrant and coherent faith in the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ. By helping clients more carefully and critically examine their secular assumptions, Latter-day Saint therapists can do much to help their clients overcome or avoid otherwise fatal crises of faith and, in so doing, alleviate a great deal of unnecessary suffering.

“ . . . Doubt wisely; in strange way
 To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
 To sleep, or run wrong, is. On a huge hill,
 Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
 Reach her, about must and about must go,
 And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.”
 (John Dunne, *Satire III*, lines 76-82)

In the October General Conference of 2013, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf (2013) observed: “There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions” (p. 23). Indeed, as Karen Swallow Prior (2018) noted in her recent book, “scrutiny can be evidence of a living

faith – one that is active, growing, and bearing fruit . . . a faith that never feels challenged is most likely dead” (p. 106). Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to first dispel a common misconception about faith and the struggle for understanding. Some have assumed that anyone experiencing a crisis of faith must only be doing so because they have committed some sort of sin. As Elder Uchtdorf (2013) teaches, however: “Actually, it is not that simple” (p. 22).

Over the years, we have seen many individuals, both friends and family, experience periods of doubt – often intense – about the Church and its teachings.¹

1. Each of us has also at different times have wrestled with certain questions for which there were no easy or quick answers

Of course, in some instances, there were clear signs that these individuals were living their lives in ways that alienated them from the Spirit of God. In other cases, they simply chose to take offense at something a particular Church leader had said or done. Many times, however, the seeds of their doubts were primarily *intellectual* in nature. Of course, that does not mean that the seeds for those doubts were always the result of good scholarship or the most careful thinking and analysis. It only means that their concerns and questions were not intrinsically rooted in some *moral* failing or rebellious and sinful desire.

We have had friends, for example, who found themselves questioning their faith when they discovered that sacred temple rituals have changed (in some respects) over the past 150 years. Others who questioned their faith when they encountered statements made by early Church leaders that seemed to contradict current Church teachings. And yet others we know and love began questioning their faith when they learned that a particular teaching they thought was unchangeable doctrine turned out to be nothing of the sort. We have watched as some of our friends have called into question the spiritual authority of prophets and apostles because of the Church's teachings on sexuality, marriage, abortion, or other controversial political topics. "How can prophets speak for God," they asked, "and yet get things so wrong? How can I believe in prophetic authority when the Brethren seem to be enemies to social progress and espouse ideas so clearly on the wrong side of history?" We know of others who began to question their faith because they could not reconcile the latest theories and findings of science with the scriptural teachings they had grown up learning and believing. Then there are those whose doubts manifest a deep dissatisfaction with priesthood authority and the hierarchical structure of the Church, things they feel place unnecessary and burdensome constraints on their individual freedom and agency. Sadly, these few examples do not exhaust the issues and concerns that we have witnessed family members, friends, colleagues, students, and fellow ward members struggling with over the years – though we sincerely wish it did.

– a professional hazard, perhaps, of immersion in an academic world where skepticism and critique are cardinal virtues of the scholarly life.

By virtue of their background, therapeutic focus, and the nature of the population they typically serve, Latter-day Saint therapists frequently work with clients who are struggling with issues and concerns similar to those just mentioned. Indeed, for some clients, personal doubts about their religious beliefs and commitments, and even full-blown crises of faith, may be their primary reason for seeking counseling in the first place. For other clients, however, their doubts and suspicions may instead be a hidden or underlying source of anguish, revealed over time only as we discover that what initially seemed to be a psychological or emotional struggle is actually rooted in an even deeper spiritual or religious struggle. In many cases, religion might be so integral to a client's life that fully teasing apart psychological and emotional issues from religious issues is all but impossible. Whatever the case, it is not uncommon for issues of faith and doubt to be at the heart of our clients' psychological and emotional struggles, and, consequently, a frequent topic of therapeutic concern. In light of this, Latter-day Saint therapists have a unique responsibility to not only help their religious clients work through psychological and emotional struggles, but also to shoulder the challenge of helping those same individuals address their religious or spiritual doubts when those doubts arise in the therapeutic setting. Like the distraught father who pleaded "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24), there are many good Latter-day Saints who desire to remain faithful to the Restored Gospel, but who are not able to resolve their intellectual and spiritual concerns without loving guidance and insight from a trusted source. As Latter-day Saint therapists, professionals who – as Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1974) taught – have our "citizenship in the kingdom, but [carry a] passport into the professional world" (p. 1), we have a responsibility to do all we can to help such people navigate not only their psychological troubles, but their spiritual ones as well. It is on this challenge, and how to most thoughtfully and fruitfully meet it, that we wish to focus our analysis.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

We must begin by acknowledging that the pain and frustration that accompanies faith crises is very real,

that the bouts of mental and emotional anguish, the gnawing doubts, and disappointments that fuel so many sleepless nights are not mere affectations. Having said that, however, we also believe that in a great many cases the struggles surrounding faith and religious commitment that so many of our clients undergo are in large measure unnecessary and avoidable – though perhaps not easily, and certainly not without serious effort being made. In short, we wish to argue that many of the questions and doubts that constitute the essential “stuff” of so many of our clients’ contemporary faith crises often spring from common (though often hidden) sources. We are convinced that many of the questions that can so easily seem as though they have no good answers – or seem only to have answers that diminish faith or lead to the abandonment of religious commitments – seem so because they are in fact grounded in questionable, typically secular, premises. In other words, it is not so much the particular questions we have regarding our faith – or even the doubts that may be generating those questions – that is the most central problem to be faced here. Rather, what we wish to argue here is that the real problem we face (both as therapists and clients dealing with sincere religious doubts) is the too-often taken-for-granted secular assumptions at the root of so many of those doubts, and which ultimately (and problematically) frame how we are to think about such things as: God, the Church, Priesthood Authority, Sexuality, Moral Agency, Science, Reason, and the nature and meaning of Faith and Truth.

While the struggles so many have as they try to make sense of their faith, of scripture, and of prophetic teachings are clearly both authentic and agonizing, perhaps the real source of frustration and confusion is that those who struggle are so often looking for the corner of a round room. Perhaps, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks (2014) has suggested, we have not been sufficiently attentive to the fact that:

... on many important subjects involving religion, Latter-day Saints think differently than many others. When I say that Latter-day Saints “think differently,” I do not suggest that we have a different way of reasoning in the sense of how we think. I am referring to the fact that on many important subjects our assumptions – our starting points or major premises – are different from many of our friends and associates. They are also

different from many assumptions currently used in the media and in other common discourse. (p. 3)

Consequently, it is all-too-often the case that we have, both as a people and as individuals, however naively and innocently, mingled the philosophies (and psychologies) of men with scripture, and in so doing, create for ourselves much unnecessary confusion, frustration, doubt, and anger. As noted historian Patrick Q. Mason (2016) has suggested:

One of the problems we have in Mormonism is that we have loaded too much in the Truth Cart. And when anything in the cart starts to rot a bit, or look unseemly upon further inspection, some have a tendency to overturn the entire cart or seek a refund for the whole lot. We have loaded so much into the Truth Cart largely because we have wanted to have the same kind of certainty about our religious claims – down to rather obscure doctrinal issues – as we do about scientific claims. . . . Many of the things which trouble people are things that we probably should never have been all that dogmatic about in the first place.

Professor Mason’s description of how some respond to their doubts will strike some readers here as painfully familiar, having no doubt worked with any number of clients who were very much in the process of “overturn[ing] the entire cart or seek[ing] a refund for the whole lot” regarding their religious beliefs and Church membership. Our hope here, however, is to provide some helpful insights for addressing such situations and the concerns of such clients. Therefore, we must now turn to a deeper exploration of just how different Latter-day Saint assumptions are, how these “different” assumptions can resolve some of the concerns our clients have, and how we might be able to help our clients recognize and understand their own assumptions (as well as the problematic implications of those assumptions).

A central plank of our argument here is that many of our clients’ most basic and most frequently professed beliefs as Latter-day Saints actually hinge on very different premises than the ones they may have unwittingly absorbed from the larger, secular world because of their engagement with and immersion in it. And, because this is so, the premises of their *questions* about those beliefs, begetting as they often do deeply painful crises of faith, matter a great deal. In short,

if the premises upon which our client's doubts are based are in fact inadequate to the task of understanding the meaning of their religious beliefs and practices in the first place, then perhaps we might help them to resolve (or even avoid) a crisis in faith by guiding them in recognizing the alien (often toxic) nature of those premises. This would be especially important given that in most cases the premises out of which our client's faith crises flow are typically unquestioned, unexamined, and, thus, remain hidden from critical notice, left to operate in profound and yet totally obscure ways. Perhaps, as Latter-day Saint therapists, we might help our clients begin to take seriously Elder Uchtdorf's (2013) invitation to "first doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith" by not only inviting them to more carefully and critically examining some of the unquestioned "secular certainties" upon which so many of their doubts seem founded, but also showing them concretely how such critical examination can be done. And, if it should turn out that those certainties are less than certain, less than the solid and stable foundation we and our clients sometimes take them to be, then it might just be that there is a way out of what otherwise seem like the insoluble conundrums of fatal crises of faith.

In his essay "The Overlooked Bondage of Our Common Sense," James E. Faulconer (2014) trenchantly observed:

The tightest cords of bondage are those we are unaware of. The most willing slave does not recognize that she is a slave, thinking that what she does is what she has chosen to do, though she has been manipulated into doing it. We are most in danger of this particular bondage when what we think or do seems "perfectly natural" or "perfectly reasonable." The things that we think are beyond question are the very things that can most easily deceive us to the point of bondage.

In other words, while our clients' may well be sincerely trying to live their lives in harmony with what they take to be gospel teachings, they nonetheless may have absorbed certain ways of thinking, certain commonly accepted ideas, certain values and perspectives, that are actually quite toxic to a vibrant and coherent faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One reason that such ways of thinking are so easily and smoothly

absorbed and adopted is because they seem so commonsensical, so ordinary and reasonable, simply the way things really are. And, they can seem to be so precisely because they are so seldom, if ever, seriously questioned. Indeed, it is not uncommon for heretofore faithful, believing Latter-day Saints to slowly (and sometimes surprisingly) begin to realize that what they actually believe is neither what they thought they believed nor what they may have long professed to believe. Many religious clients find the experience of burgeoning unbelief and "creeping doubt" to be greatly distressing, especially when they do not understand where their doubts are coming from or what they can do with them. Simply being encouraged to doubt their doubts, but not being provided with the tools or skills or the alternative perspectives necessary to successfully do so, can sometimes prove to be quite frustrating and even more discouraging. Helping our clients learn how to question their own assumptions – particularly those masquerading as secular certainties – is one vital way in which we as faithful, believing therapists can be of genuine service to clients struggling with unbelief and doubt.

HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS

In the opening paragraphs of his powerful essay *Men Without Chests*, the famous writer and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis provides an excellent example of exactly how this sort of thing can happen. Lewis begins his essay by discussing a subtle way in which relativism (moral and otherwise) can be insinuated into our thinking. He does this by examining a seemingly innocuous passage in a commonly used textbook for high school students of his day, a book he dubs *The Green Book*.² The authors of the textbook, Lewis notes, relate a story in which the famous poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge overhears two tourists describing a waterfall, one of them calling the waterfall "sublime" and the other calling it "pretty." The textbook authors then write:

When the man said *This is sublime*, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying

2. No connection whatsoever to the title or topic of the recent Oscar-winning movie.

was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the word "Sublime,"* or shortly, *I have sublime feelings . . .* This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something; and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings. (Lewis, 2001, pp. 2-3)

Lewis (2001) notes that, "The schoolboy who reads this passage in *The Green Book* will believe two propositions: firstly, that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and secondly, that all such statements are unimportant" (p. 3). In other words, in studying this text students come not only learn the fundamentals of English grammar and usage (as intended), but far more subtly and insidiously they also come to learn what Lewis calls moral subjectivism.

According to Lewis scholar Adam C. Pelsler (2017), "[Moral] Subjectivism is the view that value claims such as 'Murder is wrong,' which might seem to be claims about objective (mind independent) values, are simply reports about the subjective emotions of the speaker (e.g., 'I have a disapproving feeling toward murder'), which are no more about objective values than statements such as 'I have an itch' or 'I'm going to be sick'" (p. 7). Now, Lewis is clear that the book's authors have said none of these things, at least not explicitly. Rather, he notes, "The pupils are left to do for themselves the work of extending the same treatment to all predicates of value: and no slightest obstacle to such extension is placed in their way" (2001, p. 4). In the end, Lewis' concern is not so much with the authors' intentions behind what they have written, whether they are being nefarious or simply naïve and sloppy, but "with the effect their book will certainly have on the schoolboy's mind" (p. 5). He continues:

Their words are that we 'appear to be saying something very important' when in reality we are 'only saying something about our own feelings'. No schoolboy will be able to resist the suggestion brought to bear upon him by that word *only*. I do not mean, of course, that he will make any conscious inference from what he reads to a general philosophical theory that all values are subjective and trivial. The very power of [the book's authors] depends on the fact that they are dealing with a boy: a boy who thinks he is 'doing' his 'English prep' and has no notion that ethics, theology, and politics are all at stake. It is not a theory they put into his mind,

but an assumption, which ten years hence, its origins forgotten and its presence unconscious, will condition him to take one side in a controversy which he has never recognized as a controversy at all. (p. 5)

In short, without really recognizing what is happening, the students' minds and values are subtly being shaped here so that they will in time come to view the world in particular ways, and consequently, assume particular values. Indeed, this shaping process is so subtle (and actually involves far more sources of influence than just one English grammar textbook) that its fruit seldom ripens until many years have passed.

Lewis's central worry, both in this particular essay and many others, is the way in which the metaphysical assumptions (and their attendant values) that undergird the passages that students read in this textbook (and many similar others) exert a powerful though unnoticed influence on the development of the students' most basic understanding of themselves, of the world, and of God. The influence of these hidden assumptions and values is so powerful precisely because they are latent, things merely implied in passing, inscribed in a sort of invisible ink on the white space between words and sentences on a page. Such indoctrination – and make no mistake this is a process of indoctrination – takes place by means of a sort of educational and cultural osmosis through which an entire worldview slowly accretes over time like sediment in a river delta, both taking shape in and giving shape to the student's mind, desires, and aspirations. It is only over time that this process manages to turn young, eager, trusting students, Lewis argues, into "men without chests." Indeed, as Lewis (1970a) elsewhere writes, "the sources of unbelief among young people today do not lie in those young people. The outlook which they have . . . is a backwash from an earlier period. It is nothing intrinsic to themselves which holds them back from the Faith" (p. 116).

If Lewis' example is both particularly illustrative and generally applicable, as we believe it is, then it has much to teach about how exactly it is our clients can come to possess certain perspectives and assumptions, taking them for granted as mere commonsense, as they go about trying to make sense of themselves, God, others, and the world. Additionally, Lewis provides us with an important warning about the dangerous consequences that attend any attempt to understand

one's religious commitments and faith in the context of questions that arise out of unrecognized secular assumptions – assumptions masquerading as confirmed certainties, received wisdom, and common knowledge. After all, Lewis (1970a) contends, “a man whose mind was formed in a period of cynicism and disillusion, cannot teach of hope or fortitude” (p. 116).

In a related essay, Lewis tackles what he takes to be the central challenge of Christian apologetics, or the direct and explicit defense of the reasonableness and coherence of the Christian faith. Lewis recognizes that while it is a worthy endeavor in its own right, the formal work of apologetics faces an immense challenge in its efforts to win hearts and minds, strengthen the faith commitments of believers, and invite others to “come unto Christ.” He writes:

We can make people (often) attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible . . . Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics, or Astronomy [*and, as a psychologist, I would add Psychology*], we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. *It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism [i.e., secularism] that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books.* (Lewis, 1970b, p. 93; emphasis added)

Professor Lewis's point here is that ideas, facts, findings, insights, arguments, or what have you, do not come into the world, and are not communicated to us, as isolated atoms of information, as bits of knowledge existing pristinely independent of context or background suppositions. Rather, the information we (and our clients) glean from the textbooks we read, the podcasts we listen to, the Facebook posts we read, the memes we share, the lectures we attend, the movies we stream and television shows we watch, is always grounded in some worldview, some set of assumptions about the nature of the world and what about it is worth knowing or saying. For example, despite the pervasiveness of what has been termed “the myth of neutrality” (Slife, Reber, & Lefevor, 2012), a very popular modern myth about the nature of science,

educational researcher Kathy Hall (2003) reminds us, “No knowledge is neutral, but rather is always based on some . . . perception of reality and on some . . . perspective of what is important to know” (p. 176). Thus, Lewis cautions us to sup carefully as we learn and study so that we do not consume a rival worldview, one hostile to our Christianity, one that seeks to repudiate and replace it, without a clear awareness and understanding of what exactly it is we are doing and what its likely consequences might prove to be.

SECULAR LITURGIES

In a spirit similar to that of Professor Lewis, Christian philosopher and cultural critic James K. A. Smith (2016) has written extensively on what he identifies as “secular liturgies” (see also, Smith, 2009, 2012, 2014). Typically understood to refer to religious activities and rituals, most often public in nature, by which individuals worship together, liturgies constitute “identity-forming practices” (Smith, 2012, p. 161) that are meant to shape and refine the contours of one's religious life and self-understanding in a very concrete and embodied and social manner. “For those who practice faith,” Smith (2016) writes, “faith takes practice. And such practice is embodied and material; it is communal and liturgical; it involves eating and drinking, dancing and kneeling, painting and singing” (pp. 160-161). As such, liturgical practices ground and guide and nurture our desires and imagination in ways that define for us the meanings of our lives in subtle, nuanced, and intimate ways because they are “loaded with an ultimate Story about who we are and what we're for” (Smith, 2016, p. 46). Smith (2016) notes, “they carry with them a kind of ultimate orientation” (p. 46) that points us toward a deeper understanding of our nature, purpose, the meaning of our lives, and those moral and spiritual goods to which we ought to aspire. One need only think of the ritual blessing and passing of the Sacrament every Sunday, the daily observance of the Law of Chastity or the Word of Wisdom, or the immersive and embodied nature of LDS temple worship to see how such things are liturgical in nature. This is especially clear as one considers how such ritual observances embody ways of conveying truth and deepening personal understanding quite different than we see in the systematic interpretation

of sacred texts, or the study of abstract doctrines and formal beliefs. Liturgies involve the whole person in what is at best only a partial cognitive or intellectual task of sense-making as they invite immersion in communal activity, rather than retreat into solitary critical reflection. As Richards and James (2020) note in their recent book *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes*, “the most important things in a culture usually go without being said” (p. 2).

Although usually associated with religion, Smith (2012) demonstrates “that there are practices and institutions that have the same function and force” as religious liturgies but which we do not recognize as such, even though they also embody “rituals and practices that shape our attunement to what is ultimate” (p. 161). Smith’s provocative and penetrating analysis shows that there are indeed secular liturgies that orient us toward a “rival understanding of the [Christian] good life” (p. 161), but which we – in our immersion in the secular world of common cultural practice that gives birth to, and sustains and nurtures, such a rival understanding – seldom ever recognize as being such at all. And, because we do not recognize the “secular liturgies” in which we participate to be liturgies in the first place, we have little sense of how they are continually shaping and guiding us toward new and different conclusions than those consonant with our faith. “Ultimately, Smith (2016) points out, “when such liturgies are *disordered*, aimed at rival kingdoms, they are pointing us away from our magnetic north in Christ” (p. 47). The predictable outcome, Smith (2016) notes, is that “Our loves and longings are steered wrong, not because we’ve been hoodwinked by bad ideas, but because we’ve been immersed in de-formative liturgies and not realized it. As a result, we absorb a very different Story about the *telos* of being human and norms of flourishing” (p. 47).

By way of example, Smith (2009) writes in considerable detail about such secular liturgies – or what he also terms “pedagogies of desire” (p. 24) – as “the liturgies of mall and market” (pp. 93-103), the liturgies of nationalism, entertainment, and the stadium (pp. 103-112), and the “liturgy of the university” (pp. 112-121). In each of these instances, Smith shows how the ordinary activities of people’s daily social and political lives are shot-through with assumptions about the nature of truth, God, the human soul, and the good life that

rival those that provide the conceptual foundation for genuine Christian worship and understanding. Unfortunately, because these activities are so commonplace, so utterly ordinary and widely shared, the nature of their underlying assumptions – and the potentially corrosive implications of those assumptions, both for our clients’ own self-understandings and for their understanding of the meaning and possibilities of their religious faith and covenants – often goes unnoticed, even as our clients’ doubts about their faith mount and their commitment to their covenants wanes.

EGOCENTRISM

Among the perspectives that these secular liturgies may instantiate for our clients is one in which human nature is taken to be fundamentally and inescapably egocentric. That is, in our larger culture, people are taught to see themselves as essentially self-contained individuals, continuously seeking gratification in a world of potential costs and benefits, and their relationships with others primarily in terms of the economic exchange of goods and services (see Wilkens & Sanford, 2009). One need not have ever taken a formal course in Rational Choice Theory from an Economics professor, or study Social Exchange Theory with a psychologist, to be initiated into a worldview in which all human motivation is reducible to self-interest and the quest for the maximization of personal pleasure (Gantt & Williams, 2019). One need only turn on the television and watch a few advertisements, take a trip to the local mall for some shopping, enter the workplace to earn one’s keep, or visit a marriage counselor for a bit of couple’s therapy (Reckwitz, 2020). In each instance, the forms of living and relationship that structure and give direction to the social practices in which clients engage, as well as the norms and expectations (both written and unwritten) that serve to maintain and enforce these practices, assume a world of fundamentally independent egos arrayed against one another in a relentless competition for scarce resources (Gantt & Burton, 2013). Social life is, according to the secular liturgies in play here, fundamentally a matter of negotiation, the weighing of risk and opportunity in an endless dance meant to secure maximum profit, whether in terms of such

goods as fame, personal happiness, wealth, security, or recognition and the love of others.

AUTONOMY AND DETERMINISM

In a related way, these secular liturgies nurture a self-understanding in which our clients have often come to see themselves as autonomous agents cast into a world of near-infinite choices, responsible only to themselves for the choices they make, uniquely able to define for themselves the moral quality (if any) and meaning of those choices. The promise of self-actualization and true fulfillment they have been taught comes through the unfettered freedom of the individual will. Likewise, they may have come to see life as essentially just a vast panoply of possibilities, any and all ripe for the taking. For some, one of the most important factors in determining our choices is personal preference and the guidance of individual desire. Thus, in much the same way one might choose a particular shirt or pair of shoes from among the various styles on offer in the parade of shop windows at the local mall, our clients may see the world as simply a place where they are to select whatever lifestyle happens to “work” best for them at the moment. Human agency, they may have come to believe, is “free agency,” or the fundamentally individual freedom to do whatever they happen to want, whenever they want, and however they might want (at least, that is, insofar as doing so does not restrict the freedom of another person to do the same). In fact, they may well interpret scriptural and prophetic teachings about agency in just this way, thereby making it all the harder to uncover the secular origins and nature of such an understanding of agency.³

Ironically, at the same time, it is important to note that some secular liturgies work to form our clients’ self-understanding such that they may believe that certain important areas of their lives fall outside the bounds of their exercise of agency or their meaningful participation. For example, clients may have come to believe that in regard to key features of their identity they are a species of “things to be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:14), beholden to the determinative forces of powerful abstractions, biological conditions, or contingent

socio-cultural forces operating outside of their awareness or control. Thus, on the one hand, they may envision themselves as “free agents,” choosing how and who they will be in a marketplace of enticing options; while, on the other hand, they are convinced that some of the most defining features of their identity are things in the formation of which they play no real, active part, and before which they are ultimately rendered more or less powerless.

SEXUALITY

Perhaps one of the best examples of this sort of thinking can be seen in the way some clients, reflecting back the general consensus of our larger secular culture, understand their sexuality. That is, having absorbed certain basic assumptions about the nature of human sexuality through various secular liturgies, our clients may believe (along with many in our modern world) that sexuality is essentially a mysteriously powerful abstraction that is the central fact of human identity and purpose, and, as such, functions as the basic source of many of our deepest feelings and desires. In this way, sexuality is taken to be the core element of personality that defines for us (*a priori*) who we really are, how we must feel, and how we must act – if, that is, we wish to live authentic and fulfilling lives. Our sexuality, we are informed, is that about us which we must choose to discover, explore, and embrace, and yet equally that about us which has been thrust upon us by forces beyond our control (e.g., by our genes). This widely accepted assertion is exemplified in Lehmillers’ (2018) popular textbook on the psychology of human sexuality:

As a starting point, it is useful to acknowledge that every single sexual act is the result of several powerful forces acting upon one or more persons. These forces included our individual psychology, our genetic background and evolved history, as well as the current social and cultural context in which we live. Some of these influences favor sexual activity, whereas others oppose it. Whether sex occurs at any given moment depends on which forces are strongest at the time. (p. 2)

In short, Lehmillers asserts that human sexual desires and relationships are best understood in much the same way that Newtonian physics might understand the motions and mutually influencing

3. For an excellent discussion of the difference between the scriptural concept of “moral agency” and the notion of “free agency,” see Judd (2005).

behaviors of planets and other physical objects (see Gantt & Williams, 2014).

In this secular view, sexual desire is not something we do, it is not an agentic and moral expression of meaningful relationships and purposes; rather, it is simply taken to be the effect of mechanical forces beyond our control (or, even, our awareness), forces that serve to constitute us as who we are and cannot help but be. "It is clear," Lehmiller (2018) states – echoing, we believe, the general consensus of both our discipline and our larger secular society – "that human sexuality is determined by multiple factors" (p. 20). Unfortunately, especially for Latter-day Saints struggling to make sense of their sexual desires and relationships, moral agency is seldom, if ever, thought to be one of those factors. In the moral context of the modern world, reconciliation with the inescapable givenness and power of one's sexuality resembles a sort of hopeless resignation to one's fate, but is nonetheless, at least in the eyes of many, something that is taken to be of paramount existential, psychological, and even political importance. Given the pervasiveness of such views, it is perhaps no surprise that so many of our clients are not at all accustomed to thinking through the possibility of reconciling their desires, sexual or otherwise, to the will of Christ. Instead, they assume that if they are to remain faithful to their covenants, they are thereby consigned to a life of unrelenting struggle against their sexual identity, required to deny their fundamental sexual nature, relegated to a constant war within themselves.

THE FACT-VALUE DICHOTOMY

Another way in which our clients' immersion in the secular liturgies of our day can foster serious religious concerns that present in therapy can be seen in the way these liturgies seduce into believing what scholars have termed the "fact-value dichotomy" (Marchetti & Marchetti, 2017). This term refers to the notion that there is a fundamental difference between those things that can be known to be true and those things that are merely matters of the personal preference of individuals. Intimately (and inextricably) connected to this dichotomy is the assumption that Reason, in the guise of Science, is the final authority on what can be known to be true and how it is to be known, while

Faith and Religion are held to be epistemologically suspect, hopelessly subjective in nature and speaking only of personal beliefs and private moral values. Indeed, because of this commonly assumed distinction, a product of the secular liturgies that pervade modern political and educational life, clients often feel an overwhelming demand to hold only those beliefs and engage in only those practices that can be shown to be valid in the light of the methods and findings of scientific rationality. And, should science happen not to confirm of their religious beliefs, clients may feel trapped by the sense that the only viable alternative available to them is fideism, the notion that because Reason and Faith are inescapably hostile to one another religious belief can only ever be unjustifiable and irrational.

In this way, religious faith can quickly come to be seen as little more than a "crutch" for those who have yet to arrive at certainty, or who are not strong enough to "face reality" by accepting the facts of the world as modern science has revealed them. Faith, then, is reduced to a sort of psychological coping strategy for those who are unable to accept the world as it really is in all its harsh, unrelenting pointlessness and finitude – a reality the rational mind of the scientist knows to be true irrespective of whatever the irrational mind of the believer might hope to be the case. Evidence, we are told, is the currency of Reason and Science, and thus the source of their authority, while blind faith, belief without foundation, is said to be the essence of religious life (see, e.g., Coyne, 2015; Philipse, 2012; Stegner, 2012). It is, perhaps, no wonder then, immersed as our clients are at almost every turn in the secular liturgies founding and reinforcing such views, that so many of them come to therapy these days in the agonizing grip of deep doubts and the struggle to find answers to questions of faith. Indeed, it is surprising that not more do so.

After long and careful study, however, we have come to believe it most unfortunate that clients so often accept a view of faith in which it is taken to be simply what one is forced to settle for when a thing cannot be known for certain. It is even more troublesome that some religiously inclined therapists encourage this line of thinking, urging their clients to just "hope for the best" in order to stifle their doubts. However, the presumption that Reason and Faith are antithetical

to one another, and that only modern science, as the principle domain of human rationality, can achieve certainty, and, thus, reliable knowledge, is a presumption that even many firmly secular thinkers find to lack merit (see, e.g., Bernstein, 1983; Pasnau, 2017; Yanofsky, 2013). Indeed, upon careful reflection, it is quite clear that scientific rationality is grounded in much that is taken on faith and that “faith has its reasons” (see, e.g., Boa & Bowman, 2005). A number of scholars have shown that not only are faith and reason not diametrically opposed to one another, but also that faith – as a trust born of intimate human experience – is reliable and steadying in ways that human reason and scientific thought are not and cannot be (Davis, 1999; Moreland, 2018; Plantinga, 2011; Williams, 2008). While there are assuredly areas of inquiry in which Latter-day Saint therapists and their clients must both defer to the methods and findings of empirical science, it is by no means the case that scientific rationality holds the keys to answering all of life’s important questions. Indeed, such a claim smacks more of scientism, the reigning secular religion of science, than of genuine science itself (Gantt & Williams, 2018; Moreland, 2018; Williams & Robinson, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

Unfortunately, far too often, the formation and developmental progression of our clients’ worldview assumptions (as well as our own) is something that takes place without these assumptions ever being articulated in any explicit way, and without the secular origins of these assumptions ever being fully laid bare. Thus, our clients have often been profoundly shaped by the secular liturgies of our larger culture, but without ever having genuinely considered the logical, moral, or spiritual implications of the liturgies that ground their thinking. Consequently, few of them devote any serious effort to exploring the nature and implications of the sort of alternative assumptions Elder Oaks likely had in mind. It is in this way, we believe, that clients so often struggle to “doubt [their] doubts.” By not sufficiently interrogating their frequently taken-for-granted secular assumptions about religious belief and the nature of faith, and by not working through viable alternative starting

assumptions, our clients may feel as though there is no ground upon which to stand in order to even begin to doubt their doubts. Likewise, our clients can fail to seriously doubt their doubts by thinking only in terms of the pre-given categories of analysis or established dichotomies that secular thought provides, and thereby seriously misunderstand – or even just be blind to – alternative possibilities, the topography of issues at hand, and the true nature of the questions fueling their crises of faith.

MORAL AGENCY

For example, it is not unusual for many of our clients to understand the nature of divine commandments and priesthood authority in the context of the age-old “Freewill versus Determinism” debate. This is an ongoing cultural and political debate, as well as an academic one, in which human agency is either denied at the outset (Determinism), on the one hand, or conceived primarily in terms of boundless individual autonomy, on the other (McKenna & Pereboom, 2016). For many people, both in and out of the Church, this dichotomy can seem not only natural, but also exhaustive. That is, it just simply is the case that either we are free beings capable of independently choosing to do whatever we wish, or we are simply the victims of external forces, be they biological, environmental, psychological, or societal, acting on us in subtle and powerful ways so as to produce our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. For a people whose religious teachings are suffused with the language of agency, freedom, and choice, however, it is no surprise that Latter-day Saints tend to be uncomfortable with the concepts of determinism. Consequently, drawing on the basic categories provided by our larger (secular) cultural context and its various liturgies, we tend to think of and talk about agency as “free agency” – a non-scriptural mash-up of the secular concept “free will” and the doctrinal term “moral agency.”⁴ In so doing, we most often (mis)understand agency as a matter of autonomy – literally “self-law” (Greek: “*auto*” and “*nomos*”) – such that we believe agency is entirely a matter of our capacity to make free, unfettered choices from amongst

4. Elder Boyd K. Packer (1992) repeatedly taught, “The phrase ‘free agency’ does not appear in scripture. The only agency spoken of there is *moral agency*” (p. 67; emphasis in the original).

the panoply of alternatives and possibilities life happens to offer us.

While moral agency, as taught in scripture and by Latter-day prophets and apostles, most certainly does require the capacity to make meaningful choices and the ability to act for ourselves, viewing our agency and freedom in terms of individual autonomy can lead to serious difficulties when trying to make sense of divine commandments, priesthood authority, or prophetic counsel. Thus, it is not unusual to find that some who are struggling to reconcile their faith with the teachings and directions of priesthood leaders do so because they see external authority (spiritual or otherwise) as something that necessarily infringes on their personal autonomy. When agency is conceived in this fashion, commandments are seen as inherently onerous, burdensome, and constraining, intrinsically placing limits on the individual exercise of “free agency.” Rather than understanding agency as inherently moral and situated in a context of meanings, responsibilities, and shared possibilities – and, thus, commandments as a vital way of giving both moral texture and guidance in that context – agency is understood in terms of the powers of self-determination as possessed by self-contained egos for whom any external directive or expectation is necessarily intrusive and confining. Granted, the individual freely and independently chooses to accede to the confinement of obedience to external commands, but the very reality of being commanded by another, even God, for any reason is still typically seen as a burden of some sort, rather than a boon.

If moral agency is not essentially about possessing the autonomous freedom to choose to do as one pleases independent of influence, context, or constraint, however, then one might well ask what else it could possibly be. If we reject the concept of agency as individual autonomy (i.e., indeterminist will), is the only alternative to embrace one or another form of determinism (whether biological, mechanical, sociological, or what have you), along with its inescapable logic of nihilism (Gantt, Reber, & Hyde, 2013)? Fortunately, a number of scholars have taken these questions head-on and provided fruitful and insightful perspectives on human agency from sophisticated, as well as gospel-friendly, perspectives (see, e.g., Gantt & Williams, 2014; Hansen, 2017; Judd, 2005; Slife &

Fisher, 2000; Williams, 2005, 2017; Yanchar, 2011, 2018). A central finding of the various analyses of these scholars is that while it not possible to render a conceptually coherent and meaningful account of human agency as “free agency” (i.e., autonomous, indeterminate willing), it is possible to offer such an account in which agency is understood as fundamentally contextual, embodied, and intrinsically morally, and thus relationally, situated.

A deeper recounting of the arguments put forward regarding the nature of moral agency is beyond the scope of our analysis here. Suffice it to say that an alternative starting point for discussing commandments and freedom with our clients might be to think of agency not so much as the ability to make unfettered, independent choices, but rather as “having the truth or *living truthfully*” (Williams, 2005, p. 131). As Richard Williams (2005) has argued, it is vital to understanding the nature of our moral agency that we take seriously its intimate connection to truth. After all, Christ has assured us that it is the truth that makes us free (John 8:32), and that He is in fact that very truth. Real freedom comes from being even as He is, living as He does, perceiving and understanding and valuing as He does. Williams (2005) writes:

Lacking truth, we are prevented from tapping into that within us which inclines toward perfection and beckons us to be like our Father is. Understanding the nature of God, understanding the truth about ourselves and what it means to be the kinds of beings we are, knowing in our hearts the truth of the atoning grace of Jesus Christ, and realizing the reality of our moral purpose on earth – these are the truths that make us free. These are the truths that provide the opportunity for the flourishing of the moral agency with which we are endowed. (p. 132)

In other words, divine commandments, priesthood authority, and the counsel and guidance that flows from that authority and those commandments, do not constitute an infringement on the self-contained power of our individual autonomy so much as they are an invitation to real freedom – and, indeed, a powerful challenge to the false notion that we are first and foremost autonomous individuals. The truth that is revealed in Christ, and shared with us by means of prophetic counsel and teaching, “gives us freedom

from sin, self-deception, and falsity – from all those construals of the world that hold us captive and prevent us from being who we, from a more truthful perspective, really are and what we, from an eternal perspective, might become” (Williams, 2005, p. 132). Commandments are, thus, not constraints on our personal freedom, but rather the very framework for any meaningful freedom in the first place.

Unfortunately, by teaching clients to value individual autonomy on the path to overcoming psychological challenges, therapists may actually be encouraging their clients (however innocently) in a direction that further intensifies religious doubts rather than offering a fruitful perspective for tackling those doubts. Addressing questions of agency primarily from within a conceptual framework that equates agency with unfettered individual autonomy can actually encourage clients to question or reject the moral authority of the Church, of the prophets and apostles, and ultimately of God in determining what is and what is not sinful or acceptable behavior for them. This equation of agency with autonomy stands in sharp contrast to understanding human agency, not as the freedom to do whatever one wants, but as the capacity to do as one should (Williams, 2005). By helping clients appreciate important distinctions between “free agency” (and its secular presumptions) and moral agency (and its scriptural foundations), therapists can better serve clients who are struggling and help them towards greater insight about the role sacred commandments and prophetic counsel play in providing a grounding moral context for properly weighing and valuing various beliefs and behaviors. Further, therapists can assist clients in coming to a deeper understanding of how it is that Divine commandments are not the harsh demands or impositions of an external power meant to control or subjugate one’s will, but are rather loving invitations to live in a morally richer and spiritually peace-filled way that is more harmony with truth and reality.

HUMAN SEXUALITY

Another area in which our clients sometimes struggle to make sense of their faith, particularly in light of the secular certainties they may have absorbed from our larger culture, is concerned with the

question of human sexuality and its relationship (or, more accurately, presumed non-relationship) with moral agency. It is commonplace in our modern world to hear sexuality spoken of as though it were a powerful abstraction – one that, by virtue of the pervasive causal efficacy it possesses, defines identity at its most basic level, and determines the content and aim of our most intimate desires, attractions, and thoughts. Consequently, many people, including our clients, tend to assume, with little serious reflection, that people “have” or “possess” a “sexuality” or a “sexual orientation” – something that is most likely rooted in genetics, and which is responsible for how people are attracted to others, whom they will find most sexually intriguing, and why they will perceive themselves and others as they do. Indeed, this thing known as “sexuality” is often taken to be so central to our clients’ identity that it colors and frames almost everything else about them, so much so that, for many, almost every other aspect of their lives is thought to be best understood from the lens of sexuality. Indeed, for some, sexual politics is held to be the inescapable and founding context for understanding all interpersonal relationships (see, e.g., Ray, Carlson, & Andrews, 2018). The secular liturgies of the modern world persistently seek to shape us to believe that to live an authentic and fulfilling life, we must discover our “sexuality,” learn to “accept” it, take opportunities to “explore” it, strive to become “comfortable” with it, and find ever more satisfying ways in which to “express” it. In fact, many voices assert that unless people do such things, and, in the end, give free reign to their “sexuality,” the inevitable result will be deep psychological pain and anxiety, crippling depression, or even suicide (Pumariega & Sharma, 2018).

Many claim that science has unequivocally demonstrated (at least to the satisfaction of any reasonable person) that sexual orientation is a fixed and determinative category of being, and, thus, is non-agentic in nature (see, e.g., Lehmilller, 2018; Weill, 2009). Nonetheless, serious questions about both the validity of the methods and the soundness of the logic undergirding the interpretation of such research persist unanswered (see, e.g. Mayer & McHugh, 2016). The issue we wish to raise here, however, is not so much about whether the reductive interpretations of various scientific findings, or the impassioned arguments of various activists

across the political spectrum, have merit. Rather, what is important to understand here is the way in which pervasive secular certainties about the nature of sexual desire, especially when hidden because they have been left unexamined, can facilitate a faith crisis in response to prophetic and scriptural teachings that run counter to received cultural wisdom about such things as same-sex attraction, marriage, and transgenderism. It is not surprising to find so many members of the Church struggling to understand Church teachings and policies regarding sexual intimacy and marriage in the face of what is a taken-for-granted truth of our modern world: sexuality is identity. That is, one's sexual orientation is taken to be who and what one is, and limiting or constraining the full embrace and expression of who one is, is intrinsically oppressive, harmful, hateful, and even perhaps spiritually destructive. For some, in fact, any prohibitions against personally desired expressions of one's sexuality are seen as inherently and manifestly unfair and unjust (see, e.g., Teunis & Herdt, 2007).

Unfortunately, as with so many issues over which our clients struggle, not only of their faith commitments but also of the obligations placed upon them by that faith, the struggle over sexuality is one whose roots lie in secular soil rather than gospel sod. Despite our modern propensity to think of and explain the world and ourselves in terms of powerful abstractions – what one scholar has termed “the metaphysic of things” (Williams, 1990) – it is not at all clear that such thinking is coherent on its own terms, much less consonant with a gospel-centered worldview. Indeed, as Jeffrey Thayne and Gantt (2019) have argued elsewhere, our modern fascination with abstractions is a tradition inherited from our Greek intellectual ancestors, and not a feature of the Hebrew worldview articulated in both ancient and modern scripture. In contrast to abstractionism, the scriptural or Hebrew worldview is one in which “truth is *not* a set of abstract ideas, but a living, breathing Person who loves us as His children” (Thayne & Gantt, 2019, p. 3). The focus in such a perspective is fundamentally on the dynamic and relational, on the unfolding of contextual meaning in the vibrant ongoing activities of daily life and experience, rather than on the pre-given, the static, or the metaphysically distant, unembodied, atemporal and impersonal. This is a worldview in which such things

as moral depth, meaningful agency, and divine activity (in the form of intimate and continuous personal relationship between Creator and created) are understood to be the very warp and woof of reality.

Working outward from such premises, then, it becomes easier to see the grounding context for President Nelson's recent comments in the April 2017 General Conference regarding the nature or the Atonement of Jesus Christ. President Nelson (2017) stated:

It is doctrinally incomplete to speak of the Lord's atoning sacrifice by shortcut phrases, such as “the Atonement” or “the enabling power of the Atonement” or “applying the Atonement” or “being strengthened by the Atonement.” These expressions present a real risk of misdirecting faith by treating the *event* as if it had living existence and capabilities independent of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Under the Father's great eternal plan, it is the Savior who suffered. It is the Savior who broke the bands of death. It is the Savior who paid the price for our sins and transgressions and blots them out on condition of our repentance. It is the Savior who delivers us from physical and spiritual death.

There is no amorphous entity called “the Atonement” upon which we may call for succor, healing, forgiveness, or power. Jesus Christ is the source. Sacred terms such as *Atonement* and *Resurrection* describe what the Savior did, according to the Father's plan, so that we may live with hope in this life and gain eternal life in the world to come. The Savior's atoning sacrifice – the central act of all human history – is best understood and appreciated when we expressly and clearly connect it to Him. (p. 40)

In other words, the atonement of Christ is no powerful abstraction with an existence independent of our engagement with Him. Rather, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ is “the central *act* of all human history,” both an historical and an ongoing event that lives and breathes in the unfolding and dynamic relationship we have with Christ here and now, in the immediacy and pulsating context of daily existence. President Nelson (2017) continued:

The importance of the Savior's mission was emphasized by the Prophet Joseph Smith, who declared emphatically that “the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried,

and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it. (p. 40)

Note carefully that the language of “fundamental principles” employed here by the Prophet Joseph Smith refers directly to specific events and acts – the bearing of testimonies by Apostles and Prophets about encounters with Christ and the events of His life and ministry – rather than abstract entities or hypothetical constructs. Indeed, as Williams (1998) has argued: “The truth claims of Mormonism rest on *events*” (p. 2).

Thus, we believe it is worth considering the possibility that if something as sacred and intimately relevant to our lives as the Atonement of Christ is not best understood as an abstraction, then it is likely that something as sacred and intimately relevant to our lives as sexuality is also not best understood in terms of abstractions. Indeed, we believe it is more enlightening and instructive to think of sexuality in terms of actual sexual relationships, concrete acts of sexual intimacy, specific contexts of sexual desire and experiential meaning, and the inescapable moral framework within which sexual desire and relationship takes place. In such an approach, the achievement of “sexual agency” (Albanesi, 2010) is not about freeing ourselves from the behavioral constraints of external authorities so we can freely choose how best to obtain sexual gratification of whatever desires happen to arise out of the sexual orientation we possess. Rather, sexual agency is fundamentally a matter of the way in which we, as moral agents situated in relationship with Christ and our eternal brothers and sisters, “give ourselves over to” and “take up” various meaningful possibilities of sexual relationship and moral understanding.

In the context of therapy, then, we can help our clients with their struggle against unbelief by helping them to appreciate how their sexual identity is not something that governs them, something abstract, fixed, and causally determinative to which they must surrender themselves in order to be at peace. To the contrary, we can help them see how such a viewpoint is rooted in secular assumptions that are not consonant with the teachings of scripture and the counsel of apostles and prophets. We can help our clients come to see that sexuality, rather than being some fixed state

or condition, is an unfolding and dynamic event that flows out of their continuous “taking on” of the various meanings and moral possibilities of sexual desire as experienced in the relationships and activities of their daily lives, obligations, and responsibilities (Williams & Gantt, 2018). In this perspective, then, sexual identity and sexual desire are neither things pushed into nor pulled out of our clients by powerful abstractions such as drives, needs, or orientations. And, thus, our clients’ sexual identities and desires need be no more central to their lives than any of the other meaningful phenomena of which their lives are made. Indeed, it is often the case that when it seems to our clients that their sexual identity is of more importance than anything else, it is usually because of the particular fashion in which they have taken on and given themselves over to sexual relationships, activities, and meanings.

It goes without saying that such a view of sexuality, one in which sexual desires are understood as intrinsically active and morally agentic, has implications for a wide variety of human activities, including diagnoses and therapies, interpersonal relationships, marriages and families, and our larger conceptions of morality and what constitutes “the good life.” It also has implications for our deepest aspirations, chiefly among which is our understanding of what it means to be a human being and to be “at-one” with one another and with Christ. Additionally, it opens up a deeper understanding of our nature as fundamentally moral agents, and in so doing shows that agency is not about exerting one’s will over one’s own (biologically based and driven) sexual desires in order to maintain the necessary degree of self-control. In contrast, the view we are outlining here is one in which sexual agency *as* moral agency is a matter of living one’s sexual desires and aspirations, one’s relationships and self-understanding in ways that are harmonious with the will of Christ. In this view, unlike that propounded by secular liturgies, neither is our “sexual orientation” our most basic identity, nor are we hopelessly governed by abstract forces that dictate our desires and demand their gratification. Rather, we are children of a Heavenly Father, made in His image and likeness, and equipped at the very core of our being with the very moral agency He enjoys. And, as His beloved children, we are continually invited to desire as and what He does, to aspire to live the manner of life He lives, and to comport

ourselves with one another as He does and for the same reasons that He does. Fortunately, as fundamentally moral agents situated in morally meaningful and consequentially relational contexts, we are uniquely positioned – indeed, uniquely blessed – to be able to do just that.

COUNTERING DUALISM

One common response to what we are proposing here is that, in emphasizing the centrality of moral agency in our account of the meaning and nature of sexuality, we have not paid sufficient attention to the legitimately powerful role that biology plays in generating the psychological phenomena of sexual desire (Lehmiller, 2017). For example, as Balthazart (2012) asserts, “We can choose to accept [our sexual] orientation, to act accordingly, and to reveal it or not to the society, but the orientation itself is not in any way a deliberate choice” (p. 159). In this view, it is the impressive casual powers of biology that play the primary role in accounting for sexual desires and attractions, with the mind (or spirit), as the locus of human will and choice, playing a secondary role, one concerned only with behavioral matters, and not the more central issues of feelings, identity, and basic sense of self. However, while firmly agreeing that sexual desire and action cannot be adequately understood absent a careful account of the biological conditions of human embodiment, we would argue that such objections reflect an essentially and fundamentally secular, dualistic (Cartesian) conception of mind (or spirit) and body – one that is at odds with a genuinely Latter-day Saint perspective (Brown & Holbrook, 2015).

In contrast to the dualism found in most secular liturgies, wherein the body and its processes are explained primarily in mechanical and deterministic terms and the mind is held to be the internal, immaterial region of freewill where the mysterious processes of choice occur, Latter-day Saint thought is marked by its commitment to a form of holism in which body and spirit are understood to be “entangled . . . interconnected, enmeshed, interdependent” (Brown & Holbrook, 2015, p. 292; see also Givens, 2015;

Webb, 2013).⁵ Indeed, as Brown and Holbrook (2015) point out:

The concept of embodiment as entanglement is a constant in LDS beliefs and practices relating to the body. . . . Mormons have since the beginning believed that the entanglement of premortal spirit with mortal body is sacred and central to the meaning of life. Our identities and our bodies metamorphose as we progress from fetus (a life largely hoped-for and only tenuously physical) to infancy through childhood and adolescence, then into adulthood, maturity, and finally advanced age (a life largely remembered and only tenuously physical). With each transition, spirit remains entangled with body, and this entanglement for early Mormons was physical rather than only metaphysical. (pp. 293-295)

Similarly, Hartley (2019) notes:

The basic consensus in Mormonism, then, is that the mind/spirit and the body are not two totally separate things and that they are interrelated. So, things that we feel and think in our spirit can have physiological reactions and changes in the body because they are connected. James E. Talmage wrote: “It is peculiar to the theology of the Latter-day Saints that we regard the body as an essential part of the soul . . . Nowhere, outside the Church of Jesus Christ, is the solemn and eternal truth taught that the soul of man is the body and the spirit combined.” It is a unique philosophical answer: I have a body and a spirit. Both are essential to make up my soul. Both are substance. Both affect the other. (p. 158)

In a nutshell, then, moral agency is not some free-floating power or capacity to make choices independent of or uninfluenced by things in the physical world such as our own mortal, physical bodies. Rather, moral agency is always *embodied moral agency* insofar as meaningful, purposive agentic action always takes place in the context of the biological realities and constraints of our physical embodiment, never independent of it. Further, because the body is neither some Platonic cage imprisoning the spirit, nor the mechanical determinant of psychological phenomena, as so often portrayed in secular liturgies, our thoughts, feelings, and desires (sexual or otherwise) are never

5. Or, as LDS scholar Terryl Givens (2015) has argued, a two-tiered monism – a form of monism in which both spirit and matter are held to be material, but there is a distinction to be made in terms of refinement or purity.

adequately reducible to the causal functions of impersonal meat and chemical, but must always be seen as events occurring in a fundamentally moral, physiological, interpersonal, and spiritual context. Taking up this distinctly LDS perspective on embodiment, agency, and sexuality where appropriate in therapy, then, LDS therapists can do much to help clients understand that their sexual desires are not things that happen to them, the product of some fixed biological condition, but are instead intensely holistic embodied events that are intrinsically agentic, and, thus, inherently purposive, moral, and meaningful. Therapy, from this perspective, would afford an opportunity to explore the specific purpose and meaning – particularly the divinely appointed purpose and interpersonal meaning – of specific acts of sexual desiring.

HEDONISM

A final source of struggle and doubt for many members of the Church trying to make sense of their religious commitments and belief is hedonism. It is difficult to overstate the pervasive influence that the concept of hedonism exerts in our modern world, and on the way we in the Church understand ourselves and the gospel of Christ. Hedonism is, simply put, the notion that the pursuit of pleasure (however it may be individually defined) is the primary and most important goal of life (Wooten, 2018). Of course, there are many versions of hedonism at work in the world (see Fieldman, 2004 for a detailed analysis). Some are quite unapologetically and forthrightly selfish and self-aggrandizing, while others are more civil in nature, seeking to secure personal benefit through cooperation and mutual cost-sharing. We suspect we are on safe ground assuming that most Latter-day Saints would be repulsed by the former and more comfortable with the latter, more approving of Bill Gates, for example, than Hugh Hefner.

What is sometimes missed, however, is the profound role the secular premise of hedonism (typically unacknowledged and unrecognized) can play in shaping and guiding many Church members' spiritual lives and religious understandings. For example, many Church members report that a primary reason why they obey heavenly commandments and follow prophetic teachings is in order to secure for themselves

certain desired blessings (or reach a certain heavenly destination), the personal benefits that come from paying the divinely dictated price of discipleship. All too often our ordinary conversations about the Word of Wisdom or the Law of Tithing, for example, center on the specific goods (i.e., blessings) that are presumed to derive from following these commandments – i.e., longer life, needed financial windfalls, and so on. Obedience to God, in such a view, is the instrumental means by which one obtains for oneself certain items, experiences, or benefits one personally desires (for various reasons). The possibility that one might wish to obey God and follow prophetic counsel simply because doing so is good in itself and serves no other end or purpose, reflecting only love and self-forgetting or self-transcendence, is a possibility seldom explicitly entertained or articulated. Most often, personal desire for benefit to self is taken to always come first as motivation, framing the meaning of any particular acts of obedience and providing the only reasonable justification for inconveniencing oneself in the service of God and one's neighbor.

The ultimate consequence of this line of thinking, though seldom noted, is that clients come to see their relationship with our Father in Heaven and with Jesus Christ primarily in terms of using individual means to meet individual ends. The nature of such a relationship is at root an economic or contractual one, rather than a familial or covenantal one. It is a relationship whose primary concern is the equitable exchange of desired goods and services by separate parties with separate – though perhaps converging – interests (Fowers, 2010). In the end, hedonism casts the nature of all relationships as essentially economic relationships, and renders the meaning of all relationships in terms of the self-interested exchange of goods and services.

For example, imagine a client struggling with depression, addiction, marital problems, unwanted same-sex attraction, or any of a host of other psychological and spiritual problems. Having absorbed the precepts of hedonism from their immersion in our larger, secular culture (however unconsciously or innocently), and, thus, assuming that their relationship with God is fundamentally economic or transactional in nature, the client may end up asking questions such as: "I'm keeping the commandments, attending church, going to therapy, serving others, and everything else I'm

supposed to do, so why am I still depressed? Why hasn't God taken away my addiction? Why won't God take these unwanted sexual desires away? Why are my spouse and I still fighting? Where are the blessings I was promised?" Because their covenant relationship with God has been framed in the terms of contractual exchanges and fulfillments, grievances can begin to mount when the blessings clients have come to expect in return for their obedience do not show up. The all-too-predictable result, then, is that clients are left wondering why, in the midst of unmerited suffering and setback, God is not keeping His end of the agreed-upon bargain.

Viewing one's life and relationship with God through the lens of hedonism, especially in the face of unexpected struggles, unrelenting heartbreak, or unmerited pain and suffering, can easily lead to feelings of having been betrayed or cheated by God. They have, after all, gone to great lengths and made great sacrifices to secure the blessings they desire, but God is withholding those blessings – and, it may appear to them that He is doing so for no good or justifiable reason. Operating from hedonistic premises, it becomes remarkably easy to believe that God is untrustworthy, arbitrary, or malicious when life does not go as we have always thought it would, when God does not act in the way we expect Him to act in light of our hedonistic assumptions about who He is and how relationships with Him work. It is easy to begin to believe that God is not actually a loving God at all, not a God who wants His children to be happy, but rather someone who demands obedience and sacrifice but does not necessarily keep His promises to give back in return. After all, the client might feel, if God truly is a loving God, then He would not allow, or would take away, unjust suffering, especially when the one suffering has clearly earned respite from suffering by having dutifully obeyed God's commandments. Such a God, the client may ultimately decide, is not really worthy of being worshipped and obeyed, and any Church that preaches such a God cannot possibly be a true and living one.

Fortunately, there other premises from which clients might understand the nature of divine commandments, prophetic counsel, and the possibilities of genuine relationship with our Heavenly Father and His

Son, Jesus Christ. It is possible to "think differently" in light of the Restored Gospel. There are ways in which faithful Latter-day Saint therapists can serve their clients as they struggle with their unbelief and try to make sense of their faith and their experience of suffering, tragedy, loss – what has been variously termed "the dark nights of the soul" (Moore, 2004) and the "silence of God" (Thielicke, 2010).

While space does not permit a full exploration of the topic, one possible avenue to be explored is one in which the fundamentality of moral agency is merged with the reality of the "pure love of Christ" (i.e., Charity), or what has long been known in the Christian tradition as *Agapé*. In contrast to the secular assumption of hedonism, in which striving for the gratification of self is taken simply to be inescapable human nature, and, thus, the foundation of all relationships, Latter-day Saint therapists might encourage their clients to consider that as moral agents they are capable of forgoing instrumental reasoning and self-interest. Embodied moral agents are intrinsically capable of doing and being otherwise, and, thus, of acting in ways that transcend matters of self-regard and the means-ends relational calculus of hedonism. Granted, as moral agents, our clients can certainly give themselves over to the possibilities of self-regard, take up the invitation to seek the maximization of personal benefit, or yield to the desire for control in their relationships with others and God. However, as moral agents, they can also yield to the "enticings of the Holy Spirit" that call each of us to the possibilities of the pure love of Christ and the freedom of self-forgetting and self-transcendence. From the alternative perspective we are offering here, a perspective grounded in the teachings of scripture rather than in secular liturgies, it is clear that moral agency is our nature, and it is so in a way that hedonism is not.

By helping our clients come to understand themselves as fundamentally moral agents, we can help them to see how it is possible to understand that the commandments of a loving Heavenly Father, and the compassionate and wise counsel of anointed priesthood leaders, are not instrumental means by which they secure for themselves the satisfaction of their individual desires. Rather, divine law is an invitation to live as our Father in Heaven lives, to be in the world

as He is, and understand ourselves and others as He does. Thus, divine commandments are in fact themselves heavenly blessings, and genuine obedience is at its root an act of loving thanksgiving for the blessing of commandments, an act of gratitude for the invitation to be “at one” with the Father and the guidance for how to be so. As such, obedience constitutes a recognition of one’s dependence on and adoration of a compassionate, caring Father in Heaven who seeks always and in all ways to comfort and bless and ennoble His children. “And they shall also be crowned with blessings from above,” the Lord promises us in scripture, “yea, with commandments not a few” (D & C 59:4) – a promise immediately followed by a list of commandments/blessings our Father wishes to bestow on us to make our lives fuller, safer, and more meaningful and joyful.

Seen in this light, then, concern for the calculus of personal cost and benefit that may have been subtly inscribed on our clients’ hearts through the formative processes of secular liturgies loses its persuasive power over their religious imagination and spiritual understanding. Trials and suffering and painful setbacks will come, they can begin to see, but not because God has not been keeping His end of the “obedience bargain” with them. Rather, tragedy comes because that is the nature of life in a world such as this, a world jam-packed with other moral agents working out their relationships with one another and with God – sometimes doing it well and bringing much joy, and sometimes doing it poorly and bringing much misery in their wake. Reasoning from the premises of moral agency and charity, rather than inescapable and normative hedonism, one’s perspective on justice changes dramatically as it becomes clear that it is only mercy that can make sense of a world of injustice. Only in light of unearned mercy can unearned injustice be made, if only in some small measure, intelligible. In Christ’s merciful love for each of us in the midst of the supreme injustice of His suffering for and because of us, in Gethsemane and again on the Cross, we find an alternative image of humanity and human possibility – and image in stark contrast to the secular assumptions of the hedonic basis of human nature. As Arthur Henry King (1998) incisively noted, “Christ in his incarnation as man shows the possibilities of the human” (p. 17).

In Christ, we discover that commandments are gifts freely and lovingly given, not instruments to be used in the furtherance of individual aims and ends. And, though injustice will come into every life and pain will follow, we are never alone, even in the deepest anguish of our own Gethsemanes. “Lord, I resented your silence,” Father Rodrigues confesses in Shusaku Endo’s novel *Silence*. “I was not silent,” God responds, “I suffered beside you.” In Christ, the demands for fair exchange are swallowed up in the promise of mercy, compassion, communion, and a peace that speaks soul to soul. The test set before us in this life, I believe, is not whether we will maximize our blessings by dutiful obedience to divine laws, or whether we will ensure our place in heaven by compiling a spotless record of compliance. Rather, we believe, the test set before us all in this life is to learn what it means to be moral agents, beings who can love and must allow themselves to be loved. In so doing, we are able to give ourselves on the altar in sacrificial similitude of the infinite and eternal sacrifice of the Son of God (Alma 34:14). No negotiation is needed, no contract is necessary, only yielding and submission to the loving will of God is required, submission as pure love unburdened by the quest for personal benefit or calculations of the relative costs and benefits of discipleship.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, the questions and doubts that generate so many crises of faith for so many of our clients must be met by Latter-day Saint therapists by more sustained and careful reflection on the premises from which our clients’ questions and doubts and struggles to believe actually spring. However, in order for such reflection to do more than just recapitulate tried and tired assumptions and categories of thought, we as Latter-day Saint psychologists and mental health professionals must open ourselves up to alternate starting points and the different ways of thinking such alternatives entail. Perhaps, in so doing, we may at last come to see what the real, most fundamental difference is between secular starting points and sacred ones. Perhaps, if we are sufficiently open to divine instruction as well as critical reflection, we will come to see that Christ is, always has been, and always must be, our one true foundational premise.

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