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Mormonism and Anthropology: On Ways of Knowing

Fenella Cannell

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> What will happen to me when I die? What will occur tomorrow? next week? in a thousand years? How did everything begin? How will it all end? We all want to know more than we can know. . . . Religion gives order to people's emotions and meaning to their lives. The way any religion does so raises problems even as it solves others. This is the nature of a dynamic system. Normal procedures have unsettling by-products. —William A. Christian Jr.[1]

> If I have a spiritual gift it is perhaps an immense capacity for doubt. —Terryl Givens[2]

When William Christian, that exemplary historian and anthropologist of Christian practice, suggested that, through its "normal procedures," "any religion . . . raises problems even as it solves others," he was writing not about Latter-day Saints but about Roman Catholics. Specifically, he was describing popular visions of the Virgin Mary, often centering on child visionaries, that commanded the rapt attention of vast outdoor crowds in the Basque regions of Northern Spain in the early 1930s.

Given that most Latter-day Saints would draw a strong contrast between their own church and Roman Catholicism, Christian's remarks might seem an unexpected starting point for a

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[1] William A. Christian Jr., *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 392–93.

[2] Mormon Scholars Testify, http://mormonscholarstestify.org/1904/terryl-l-givens.

discussion of present-day Mormonism. But anthropologists, like many historians, are committed to exploring comparisons.

To a visiting ethnographer with previous experience of fieldwork in local Catholic settings,[3] parallels between these two great institutional churches necessarily suggest themselves. Mormonism, it sometimes seems, combines Catholicism's focus on sacramental efficacy with Protestantism's attention to sincere interiority and personal agency, although doing so of course in its own unprecedented way.[4] This is one context, among others, in which it is possible to consider both the joys and the difficulties that Latter-day Saints describe in the practice of their faith.

I first became interested in research with Latter-day Saints because Mormonism's famous distinctiveness allowed me to question some of my own discipline's theoretical claims about what religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is like and how it is supposed to work.[5]

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[3] Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[4] Fenella Cannell, "How Does Ritual Matter?," in *Questions of Anthropology*, LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology, ed. Rita Astuti, Jonathan Parry, and Charles Stafford (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 105–37.

[5] Fenella Cannell, "The Christianity of Anthropology," Malinowski Memorial Lecture, 2004, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, n.s., 11 (2005): 335–56; Cannell, ed., *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Cannell, "How Does Ritual Matter?,"105–37; Cannel, "The Re-enchantment of Kinship," in *Vital Relations: Modernity and the Persistent Life of Kinship*, ed. Susie McKinnon and Fenella Cannell (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2013), 217–40; Cannell, "The Blood of Abraham: Mormon Redemptive Physicality and American Idioms of Kinship," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (May 2013): 77–94.

When I was asked by the editors of this journal to write a short piece on Mormon anthropology, it seemed to me that two kinds of task were implied: first, to provide some indicative references to the anthropology written about Latter-day Saints, which Ann Taves[6] has said is less familiar to scholars of religion including herself; and second, more broadly, to offer a brief account of what a comparative, plural, and perspective-sensitive approach to Mormonism—now also being called for by scholars in other fields, notably in a key issue of *Mormon Studies Review*[7]—might look like from the point of view of an anthropologist. Another way of putting this second task would be to ask what the object "Mormonism" might look like from the viewpoint of anthropology and what the object "anthropology" might look like from the viewpoint of Mormonism, and so to begin to imagine the kinds of conversation that could take place between people involved in these two practices.

The distinctive analytic process anthropologists[8] use is dialectical; on the one hand, we are interested in questions about human society at a very general, even a universal, level. We ask why gift giving seems to be important all over the world, for example, or whether all human groups have marriage, or whether there is any such thing as society without hierarchy. On the other hand, anthropology is always committed to recording, through ethnographic writing, what

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[6] Ann Taves and Spencer Fluhman, "Mormon Studies in the Academy: A Conversation between Ann Taves and Spencer Fluhman," *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 9–16.

[7] Kristine Haglund, "We'll Find the Place: Situating Mormon Studies," *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 96–102; Taves and Fluhman, "Mormon Studies in the Academy"; Thomas Tweed, "Beyond 'Surreptitious Staring': Migration, Missions, and the Generativity of Mormonism for the Comparative and Translocative Study of Religion," *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 17–28.

[8] I speak here of anthropology as I understand it; other views of the discipline, of course, are possible.

is unique and particular about human social life in any given time and place encountered by the researcher. Ethnographic writing is classically based on long-term, participant-observation fieldwork in which the anthropologist as far as possible shares the daily lives of her interlocutors[9] in the attempt to gain a more contextualized understanding of what they say. By doing as well as by asking, the ethnographer seeks to understand how it feels to build a canoe or plant rice or pray daily at dawn. Ethnographic inquiry is imperfect, as are all forms of research, but it is a way of asking about the world that (for me) continues to have a value and often to yield more empathetic insights than standard modes of enquiry such as surveys. For my discipline, one value of ethnographic description is, or should be, that it checks the tendency towards easy theoretical generalization; another is that it keeps concrete and complex human experience to the fore, against reductive abstraction. We should always begin, as anthropology's most distinctive theorist Marcel Mauss advised, with the particular and reason inductively. Anthropologists also begin with the everyday lives of ordinary people and count these as significant as the acts of political elites. Good ethnography should therefore also offer one kind of counterweight to the repetition of stereotypes and misrepresentations of particular social groups—or so it is hoped. Finally, my discipline tends to look at traditions, including religious traditions, as they are practiced, rather than working from theological or other in-principle accounts in isolation.

While most authors now publishing anthropology on Mormonism would describe themselves as professional anthropologists, some colleagues in other disciplines also draw on anthropology's toolkit, including ethnographic specificity.

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[9] There is an important critical literature on the limitations and difficulties of ethnography that I will not cover here; my own view is that such criticisms should refine but not negate the value of ethnography.

Colleen McDannell writes from a department of religious studies and uses both ethnographic and historical approaches. Her work is wide-rangingly comparative, across topics in Mormonism, Protestantism, and Catholicism. *Material Christianity*[10] is a seminal study arguing that the religious practices of ordinary American people across different churches share some important features. In particular, she proposes that—in contrast to theoretical accounts of religion concerned with the transcendent or the supramaterial—American Christians are generally comfortable with religious objects and see no tension between the validity of religious concepts and their material expressions. Mormonism's material culture (here explored through an essay on temple garments) is considered alongside aspects of Catholic and Protestant Evangelical material practice. McDannell is currently writing on the changing role of LDS women and Relief Society.[11] Both explicitly and implicitly comparative, her work has challenged other scholars to formulate their arguments in a way that includes and relates to Mormonism rather than consigning it to an exceptionalist enclave.

Janet Bennion writes as a scholar of LDS upbringing who has chosen to focus on present-day fundamentalist polygyny. *Women of Principle*[12] gives a fascinating account of the daily lives and religious logic of members of the Allredite group, based on Bennion's fieldwork in Montana, and argues that some women actively choose to convert to polygynous groups from mainstream American culture since plurality offers them substantial relative advantages. Women who have

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[10] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[11] Colleen McDannell, *The New Mormon Woman: From Polygamy to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press forthcoming).

[12] Janet Bennion, *Women of Principle: Female Networking in Contemporary Mormon Polygamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

been disappointed in the search for a lasting marriage in the mainstream may value the sacred basis of contemporary polygamy, sociality among sister wives, and opportunities to share limited financial resources and childcare. *Desert Patriarchy*[13] explores the relationship between desert ecology and polygynous communities' kinship dynamics. Many young men resort to cohort labour migration because their access to marriage partners is rationed by male elders and priesthood leaders. *Polygamy in Primetime*[14] places contemporary plural marriage in the context of public policy, legal and policing responses and feminist assessments, and the media interest in the topic of polygamy, which has seen large audiences for both fictionalized and reality-TV depictions of polygamy. Bennion offers a balanced assessment of arguments about harm to individuals and personal freedom in relation to American polygyny, and she explores the ways in which plural marriage may appeal to diverse constituencies including religious feminists and advocates of gay marriage in the United States. The legal and welfare issues are further explored in a full-length study of four polygamous groups, *Evaluating the Effects of Polygamy on Women and Children*.[15]

Douglas Davies, one of the most knowledgeable and prolific writers on Mormonism, theology, and anthropology, has also nurtured new Mormon scholarship among his students. Davies draws on decades of firsthand research and long knowledge of Utah Mormonism but does not usually choose to present his work as time-and-space-specific ethnographic case studies of

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[13] Janet Bennion, *Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahua Valley* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

[14] Janet Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

[15] Janet Bennion, *Evaluating the Effects of Polygamy on Women and Children in Four American Mormon Fundamentalist Groups: An Anthropological Study* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

the particularities of Mormon lifeworlds. Whereas Bennion gives us the Apostolic United Brethren in Montana in the 1990s, Davies gives us thematic explorations within the sweep of mainstream LDS Church development as a whole. An exception is his study of Welsh Mormonism,[16] but this is primarily historical. In addition to an authoritative introduction to Mormonism,[17] an edited volume on Mormon identities in transition,[18] and numerous articles, Davies's *Mormon Culture of Salvation*[19] offers an important discussion of the distinctiveness of LDS teachings on death. Anticipating some of the arguments of Samuel Morris Brown's fascinating *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*,[20] Davies proposes (drawing on ritual theory by anthropologist Maurice Bloch) that Mormonism goes beyond the prospect of salvation offered in other forms of Christianity to a position of "death conquest," which takes mere postmortem survival as read [au: Something is missing here.- FC no, nothing missing, but if you think clearer, it could read ' takes mere postmortem survival as a given and so …'] and so focuses rather on the attainment of graduated levels of resurrected life. *Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Satanic Opposition*[21] considers the historical development of the plan of salvation, LDS teachings on the nature of evil and Mormon Christology, suggesting that the plan of salvation is the fulcrum of

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[16] Douglas Davies, *Mormon Spirituality: Latter-day Saints in Wales and Zion* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1987).

[17] Douglas Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003).

[18] Douglas Davies, ed., *Mormon Identities in Transition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

[19] Douglas Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation: Force, Grace, and Glory* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2000).

[20] Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[21] Douglas Davies, *Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Satanic Opposition: Atonement, Evil, and the Mormon Vision* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010).

developing and reviving Mormon theology and a counterpart to Trinitarian theology in other Christian churches.

For space reasons, I will mention other important anthropologists more briefly than their work merits. David Knowlton is an insightful commentator on Mormonism in Latin America and among Latino Americans.[22] Hildi Mitchell has published astute accounts of British Mormonism, emphasizing the intersection of text, body, and place for the maintenance of a stable experience of LDS belief.[23] Gary and Gordon Shepherd combine anthropology and sociology, notably in their book on mission.[24] Tamar Gordon (Renssellaer) has work in progress on Tongan Latter-day Saints and Polynesian heritage culture, Jon Bialescki (Edinburgh) has work in progress on Mormon evolutionary science, and Aiwha Ong has included an account of conversion to Mormonism as a mode of Americanisation (sometimes by hypergamy) in her discussion of new American citizens of Asian origins.[25]

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[22] See, for example, David Knowlton, "Hands Raised Up: Power and Context in Bolivian Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Winter 2007): 47–71; and Knowlton, "Mormonism in Latin America'" in *The Mormon World*, ed. Carl Mosser and Richard Sherlock (London: Routledge, 2012).

[23] Hildi Mitchell, "'Being there': British Mormons and the History Trail," *Anthropology Today* 17/2 (April 2001): 9–14; Mitchell, "Postcards from the Edge of History: Narrative and the Sacralisation of Mormon Historical Sites," in *Pilgrim Voices: Narrative and Authorship in Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. Simon Coleman and Jon Elsner (London: Berghahn, 2003), 133–58; Jon Mitchell and Hildi Mitchell, "For Belief: Embodiment and Immanence in Catholicism and Mormonism," *Social Analysis* 52/1 (2008): 79–94.

[24] Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, *Mormon Passage: A Missionary Chronicle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

[25] Aiwha Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

I carried out my own fieldwork both in Utah and in upstate New York, and the question of the relationship between Mormonism and Catholicism with which I began was of personal interest to some of my interlocutors. The New York ward I visited had many members whose families joined the church in its earliest years, but a significant proportion were established first- and second-generation converts; some, from the postindustrial cities of northern New York State, had been born into traditional American Catholic families.[26] A number of people who shared conversion stories with me told me they felt that Mormonism offered real access to sacred knowledge while Catholicism's priestly hierarchy frustrated lay piety. Several people mentioned growing up in Catholic neighbourhoods with priests who would reply to all their questions with "It's a mystery." While one can imagine that reply being intended to convey humility, to these particular listeners it felt like evasion. By contrast, Mormonism with its lay priesthood confronts the largest questions of human life directly, notably in the plan of salvation, to which potential converts are often deeply drawn. "Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going after this life?"—these and other mighty questions on the nature and purpose of good and evil in the universe are asked explicitly in Mormon teaching and mission, and any inquirer can look up the LDS Church's answers to them on the Internet.[27] Conversion stories often pivoted on the sense of an unfolding horizon of extraordinary knowledge that opened before the eyes of those newly encountering Mormonism—the prospect that now, finally, the real meaning of human

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[26] One or two were former Catholics of Mexican origin, but the ward I visited did not have a significant Latino-American population. On the culture of European American Roman Catholicism, see the work of Robert Orsi (e.g., 2005). On the transnational ethos of Latin American Catholicism, see Valentina Napolitano, *Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return: Transnationalism and the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

[27] https://www.lds.org/ensign/2014/04/using-the-plan-of-salvation-to-answer-questions.

existence would be made plain. Further, there was the sense of *recognition* that people reported, that these dizzying vistas of knowledge were also, somehow, already familiar to them. As people engaged themselves with LDS teaching, these responses took shape within the distinctive Mormon framing of human-divine time, and converts came to understand their sense of recognition as an experiential confirmation of the reality of the premortal life, and thus as a form of both recovered memory and communication between persons and beings in mortality, before it and beyond it.[28]

A commitment to these forms of knowing is one central aspect of LDS experience, and inevitably this complicates—although it can also enrich—conversations in Mormon Studies that engage with comparative disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. On what shared basis are we having such conversations, and what forms of knowing are we each reaching for or claiming? While serving as LDS Church historian, Elder Marlin K. Jensen expressed this same idea when he was kind enough to give me some advice at the beginning of my fieldwork:

> If you think about the epistemology of religion, and how you do come to know things—if you try in your study of Mormonism to apply the scientific method and to try to find the explanation for why Mormons do what they do and feel the way they feel, you'll never make it.

Elder Jensen was referring, if I understood him correctly, to certain kinds of reductive claims that social science sometimes has made about religion—or, rather, about an objectified category of "religion"—considered as supposedly irrational and possibly "primitive" conduct needing to be

[28] Although memories of the premortal existence are largely lost during mortality, glimpses between these lives are highly prized by Latter-day Saints, as are liftings of the veil between mortality and the life to come.

explained away with reference to other kinds of human concerns, motivations, and causes. Religious matters, in such paradigms, are always really about something else—economics, perhaps, or demography or the evolutionary adaptation of the human brain, or very often some cause that can be presented as more real in the sense of being material and thus natural. He was referring to an expectation or perception that the social sciences, including my own subject of anthropology, might be intrinsically atheistic (even perhaps hostile to religious topics) in their theoretical foundations and methods. Behind this concern lies a tendency to assume that religion and the secular are opposed forces at war in the modern world, an assumption that shapes the way that most of us think.

It is true that the foundational period in the social sciences was marked by an attempt to situate the analysis of the social aspects of human life in a way that was independent of the natural sciences, on the one hand, and of theology, on the other, creating a new analytic space. An arm's-length approach to truth claims about the divine was therefore a constitutive feature of their making. It is also true that at a later period, after a disciplinary division had arisen between anthropology and sociology, both subjects and especially the second were sometimes associated with strong theoretical claims (known as "secularization theory") that the modern world was taking a unitary direction of change in which religion would be left behind in favor of a secular worldview. My own view, and that of many other anthropologists presently writing, is that these two developments are not equivalent to each other. "Secularization theory" came in many forms, and some of these were hostile to religion, casting it as an immature phase of social

development.[29] It therefore constituted part of a set of claims or myths about the "inevitable" directions the modern world would take, one aspect of which was to polarize concepts of what the "religious" and the "secular" might mean.[30] From this polarization also derive, as LDS historians will immediately recognize, many strands of anti-Mormonism, and it is implicated in a wider oppositional cultural politics and in the opposition between social progressivism and biblical literalism in the United States.[31]

The earlier attempt in anthropology and sociology to create a space to think about human social life as such has (to my mind) more diverse potentialities than secularization theory. Foundational theorists including Durkheim and Weber took a complex approach to religious life; for Durkheim, moral values could be seen as humanly derived rather than given by God. At the same time, however, he argued that all human morality was necessarily founded in collective ritual ("religion"), including in the modern West. Neither Durkheim nor Weber took a triumphalist approach to the loss of personal faith in the modern world, including in their own lives, which they rather regarded with grave ambivalence. For some important commentators,

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[29] On the attribution of immaturity to faith positions in writers such as Richard Dawkins, and its philosophical roots in Nietszche, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[30] Fenella Cannell, "The Anthropology of Secularism," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (October 2010): 85–100; Susie McKinnon and Fenella Cannell, eds., *Vital Relations: Modernity and the Persistent Life of Kinship* (Sante Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2013).

[31] Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

such as John Milbank,[32] the social sciences were a doomed intellectual enterprise from the beginning because they were nontheistic, and specifically because they committed themselves in his view to the supposed reality of "the secular." For me and others, however, the social sciences do not require this commitment, but instead make possible what Robert Orsi has called the analytic space of "in-betweenness," a space, as he says, difficult to sustain and from which, however, it may be possible to look at how we define what "religion" is in contemporary life without immediately assuming the role of the person of faith or his enemy, the skeptic.[33] Interestingly, within a generation there was an important and highly creative minority in Anglophone anthropology who wrote professionally about religion but were also personally religious (largely adult converts to Catholicism).[34] Further, the ethnographic project in anthropology, with which Milbank does not engage in his critique, is incompatible with a dismissive account of religious practice, in that it requires a sustained attention to the specifics of what ordinary people find important in a given time and place. Ethnography, properly conducted, cannot be reductive.

In its most explicit forms, this project of description from a position of "in-betweenness" asks anthropologists to step back from a hardening of categories and to look at the "secular/religious" divide as itself a historical feature of contemporary thought, philosophy, and

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[32] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[33] Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious World People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 177.

[34] Timothy Larsen, *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

politics.[35] While not proposing an answer to the ultimate, theological questions of the truth of the existence of God, such an anthropological method does suggest an intermediate mode of proceeding in which any actually antireligious position would also be unanthropological.

Anti-Mormon prejudice, like the stigmatization of Protestant fundamentalism described by Harding,[36] is connected to the historical development of polarized categories of "religion" and "secularism" in contemporary political and legal structures, as well as to the triumph of particular definitions of what acceptable kinds of modern religious practice might be.[37] Anthropology requires imaginative work in thinking of unfamiliar ways of life, including religions, as having profound human value. However, it is true that when I began my research with Latter-day Saints, I did sometimes encounter colleagues who found it more difficult to consider Mormonism this way.[38] At least initially, they tended to reproduce concerns and prejudices about the church widely found in nonacademic discourse. I was interested occasionally to hear colleagues remark, for instance, that Mormonism was not "really" Christianity. I was warned that I would likely come under great pressure to convert. Someone sent me newspaper clippings about the objections raised by Jewish people to the vicarious baptisms for the dead performed for those who had died in the Holocaust. But one of the most serious worries was expressed instead about my professional prospects; surely, some colleagues said to me, my project was doomed; there would be nothing for me to write about, working with

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[35] Taylor, *Secular Age*; Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*.

[36] Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*.

[37] Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[38] Compare Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*.

Latter-day Saints, since people would all be likely to tell me the same thing; that is, they would simply repeat orthodox views and statements as ratified by the central church leadership.

Viewed from one angle, the suggestion was a variation on the widely found anxiety expressed by the "I'm a Mormon" church publicity campaign (we might call it the "Mobot" anxiety): that becoming a member of the LDS Church involves an undue suppression of individuality. For members, the central commitment to human free agency is theoretically reconciled with the equally central commitment to the reality of revelation by the injunction to "choose the right"—but living this reconciliation may be difficult.

For anthropologists the topic of orthodoxy resonates in particular ways. In fact, I would suggest that although anthropology is not really confined inside hostility to the object of "religion," my discipline does currently have a theoretical problem with the topic of orthodoxy, including but not limited to religious orthodoxy. In all the social sciences, as in philosophy, there is a general theoretical question about the possibility and limits of human autonomy. How can one try to describe social events in a way that takes account both of the agentive actions and responsibilities of human beings and of the numerous historical and cultural factors that constrain them? These questions were fundamental for Durkheim and the other founders of the discipline and have been often revisited, most recently in debates regarding "the anthropology of ethics." The attempt in these debates has been to do justice to the capacity of human beings for conscious reflection on their own actions and to dispense with any tendency to imply that people simply follow cultural traditions (perhaps enforced by religious ritual) in an automatic fashion.

For some of my colleagues, such as James Laidlaw,[39] Durkheim in particular undertheorized the human potential for freedom and for reflection. For other colleagues, such as Michael Lambek,[40] the term *freedom* is unhelpful, not least in retaining too close a connection with aspects of the myths of modern life identified by Durkheim himself, such as strong claims about the naturalness of capitalism or the neutrality of economic freedom, and what Durkheim called "the cult of the individual" in modernity. For Lambek, "the human condition *is* an ethical condition,"[41] and what is needed is not the language of freedom but an ethnographic attention to the ways in which all human action has a reflective dimension to it, whether in modern or traditional settings.

While both authors have much of value to say, I myself prefer to use Lambek's approach, since to my mind it is more useful to an anthropologist of religion. Laidlaw's description of religious orthodoxy is of a deliberately chosen moral incapacity; "freedom is exercised towards its own future curtailment.[42] Even though the incapacity concerned is the aim of making oneself unable to disobey God, for Laidlaw this is a departure from reflective self-regulation.

For reasons not immediately relevant here, Laidlaw (an expert on Jainism) is here relying mainly on examples taken from Sunni Islam. He argues, however, that this self-extinguishing freedom is widely found in salvationist religions. My own view is that this offers only an impoverished view of the various theologies of freedom and the will in religions, including

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[39] James Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[40] Michael Lambek, *The Ethical Condition: Essays on Ethics, Person, and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[41] Lambek, *Ethical Condition*.

[42] Laidlaw, *Subject of Virtue*, 154.

Christianity (in Augustine's theology, for instance, all unfallen human will is actually the desire for God.

In that case, one approach for anthropology might be to take up William Christian's cue and think of religions—including Mormonism—as constantly generating both faith and uncertainty in the daily conduct of ordinary life. An element that is one generation's heresy becomes another's orthodoxy, and vice versa, even in religions of revelation that sustain many continuities. Orthodoxy, as I have observed its practice, is never a static or finished object, but a living creation of human beings requiring constant renewal, wide human participation, and, therefore, inevitable instability and variation, even when it most aims at the attainment of perfection.

Fenella Cannell is [au: Please add your bio. It should not exceed 100 words and ideally includes your full name, degree and institution, current institutional assignment, major publication, and current project. FC Reader/Associate Professor at the Department of Social Anthropology, London School of Economics. Her books include *Power and intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (1999); *The anthropology of Christianity* (2006) and with Susan McKinnon *Vital Relations; modernity and the persistent life of kinship* (2013). She is curently completing a monograph on her work with Latter-day Saints]