

n e w w o r l d o r d e r s : millennialism in the western hemisphere

Deliverance Deferred: Growth in Millennial Heavens

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At the turn of the twentieth century, the deceased Franz Petersilea answered questions about the conditions in heaven, ranging from whether there is sex in the afterlife to whether angels wear shoes.¹ His communications from beyond the grave came through the automatic writing of his son, Carlyle; this feat was made more remarkable by the fact that in life, Carlyle's father had been largely illiterate. The "writings" of Franz Petersilea are indicative of a larger pattern of nineteenth-century portrayals of heaven—the dead continue to grow, both bodily and mentally, and Franz has learned to write in the afterlife. As Franz himself informs us, "Oh, we have work to do here. None may be idle, not one. The second sphere [of seven] is absolutely filled with schools and children . . . Yet children and schools are found in all the spheres, even to the seventh, for many exceedingly wise angels . . . draw the children of their love to themselves."²

This depiction of heaven as continual progress and a complete lack of stasis countermands more traditional visions of heaven, and even the concept of "eternal rest." Dante's heaven, where the ground is so solid it bruises one's feet to walk on it, or Huck Finn's heaven, where angels play harps while seated on clouds, imply a sense of closure which is lacking in the literature on nineteenth-century millennialist heavens. The curiosity of this fact comes laden with an irony of its origins: few articulations of religiosity are more concerned with closure than millennialism. If there is no rest for the righteous in heaven, then perhaps the emphasis on closure in millennialism writ large is only one part of a bigger project of sense-making.

As a religious phenomenon, millennialism has been defined by its foregrounding of cosmic closure: the apocalyptic ending is frequently right around the corner, whether ushered in at our behest or at God's. Millennialism is a sense-making position, one which creates *kosmos* out of the perceived chaos of the

¹ Carlyle Petersilea, Letters from the Spirit World (Chicago: Progressive Thinking Publishing House, 1905) 245-5 and 160, respectively. Incidentally, angels prefer sandals.

² Petersilea, 156.

times. As Frank Kermode and others have noted,³ millennialism has its analogue in narrative: time began at a certain point (whether Edenic, apostolic, or other), is currently passing through the period of believers' lives, and is rushing toward apocalyptic closure. History is novelized, and events in the world are never random: suffering and triumph are infused with sacrality, since millennialists are the characters—and often the protagonists—in God's plot.⁴

I will argue, however, that by violently foregrounding apocalyptic closure, millennialists must simultaneously defer the very closure which is their defining characteristic. Frequently closure is deferred by failing to meet certain requirements which are understood as necessary to bringing about apocalyptic closure: for postmillennialists, the Second Coming was predicated on progressing to the point of implementing a social utopia on earth. This clearly has yet to happen. For premillennialists, such as the Mormons, particular conditions, here of gathering the Jews in Jerusalem and the Saints at the second Zion of Utah, have not yet been accomplished.

While earthly strategies of deferring closure are legion, they are tangible, sociological factors in the history of millennialism. I wish to posit that the concept of deferral of closure was so pervasive, however, as to manifest itself in psychological constructions of closure. This may be seen as the inevitable apocalypse for all, the individual's death. Millennialist constructions of heaven suggest not a denial of death *per se*, but rather a denial of closure of any sort.

The Spiritualist movement, which began in 1848 with the famous “mysterious rappings” in Hyde Park, was a postmillennial religious worldview *par excellence*. Articulating an evolutionary *telos* of history which embraced both Darwin and Hegel's parade of time, Spiritualists were involved in every conceivable reform movement of their day, ranging from Abolition to women's undergarments.⁵ The future *parousia* would be ushered in by the works and days of hands, as society was eventually improved unto perfection. Spiritualists, with their emphasis on seances, trance speakers, and myriad forms of communication with

³ See Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), particularly Chapter 1. Paul Ricoeur's discussion of the quest narrative reiterates some of Kermode's points and is also illustrative here. See Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, Vol. 2, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 47.

⁴ For the best discussion of millennialism as a response to theodicy, see Stephen D. O'Leary, Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.)

⁵ For a discussion of Spiritualism's impact on women's rights and related movements, see Ann Braude, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America (Boston: Beacon

those in the afterlife, sought to overcome the mini-apocalypse of death. And in communicating with those beyond the grave, Spiritualists found growth.

As Spiritualism's most notable commentator Ann Braude has argued, the movement was largely a reaction to the Calvinist policy of infant damnation. In an epoch with high infant mortality rates, women in particular could no longer stand the psychological burden of their children's alleged fates and rebelled. In the era of the telegraph, telephone, and photography, invisible communication across time and space was the cutting edge of technology, and communication with the dead was merely the logical conclusion of the contemporaneous excitement. And the women who communicated with their deceased children found them thriving, growing up in both spirit-body and mind, surrounded by loving relatives and angels, completing the life-cycles they were denied on earth. As Ruth Brandon has so pithily observed, "Benjamin Pierce, son of the President, who, it will be remembered, had died in a railroad crash, was married years after his death to one Katie Eaton, who had died at the age of only three weeks, to the accompaniment of great rejoicings at the Eaton home at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas."⁶

The spiritual body grows to maturity in the case of the death of a child, and the adult body grows to an ethereal, angel-like existence as it grows in learning and advances through the seven spheres toward perfection. Judge John Edmonds, the most influential Spiritualist in the period before the Civil War, received this explanation for the growth of children in heaven from no less a figure than Swedenborg: "Those who die in infancy grow up to manhood, and are instructed in the spirit-world in those things which they ought to have learned here. It is a misfortune and a violation of a law of nature to die in infancy, because the object of their first stage of existence [the learning that mortal life brings] is thereby thwarted."⁷

The education of children was an imperative for the afterlife, as progress through the spheres to angelic perfection was coterminous with progress in both moral and pedagogical matters. The educations themselves were comprised mostly of standard Victorian Common-school curricula. As a rule, heavenly schools were peopled with dead relatives and angels who lovingly instructed all of those in need—foremost

Press, 1989), *passim*.

⁶ Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983) 39.

⁷ John W. Edmonds and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism*, Vol. 1 (New York: Partridge & Brittan

children, but also the likes of Franz Petersilea and the inevitable colonialist education of innumerable “tribes and races” of the so-called “primitives.”⁸ However, the education of the dead was not relegated to the teachings of the dead only, and occasionally a living medium would hold heavenly classes for his young pupils. R. Lawrence Moore comments, “People who received the messages were often in the comfortable position of knowing more than the spirits The report of Dr. Charles Main, a healing medium, on his own lectures to spirits (his spirit pupils numbered to the hundreds and thousands) offers no little insight into the psychology of many who got involved in the movement.”⁹

The deferral of closure in heaven was in part accomplished through the infinite need for education. Not only did children receive seemingly endless instruction, but also adults, even cultural heroes, slowly plodded through the infinite advance of the spheres. Figures such as Francis Bacon, Swedenborg, Plato, and others reported being on upper-middle level spheres, learning the lessons of heaven.¹⁰ Literary greats like Shakespeare, Robert Burns, and the recently deceased Edgar Allen Poe were frequently called upon for advice and solace, and they, too, were in the process of progress. Many of these latter category in fact took it upon themselves to continue their literary efforts through mediums, allowing the authors to thus “correct” the various mistakes they had made as living beings. In 1869, a Miss Lizzie Doten of Boston published a collection of such works, in which we are treated to this posthumous revision: “‘To be, or not to be,’ is not the question.”¹¹

Deferral of closure was also implicated in acts of love. Andrew Jackson Davis, the primary theologian of Spiritualism, asserted that since heaven was continuous with earth, therefore marriage was eternal.¹² Spiritualists demurred a bit from this proposition, but posited in its stead what they called “spiritual

Publishers, 1853) 119.

⁸ Examples of this phenomenon are too numerous to recount. For a typical scenario, see Petersilea, 157. For an interesting treatment of “primitives” and violence in the afterlife, see Andrew Jackson Davis, A Stellar Key to the Summer Land (Rochester: Austin Press, 1910) 167.

⁹ R. Lawrence Moore, “Spiritualism,” The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974) 86.

¹⁰ See Edmonds and Dexter, *passim*. For one of the many examples of the usefulness of having such people to consult via mediums, see Hudson Tuttle, The Arcana of Spiritualism: A Manual of Spiritual Science and Philosophy (Manchester: Two Worlds Publishing Co., 1900).

¹¹ Cited in Howard Kerr, Mediums, Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973) 17.

¹² For one example among many, see Andrew Jackson Davis, A Sacred Book Containing Old and New Gospels Derived and Translated from the Inspirations of Original Saints (Boston: William White & Company, 1873) 64.

affinities,” roughly the nineteenth-century version of what we may call a “soul mate.” The idea of spiritual affinity developed at the intersection of Davis’s theology, the free love movement, and the middle class’s growing emphasis on the importance of marriage as a romantic rather than economic arrangement.¹³ The groundwork for the importance of a romantic bond was laid in the middle-class household which, by 1850, had idealized marriage as the foundational social unit upon which all other institutions were dependent. In Free Love John Spurlock discusses the environment that fostered a wide-spread belief in spiritual affinity.

He writes:

Spiritual affinities . . . appealed to urban middle-class women who had already become thoroughly indoctrinated with the new standards of family life. They accepted the views of marriage idealizers like William Alcott who placed marriage at the center of life. Spiritualists extended this marriage into the infinite future, giving it a transcendent dimension and at the same time insisting that not everything with the name of marriage in this life was a true marriage.¹⁴

Romantic love, even if denied on the earthly plane, would be an intrinsic part of the heavenly experience, and one which also was seemingly deferred in perpetuity. One of the most extensive documents on spiritual affinities from the period comes from the prolific medium Mrs. Mary T. Longley. In one illustrative session, the spirit of a Father Pierpoint is asked, quite bluntly, whether there is physical sex in heaven, reiterating a favorite Spiritualist question. He replies with a long disquisition about the primal nature of soul mates as dual in essence and gender and separated into two for the purpose of “human expression.” He states through Longley’s automatic writing, “Soul mates are always united sometime, it may not be for many, many years, according to their unfoldment and work, or knowledge in the spirit world; sometime and somewhere the union will be, of course, since the law of affiliation and attraction, as well as vibration, in the spirit, all life, or being, must find its own.”¹⁵

The union of the two halves in heaven takes bodily as well as spiritual form, echoing the primal androgyne of Plato’s Symposium.¹⁶ The heart of Pierpont’s answer to the question of sex in the afterlife

¹³ For the best discussion of this phenomenon as a product of the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy and the concomitant separation of spheres of labor for men and women, see Mary Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁴ John C. Spurlock, Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860 (New York: New York University Press, 1988) 97.

¹⁵ James H. Fletcher, Letters from Astrea (New York: 1908), published by the author. Reprinted in Gary Ward, ed., Spiritualism I: Spiritualist Thought (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990) 64.

¹⁶ See Aristophanes’ speech, 189c-193e, in Plato, The Symposium and the Phaedrus: Plato’s Erotic Dialogues, trans. William Cobb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

will be given in full to demonstrate that the fullness of erotic love at some distant point in the future extends beyond the emotional to a concrete and undifferentiated physical unity. He writes:

The organ of generation maintains and is like a seat of life, since it, through the intelligent will and the love element, increases the flow (so to speak) of the magnetic aura toward the counterpart of the individual (soul mate) and causes a blending of the whole harmonious natures, not in sexual intercourse as known on earth, but in the conmingling of the auras as their atoms meet in mutual harmony and love We are told that, ultimately, in the Celestial Spheres, ages on, the reunited Soul Mates appear as one rounded Glorified Sphere of Light, possessing the attributes of Intelligence, Energy, Wisdom, Love and Power; but that the distinct individual attributes and elements of each, the male and female, are plainly discerned and manifested; there is no swallowing up of either individuality by the other part; and that whenever desirable, they can separate and appear as two distinct individuals, male and female.¹⁷

However, Father Pierpoint has only heard word of this ultimate erotic coupling, this heavenly version of romantic closure. Perfection is perpetually deferred in this account and in all others I have encountered. Closure remains elusive, even into the reaches of the afterlife. The life of the dead recapitulates the life of the living: perfection remains the chimeric pot of gold at the end of history's rainbow. Neither earthly reform nor spiritual progress ever achieves the "fullness of time," knowledge like God's or love like the "twining of two souls."¹⁸ The deferral of closure, however, is not relegated to the realm of postmillennialism, with its obsession with infinite progress, but is also present in one of the most pronounced premillennialist movements of the day, the Latter Day Saints. I wish to posit here that the deferral of closure is an intrinsic act to all forms of millennialism, be they pre-, post-, or the most common animal, some combination thereof. Striving toward and resisting cosmic closure comprise the Moebius strip of history, enabling belief systems to remain intact in the face of a failed apocalypse.

As with Spiritualism, not death but the dead are deferred in Mormon cosmology. In Joseph Smith's era, the understanding of heaven itself was a battleground on which the forces for and against closure raged. In The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism Grant Underwood argues that Mormon soteriology underwent a shift in the 1840's as a result of disputation over the tenor of Protestantism's polarities of heaven and hell. Underwood argues that early converts, accustomed to an apocalyptic dualism of salvation and damnation, continued that rhetoric in the earliest Mormon theology. He writes, "For centuries, the polarities of heaven and hell, election and reprobation, had informed the contours of

¹⁷ Ward, ed. 65.

¹⁸ See Ward, "Letters to Astrea," 35.

Protestant thought, and this formed an important part of the cultural baggage early converts carried with them into the LDS church.”¹⁹

Heaven is seen in visions, given to Smith the prophet and others, and many of the earliest revelations clearly support a polarized rhetoric of heaven and hell, with classical post-Puritan visions of the ever-vigilant devil. The early Mormon writings on heaven and hell in the context of the final days appear unsurprising and even routine for nineteenth-century millennialism. However, the problem with a dualistic soteriology is that it directly contradicts a revelation given to Joseph Smith as early as 1832: there are three heavens and only a minute hell which later becomes reserved for Mormon apostates. Smith and his colleague Sidney Rigdon are shown three separate, hierarchically-ordered heavens, to which the Saints, other Christians, and non-Christians who are well-intended will go, in descending order. These groups correspond to the celestial, terrestrial, and “telestial,” respectively, and will become in the afterlife suns, moons, and stars.²⁰ Since the Saints generally accepted Smith’s revelations as divinely inspired, this contradiction reveals a fundamental question: why is apocalyptic dualism asserted in the beginning and replaced by a return to the 1832 revelation of three heavens?

Grant Underwood offers a compelling answer to this issue. The foundation of Underwood’s argument is that although this revelation did exist in the early 1830’s, it only came into a generally accepted prominence in the 1840’s as a result of a transformation from inherited Protestant constructions of the apocalypse to a more specifically “Mormon” understanding of the afterlife.²¹ However, I wish to offer an additional reading of this remarkable shift: the apocalyptic urgency present in early Mormon writings had to be countered by strategies of deferral. As the Saints fervently expected imminent apocalyptic closure, they simultaneously began to set in motion methods by which that closure could be delayed. Their understanding of heaven in this period underwent an emblematic shift--immediate closure in heaven or hell was replaced by an anti-closural construction of heavens.

It is not only the plurality of heavens, however, which speak to this strategy as one of deferral. The subsequent revelations which constructed the heavens as fluid and ever-expanding also served to defer

¹⁹ Grant Underwood, The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 54.

²⁰ See Doctrine and Covenants 76:69-83.

²¹ Underwood, 56.

closure. Following the rebirth of the three-tiered heaven concept, Smith received two inter-related revelations--the eternal “sealing” of marriages and the baptism of the dead. As has been so eloquently argued by Lawrence Foster, these revelations served to extend kinship systems eternally: the former made marriages—monogamous, polygynous (“plural”), and Levirate—extend into the afterlife.²² The latter involves the posthumous baptism of those who had died before the new revelation into Mormon heaven. These revelations indicate that heaven not only expanded horizontally, that is, one’s experience of heaven was increased by the addition of plural wives and children, but also vertically with the posthumous baptism of relatives and friends. Being placed in a heaven did not constitute closure, since posthumous baptism would raise one to a higher level of heaven itself.

The original revelation commanding the baptism of the dead begins with an explanation that divine laws given on earth are also binding in heaven, and thus the Saints’ religious laws in the new dispensation are applicable to the dead. Doctrine and Covenants states, “It may seem to some to be a very bold doctrine that we talk about--a power which records or binds on earth and binds in heaven. Nevertheless, in all ages of the world, whenever the Lord has given a dispensation to any man by actual revelation, or any set of men, this power has always been given. Hence, whatsoever those men did in authority . . . it became a law on earth and in heaven, and could not be annulled, according to the decrees of the great Jehovah.”²³ The baptism of the dead is justified in the revelation by positing a pre-existing relationship between baptism and death: in the ceremony of the living, one enters the ritual symbolically “dead” and arises living.²⁴

²² See Lawrence Foster, Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) 233.

²³ Doctrine and Covenants, 128:9.

²⁴ It is worth noting at this point that although the Saints’ mobile understanding of heaven bears a strong resemblance to movement through the spheres in Spiritualism, Smith’s initial revelation precedes the Spiritualist movement by almost twenty years. However, Andrew Jackson Davis was writing before the Fox sisters began the groundswell in 1848; it was, in fact, fortuitous for both parties that Davis allied himself with the Spiritualist movement. I can find no direct indication that Smith was familiar with Swedenborg’s work, although it does seem to have filtered into the society at large by the 1840’s. Since Smith was martyred before the advent of Spiritualism, I can find no direct correlation between his theories of heaven and those of the Spiritualists in this period, although that was clearly the case later with the advent of the Godbeites. However, it should be kept in mind that Smith, although reactionary at first, became a devotee of things esoteric--all of the Church Elders were Freemasons, for example--and it is not impossible or even unlikely that Smith encountered Swedenborgian thought somewhere during his career, although Swedenborg himself is never mentioned in Smith’s published diaries. For the best discussion of Freemasonry and the Saints, see Klaus J. Hansen, Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1967) 54-55. Smith’s connection with the “occult” has been largely denigrated following the debunking of the so-called

Striving for the end of the world appears counter-intuitive enough; striving toward one's own death--as a collectively sanctioned act at that--seems almost unthinkable. This death-reaching focus was far from morbid, however. What I am positing here is that in millennialism, the individual is a microcosm of the phenomenon: just as closure invests religious meaning on the group at the end of days, the closure of an individual life, or the anticipation of that closure, transforms the present. In their emphasis on the afterlife, the Saints were carving their millennial thinking on individuals. Temporalization functioned as an epistemic tool not only for the grand theoretical reaches of theology, but also for individuals facing the eventuality of their own demise. By striving toward the end and elaborating sweeping visions of the afterlife, the Saints managed to disrupt the *telos* of time--the end was the beginning of the great journey toward godhood.

Death is a signifying moment which retrospectively changes the importance of the present. The bookends of birth and death allow one to look upon life as a novel with a *telos* and with meaning. Both the Spiritualists and the Saints positioned themselves wisely in relation to death: it invests this life with meaning but it is also the birth into another journey. The deferral of cosmic closure, seen on both the sociological and psychological planes in these millennialist movements, was a necessary strategy to keep their epistemic structures intact. For those who believed in a cosmic ending which never came, the signs of the times were their structure of knowledge for how the world's events were invested with religious meaning.

The horror of suffering and the seemingly random historical exigencies which inflict themselves on every life are subsumed into a sacred story in millennialism: this natural catastrophe or that collapse of an empire is happening according to a greater plan, one that could not be abandoned even in the case of

"Salamander Papers," forged documents purporting to be Smith's writings on that topic. However, in my opinion, the backlash that has resulted from this discreditation has led to an under-appreciation of Smith's involvement with the esoteric. For example, there is ample evidence that Smith was deeply influenced by the Kabbalah. For an introduction to that issue, see Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 117-194. For a full discussion of the influences of Kabbalah in Mormonism, see John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). For the influence of the Kabbalah specifically on the theology of three heavens, see Brooke, 13. It should be noted that Brooke's work has lost some credence in Mormon academic circles, coming, as it did, before the debunking of the Salamander Papers and thus in a whirlwind of interest in the occult connection. Finally, for a reading of Mormonism in general as being esoteric and "gnostic," see Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

apparent disconfirmation.²⁵ The deferral of closure in this world and the next occupies a space next to and equal to the foregrounding of closure, and this interplay of conflicting drives is imprinted on the souls of believers in their endless journeys to perfection.

²⁵ For the classic work on this issue, see Leon Festinger, When Prophecy Fails (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).