

BAPTIZING DEAD PEOPLE FOR FUN AND PROFIT: ORGANIZED RELIGION'S MOST IMAGINATIVE SCAM

Tom Bradley

“Baptism enslaved me.”

—Rimbaud, Night in Hell

Our Heavenly Father did not get around to making the heaven and earth and Adam and Eve until approximately the end of the Ubaid Period in southern Mesopotamia, in spite of all the green pottery those uncooperative folks left behind.

The word “approximately” appears in this article’s hook only because the dates of the Ubaid people are usually preceded by a “circa.” The date of creation, on the other hand, is an absolute certainty. Pretty much.

Fundamentalists calculate the precise year by tallying up all the “begats” in Genesis: “Cainan lived seventy years and begat Mahalaleel... Arphaxad lived five and thirty years and begat Salah... Peleg lived two and thirty years and begat Serug,” etc. This hard data is then dovetailed with the family trees of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—which are divinely inspired, just like the rest of the Bible, and are therefore literally factual right down to the smallest syllable, except they contradict each other. But you sort of split the difference, and continue doing your ciphers till you arrive at the birth of Our Redeemer at the dawn of the Common Era.

Christ was actually born four or five years Before Christ, due to an honest boo-boo made by a lovable but ditzzy monk named Dionysius (a.k.a. “Dennis”) the Little. But, never mind. Crunching the numbers just so, and maybe playing the odds here and there, you come up with precisely 4004 B.C., anno mirabilis, and how: the year everything—space, time, matter, anti-matter, us, etc.—came into being.

The American religion of Mormonism is not Christian by any means, but they also choose to

disregard Mesopotamian archaeology. They accept 4004 B.C., or a date pretty near it, for the beginning of our world. Those green Ubaid pots, right along with fossils of trilobites and pterodactyls and Lucy the glitzy hominid, and so forth, were deliberately placed on earth to test our faith. Which are you going to buy into, the comforting and manageable truth of the scriptures, or the disorienting lies that secular humanists and communists and anarchists try to feed us?

Mormons also believe that, at the time of creation, six thousand and five years ago, God whipped up a batch of souls, a finite number of them, all at once, and one time only, and tucked them in cold storage amongst the clouds. With an ever-accelerating rate of attrition, these souls wait patiently to be embodied. Whenever a baby is conceived on earth, one of them flutters down and squeezes itself into the embryo. Imagine squeaky sounds, as when someone in the back seat of your car is desperately trying to pull on a wet rubber swimsuit before the Highway Patrolman can come to the window.

(I'm not altogether sure about this, but I think that, in the case of clomiphene-induced sextuplets, each fetal sibling winds up with one-sixth of a soul. A good way to test my hypothesis would be to look up a set, invite yourself over to lunch, and look deeply into their eyes.)

Now, if an embodied soul joins the Mormon Church during its terrestrial tenure, at death it can bounce right back to its cozy pigeonhole in Heaven, and that's the very best thing that can happen to anybody. Therefore, it is the humanitarian duty of every right-minded Mormon to fetch down as many souls as possible and initiate them. This is the practical purpose of polygamy. As America's inner city demographers have noted, one man, given the proper motivation and a sturdy brace of gonads, can maintain any number of women in a state of fecundation.

Another reason for this frenetic coughing-up of new members is that Mormons have been instructed by their leaders, the unassumingly designated "General Authorities," to pay ten percent of their yearly income to the organization. This is the tithe, as prescribed in the Book of Deuteronomy. (Mormons have their own scriptures, which serve their spiritual needs better than the Old and New Testaments ever could. But, as we will see shortly, the General Authorities are not averse to lifting whatever's useful from the Holy Bible and bending it to their purposes).

In a denomination that makes tithing compulsory, it's only good business sense for the leadership to encourage grotesque levels of procreation. The coffers swell exponentially with each generation. In Utah, the birth rate is the same as that of the Indian subcontinent, while the rest of Caucasoid USA wimps oxymoronically out with a "negative population growth." There is no graying of Utah society. Dying nations such as Japan gaze in envy at Salt Lake City's omnipresent dumpsters brimming with fulfilled Huggies.

In that town's suburbs, the sidewalks and crew-cut lawns are barely visible under teeming throngs of semi-feral youngsters. As Mommy is confined in perpetual parturition, and Daddy's every free moment is occupied with sacred volunteer work, these skittering, screeching mobs wax no less numerous when the sun goes down and the boogey-man comes out trolling. And, as the majority of the tiny Mormons are blond-haired and blue-eyed, perfectly fitting most infertile couples' profile for adoption fodder, these neighborhoods have become a professional kidnapper's paradise. Vanishings of tykes usually have to be aggravated by gutters full of blood and bone fragments, or multiple UFO sightings, to make it beyond page two of the local newspaper's ho-hum B-Section. No matter, plenty more where they came from.

You can see that it is no exaggeration to call this suburb a Utopia, though in the original Rabelasian rather than borrowed Morian sense:

"...the Utopian men had so rank and fruitful genitories, and the Utopian women carried matrixes so ample, so gluttonous, so tenaciously retentive, and so architectonically cellulated, that at the end of every ninth month seven children at the least, what male what female, were brought forth by every married woman..."

—Gargantua and Pantagruel, Book 3, Chapter 1

It's astounding, the level of cooperation the General Authorities can command over the very reproductive organs of their flock. But there's something in it for the rank and file as well—or at least for a good fifty percent of them.

If you are a Mormon male, and if you more-or-less discreetly marry as many females as you possibly can without going to jail, and if you keep them all pregnant from the ages of twelve to fifty

(the ideal Mormoness never touches a Tampax in her whole terrestrial life), and if you persuade your vast armies of spawn to join the church, and if you teach these new members to tithe—then, upon death, you will become a Mormon god yourself, and be furnished with your own planet, and a harem of numberless wives. (It's easy for a full-fledged god to ignore the words of a mere Son of God, as recorded in Matthew 22:30, where Jesus says unto the Sadducees, "For in the resurrection, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage.") And, being God, you are free to knock up your cosmic broads wholesale, getting Carl Sagan-type numbers of souls to populate your planet, who will pay ten percent of their income to your very own hand-picked General Authorities, and so on forever and ever. It's an endless gushing forth of carcasses and cash-money.

I guess that sounds like big fun to certain categories of postmodern personality. And this is why Mormons think their Heaven is such a good place to be, and why they feel a responsibility to make sure that as many souls as possible wind up there, whether they desire an afterlife of ceaseless missionary-position intercourse, or not.

The notion that a man can become God removes this wacky bunch far from the realm of Christianity. There are many types of Christian, with all sorts of conflicting doctrines, but one belief they all have in common, by definition, is that only one man was God, and that man was Jesus Christ. And he was unique in history, to the extent that his eventual return to earth will constitute the end of history. Any deviation from that basic assumption ends up somewhere in the category of heathenism.

This particular Mormon deviation bounces us all the way back to pre-Sumerian times. One of the three advances (the others being agriculture and bureaucracy) that distinguished the first civilization from everything that went before, was the fundamental insight that man is not even potentially divine. This is the subject of the world's oldest epic. It's the whole lesson Gilgamesh learns on his quest.

But the notion of Orders of Being is alien to Utah theologians, blinkered as they've been by the most naive American populist democracy. In the Mormon cosmos, Jesus was merely one of many sons of one of many gods, whose peer any man can become through correct practice and a high sperm count with good motility. If each of us is potentially the first person of his own trinity, it

follows that Jesus is nothing more than a kind of paradigmatic super-nephew.

By now you will have noticed a certain wrong-headedness, if not outright sloppy-mindedness, underlying this whole deal: beneath the tastelessness and exaggerated horniness lies a telling kind of mythopoeic ineptitude. It smacks not of long-lived tradition motivating hearts and minds across the generations, but of deliberate contrivance on the part of a less than inspired, or even sincere individual. You could be forgiven for suspecting that one of those so-called “charismatics” is behind such a scam: one of those cynically manipulative Sunday morning demagogues who seem to flourish only in North America, since the Enlightenment drove them from Europe. And, in fact, Joseph Smith, the founder of the church and its first “Prophet, Seer and Revelator,” to whom the golden tablets of the BOOK OF MORMON were delivered by the angel Moroni, started out life as a part-time dowser of buried treasure in gullible farmers’ fields, and a full-time hymen demolisher. Examine the black velvet paintings of him for sale in Salt Lake City souvenir shops, and you will see the fathomless, yet vacant eyes of the born seducer-con man.

In a politically motivated attempt to appear to be part of mainstream American culture, Joseph Smith’s successors have named their heresy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (lately they’ve even started putting the fourth and fifth words in larger type). And, by way of camouflage, they superficially ape the outward appearances of a few legitimate Christian practices. One of these is baptism. Perhaps not surprisingly, the General Authorities have taken this rite and tweaked it to their own worldly advantage, unearthing a whole new (rather, old) customer base. They are the only denomination in existence that baptizes dead people.

This grotesque idea derives, albeit indirectly, from no less venerable an authority than the Apostle Paul. In the early years of Christianity, that human dynamo went around the Roman Empire organizing cells of the new faith, and advising them on doctrine and procedure. He wrote a lot of letters to these various communities, several of which made it past several editorial board meetings and into the New Testament. In Paul’s first letter to the faithful who were abiding at the northern Greek port of Corinth, the following problematical line can be found:

Else what shall they do
which are baptized for the dead,

if the dead rise not at all?

Why are they then baptized for the dead?

—1 Corinthians 15:29

These words were the source of much confusion when Christianity was just getting started. Nobody really knows exactly what Paul was talking about. But it is generally assumed that he was referring to some strange rite performed by a fringe group who have long since died out. It is known that at least one second-century cult developed the habit of digging up and washing corpses based on a misunderstanding of this verse. But they also died out (probably of diarrhea from all the gross germs), and the whole question raised by Paul's words has long since been forgotten by everyone—except the canny modern-day cult presently under consideration.

It occurred to the General Authorities that many of the finite number of souls arrived on this planet and departed before Joseph Smith began his hustle in the eighteen-twenties, A.D. Those poor wraiths never had the chance to be properly baptized while incarnate, and so they are out there, floating around in limbo, with no means of getting into Paradise.

So the Mormon theologians dug up that almost forgotten line from First Corinthians and decided to build a huge industry around it. The goal is to proxy-baptize the ghost of every personality ever to visit the planet—be he righteous philanthropist, depraved cannibalistic pederast, or middlebrow nebbish (runners of pyramid schemes are never interested in making such fine distinctions). The earth's non-renewable reserves of worm bait are to be nudged awake and suddenly teleported to the lower floor of Heaven, there to dance attendance on Mormons properly christened while alive. (Talk about enslavement by baptism. It's enough to make Rimbaud soil his pants and forget to write a poem on the table with it.)

To promote this celestial slave trade, Mormons have compiled the biggest genealogical library in the world. They gather disembodied names from the archives of nearly every parish church in Christendom and pagan shrine in the rest of the world. Otherwise completely forgotten dead people, more than a billion of them, wait on microfilm and hard copy, presumably with bated breath, to be scanned and burnt onto CDs and eventually baptized by proxy. The librarians are all unpaid "volunteers," forced by threat of damnation to spend their weekends wrestling with gigantic

bales of smudgy xeroxes.

Much of the collection is kept in a hydrogen bomb-proof vault bored straight into the solid granite side of a mountain on the outskirts of the Mormons' plagiarized "Zion," a.k.a Salt Lake City. It's a nightmarish hole in the rock, a place devoted to drudgery, devoid of decor but for a non-sequitur accumulation of Oriental shadow puppets that line the shaft down to Hell.

It's difficult not to suspect that this entire subterranean enterprise was actually undertaken for a reason which couldn't be less eschatological: to serve as a monument to the administrative talents of a handful of men. If you are susceptible to another recent bit of pseudo-historical flummery known as the bicameral mind theory, the Genealogical Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints might remind you of the Great Pyramid of Cheops at Gizeh, or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, or any of the other preternaturally labor-intensive Seven Wonders of that historical epoch which supposedly ended, in the rest of the occident at least, with the awakening of the side of the brain that permits individual volition, as opposed to slavish, social insect-like devotion to hubris-bloated tyrants and their megalomaniacal whims.

Fair enough: the old Ozymandias syndrome. But modern economics, i.e., big bucks, enter into this equation as well. You may take a moment for your astonishment to subside.

Every Mormon is urged to spend his vacation time in Salt Lake City, burrowing like a self-referential termite into his family tree, filling in the blanks with as many of his forbears as possible, that he might wash their past-perfect sins away and "carry their souls to Heaven on his back." To facilitate the accomplishment of this purpose, he must purchase pricey research materials direct from his neighborhood "bishop": attractive leatherette loose-leaf binders, and high-rag-content ledgers with a sky-blue angel motif embossed along the margins. The celestial honor roll can't be scrawled on the backs of doughnut wrappers, after all.

Their "research" accomplished, Latter Day Saints make further pilgrimages to the temples, to undergo as many baptisms as there are monikers on their lists. They must shell out for overpriced sacramental paraphernalia and official gauzy garments to wear in the sacred font, which are mass-produced by Mormon laborers in consecrated factories. And these damp pilgrims must stay in

motels and eat in restaurants run by Mormons, who pay ten percent of their money to the church.

By this point their wallets barely raise a bulge on their buttocks, but they report to the fonts with a smile. Otherwise, without the watery consummation, all those hours giving themselves terminal asthenopia over the microfilm machines would be pointless, and they would end up looking like idiotic dupes—something like devotees of Philip Morris with their nicotine delivery systems stuck in their faces, but no benzine in their Zippos. At this late date, could they be expected to admit to themselves that poring over blurry reproductions of centuries-old obituaries in one of the world's nastiest and most boring cities is a ludicrous waste of their own particular souls' scant sojourn inside a skin?

It all adds up to a very profitable, self-sustaining supplement to the tithes that are piling up in the General Authorities' shiny brass collection plates. And you'd think the poor marks would by now be sapped of all their wealth and enthusiasm. But, miraculously enough, on top of it all, they somehow manage to come up with the wherewithal to mount the most active and successful proselytizing program of any faith in history. And this worldwide high-pressure promotional campaign is financed not by the church, but by the families of the missionaries themselves.

As a result, Mormons are the fastest growing denomination in the world, with as many members as Hitler killed Jews already—and I'm talking non-Holocaust denial numbers here. (Maybe now would be a good time to...well, on second thought, never mind. Forget I said anything.)

Youthful proselytizers are sent everywhere, two by two, in three-piece suits, on one-speed bikes. (They are almost always male: it's the ultimate failure for a young Mormoness to be sent on a mission, as she's supposed to be perpetually in a family way, unfit to scent a bike seat). Their task is not only to recruit living souls and to encourage the grunting-up of more, but also to gather birth, death and copulation records. When two handsome, tall white boys come to your door and want to talk to you about the Kingdom of Heavenly Father being established on earth, pay close attention to them. If you don't pay close attention, they might sidle up to your mantelpiece, snag onto the family Bible, and quietly tear out that page where your sweet old Episcopalian godmother wrote her name in purple ink.

But do let these pillaging marauders into your living room, by all means. They may be able to help you place yourself in the grand scheme of things, especially if you happen to have Charlemagne for an ancestor, or one of the other historical notables whose line has been traced back to Adam. With the help of the Mormons, it just might be possible for you to know who begat the begetter of your begetter, and so on, all the way back to the beginning of time.

Then you can be moistened on behalf of each name on the catalog, and rest secure in the knowledge that, when you die, you can go to Paradise and embrace every single one of your relatives, including either Cain or Abel, whichever side you came from. Finally you will know where your people got those close-set eyes, buckteeth, and that pesky predisposition to every learning disability in the book.

Actually, this prospect doesn't appeal to me, personally—but then, I'm probably a special case: I've got great-great-great uncles who make Timothy McVeigh look like Oskar Schindler, and at least one cousin who died sharing a cell block in the Nevada State Penitentiary with five of her twelve children. George Pickett, the Confederate general responsible for the biggest and most pointless massacre of the War Between the States, would be waiting at the Pearly Gates to shake my hand. A rugby scrum of Liverpool's worst yobs would be more fun than a trans-temporal Bradley family group hug. But not everyone is sprung from the seed of Cain, like me. The General Authorities meet with little difficulty persuading plenty of people to bend every effort to achieve such a desirable end.

The faithful file obediently into a secret chamber in the temple, which has a big tub full of magical water, set upon the backs of four giant bronze oxen, also magic. By definition, magic intends to coerce a gullible deity, so gymnastics are everything. If the smallest detail does not go perfectly, the whole rigmarole must be repeated from the top. They baptize by full immersion of the body, and if so much as half a pube detaches from the root of your tickle-gizzard and floats to the surface, you have to take a deep breath and start all over again. I have no idea how long the mouth and nose must be submerged in order for the metaphysical graft to take. There's no way to judge by scrutinizing the rank and file for symptoms of oxygen deprivation to the brain, as no control group exists.

But, even with all the difficulties and dangers, this is no impossible chore. Remember, the world is only 6000 years old. You can figure between forty and fifty generations for every thousand years—until you get back to old boys like Methuselah, who lived nine hundred and sixty-nine years all by himself, at which point the inconvenience to yourself has decreased considerably. So you wind up with probably fewer than a couple hundred guys in your direct line, and that's only if you were industrious and stupid enough back in the old library to trace yourself all the way back to the Garden of Eden. A couple hundred baths in the Water of Righteousness—a good Mormon can encompass that in less than a month, with diligence inspired by a fervid desire to sit for eternity upon the right hand of Our Heavenly Father, and a good blow dryer.

I have no doubt there are convenience store managers and gas station attendants who've been proxy-baptized for the immortal souls of Abraham Lincoln and Albert Schweitzer and Johann Sebastian Bach and Mother Teresa. (Admittedly, that last one is going to need all the help she can get. Charles Keating's main squeeze, indeed. How did those people in the Calcutta stadium know it was really her in the open casket? I, for one, hope to die before gravity has enough time to make the whole shape of my head transmogrify whenever I lie down on my back. But, come to think of it, that very bloodhound quality of Mama T's face makes her ideal for conversion to the sect: didn't Mark Twain say that Mormon women were so ugly that polygamy was an act of charity?)

After a hard day's work redeeming the dearly departed and dealing out salvation in the preterit tense to faceless strangers who otherwise might as well have never existed, Latter-Day-Saints like to slap on the old feedbag in restaurants near the temple. Their favorite places are all-you-can-eat smorgasbords, as they tend to be big-eating Nordic types on a budget (don't forget that pesky tithe). It's humbling to hang around the tables and watch their massive hands as they reach for the prime rib and pimento loaf and green jello with tiny marshmallows. Their fingerprints are wrinkly from spending all day underwater.

Strange dogma, to be sure, and weird group activities. But this is not just an ephemeral oddball cult, like Heaven's Gate. Remember, they pretty much own and operate one of the fifty United States of America. And the financial arm of their church, the Bonneville Corporation, is one of the biggest corporate entities in the country. Calling themselves a religion, they needn't trouble with taxes.

Their ambition, of course, is to get a Mormon into the White House. And since America is still mostly a Christian nation, the Mormons are trying to push their strange unchristian doctrines and practices into the background, hoping the rest of us saps will mistake them for regular vanilla Protestants. One of the perennial candidates in Republican primaries is Utah senator Orrin Hatch. He keeps saying, "It's not a cult, it's not a cult," but the majority so far haven't chosen to believe him.

As the European cultural traditions that formed America decay and are gradually forgotten, and our education system somehow manages to decline even further, and people become more and more ignorant, and sink into the pit of cultural relativism, it's very likely that the time will come when Americans no longer find it strange or distasteful to have many wives, or to believe that men can become God, or that dead people should be roused from their eternal repose and forced to do bizarre things without their consent, or, indeed, that dunking oneself on behalf of the long-defunct owner of some syllables on a chart is any stranger than sprinkling a little water on a brand-new baby's forehead. And I have no doubt that a Mormon will one day be president of our country.

A president who believes the universe is only a couple hundred generations old will have no problem starting a nuclear war and allowing pollution to destroy our planet. It can always be rebuilt and repopulated in a week by God, or some other Mormon.

e-mail : bradleytom@excite.com