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**THE INFALLIBILITY TRAP:  
THE SACRALISATION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY**

*Walter E.A. van Beek*

*Roma locuta, causa finita*<sup>1</sup>  
*When the prophet speaks, the debate is over*<sup>2</sup>

This article develops the thesis that religions with an exclusive truth claim, a hierarchical organization and a clear follower commitment almost inevitably tend to define their ecclesiastical authority in terms of infallibility. Though the latter concept is couched in different terms in various religious traditions, the pattern of defining authority as such as sacred is clear. This is called “creeping infallibility”, a process that, in the eyes of the author, represents a theological trap, a severe problem that is hard to avoid. The processes leading to overt or creeping infallibility are compared between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, religions that share these major characteristics. First, the text zooms in on the intricacies of the Catholic notion of “infallible”, which shows to be a problematic issue, much debated and part of a political process; then the equivalent notions within the Mormon tradition are explored. LDS theology and discourse focus on “authority” and “obedience”, but LDS history shows how political developments informed the formulation of these concepts into infallibility-like notions. Such a contagious discourse does present a severe problem, if only because of the supreme values of humility, repentance and atonement. The work of Bourdieu and Giddens provides some insights into the processes leading to this “infallibility trap”, which the author illustrates with his personal experiences in the LDS scene.

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<sup>1</sup> Common Roman Catholic expression: “When Rome has spoken, the case is closed”.

<sup>2</sup> Statement of first counsellor N. Eldon Tanner in the church’s *Ensign*, August 1978, a repetition of an *Improvement Era* message from June 1945.

## INFALLIBILITY AS A PROBLEM

A well-known quip in the Mormon scene runs: “Catholics are taught that their pope is infallible, and they do not believe it. Mormons are taught that their prophet is fallible, and they do not believe that either”.<sup>3</sup> Both churches wrestle with the notion of infallibility in their own way, and in this article I try to show that they face a similar “infallibility conundrum” due to their similar theological and organizational structures: a hierarchical organization, where authority is handed top down coupled with a monopolization of symbolic capital.<sup>4</sup> My crucial notion in this article is “creeping infallibility”, the idea that given a certain type of ecclesiastical organization and theological discourse, the idea of “infallibility” creeps into the Church, even uninvited. This conundrum implies that on the one hand this type of organization-cum-ideology almost inevitably leads to some idea of infallibility, while on the other hand in human terms infallibility is a highly problematic concept, especially in a religion where man is defined – at least partly – as a sinner, and humility is considered a virtue. Add to this the detailed information available to us in the electronic age, plus a general cultural decline of the notion “authority” in general, and the theological trap is not only clear but also actual. So the basic thesis of this article is that some Christian formations through their organization and theology are bound to have a cognitive clash between the doctrinal inevitability of a form of infallibility, and the human impossibility of the same notion.

The comparison between LDS and RC might seem far-fetched, but in no way is. The Roman Catholic Church, in many ways, is important other for Mormonism, more than Protestantism; even if the cultural roots of LDS lie in Puritanism<sup>5</sup>, the claims, structure and ambition of the LDS church is modeled much more after the Roman Catholic Church: a centrally led world church with a recognized claim of uniqueness and of divine mandate. The RC Church as relevant other is a subtext in the LDS dealing with mainstream Christianity; the cultural milieu in which Mormonism emerged was emphatically

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<sup>3</sup> This article results from a presentation and discussion at the July 2010 conference of the European Mormon Studies Association at Tilburg University, The Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup> I thank my colleague Jan Jans from Tilburg University for his guidance in Roman matters, as well as the anonymous reviewers of the IJMS.

<sup>5</sup> Rex E. Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers. Mormon Covenant Organization* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990).

Protestant, and in its drive towards respectability Church officialdom addresses evangelical Protestantism more than the Catholic Church<sup>6</sup>, yet church structure and authority discourse is definitely Catholic.

The recent “*approchement*” between LDS and RC over the temple in Rome, Italy, provides a good illustration. The building permission hinges on the *nihil obstat* of the Catholic vicar of Rome – in fact from the “assistant pontiff” of the city, as the pope is *ex officio* the pontiff of Rome. City and Roman Catholic Church still operate under the concordat rules of Mussolini. So, in these days good relations with the Roman Vicariate are actively sought for by the LDS church, trying to bank on the joint support for Proposition 8 in California. Speaking with LDS leaders in Frankfurt I was struck by their eagerness for Catholic recognition on the one hand, and their expectation that this would be obtained within a few months. Specialists of Roman Catholicism, when interviewed, tended to estimate the time needed in terms of years. Eternity has a different implication in Catholic terms than in LDS thought.

So, the days of Bruce R. McConkie seem to be over; in the first edition of *Mormon Doctrine* he defined the Catholic Church as the church of the devil. Instigated by the Brethren he deleted that passage in a later edition, but pro-Catholic he never became. In this he reflected the anti-papal stance of early Puritanism, one of the roots of Mormonism, but anyhow his position was not isolated as the relation between LDS and RC has been very ambivalent through the LDS history. At least as the Mormons see it; the reverse view has been more consistent (and negative). In sociological terms this LDS ambivalence *vis à vis* the RC Church can be read as a variation on one consistent underlying theme, i.e. that the Roman Catholic Church is the ‘relevant other’ for the LDS church. Either as adversary, as reluctant ally, or as ultimate model,<sup>7</sup> the Roman church is the embodiment of the claim to apostolic succession, while the LDS embodies the claim to apostolic non-succession-*cum*-restoration. So I think the comparison is highly relevant, even inescapable. I will start out with a short overview of the dynamics

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<sup>6</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive. The Mormon Struggle for Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> Walter E.A. van Beek, ‘Mormon Europeans or European Mormons? An Afro-European Look at Religious Colonization’, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 38, 4 (2005), 33.

of the infallibility concept in RC thought, and then compare the LDS position.

#### INFALLIBILITY: THE POPE AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Exposés about the Roman Catholic dogma of infallibility usually start with a few disclaimers, and for a fair understanding these are often needed. Papal infallibility does not mean that the “pope is always right”, nor that “the pope commits no sins”, or “makes no mistakes”, just as it does not mean that anything the pope says is scripture even if he speaks as a pope. Actually the dogma is not about the pope, but about a specific kind of statements the pope is in a position to make.<sup>8</sup> The dogma has been posed by the First Vatican Council in 1870 but is formulated very restrictive and concerns only a very specific kind of statements. The accepted conditions for an infallible declaration are, since 1870, that: 1. the pope has to utter it; 2. he has to speak *ex cathedra* (i.e. “in discharge of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, and by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority”); 3. He has to use the word “define”; 4. The doctrine has to regard faith or morals; 5. and he has to state that the belief must be held by whole Church. Finally, the text must indicate that the teaching is definitive and binding, in any type of wording, usually expressed by: “We declare, decree and define ...” (the teaching as definitive); as final indication the text has a so-called *anathema* attached, stating that anyone who deliberately voices dissent is outside the Catholic Church and no longer belongs to the flock.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in order to be infallible, the papal statement has to be very precisely worded; if the wording is different, then the statement has (considerable) authority as coming from the pope, but is not considered infallible. In actual fact, there are very few infallible papal statements formulated in the history of the RC Church. In the 1870 Council the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary was formulated by pope Pius IX as an infallible dogma, i.e. the belief that Mary, the mother of Christ, had been conceived beyond the influence of the original sin. In

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<sup>8</sup> The following description is indebted to I.A.R. Costigan, *The Consensus of the Church and Papal Infallibility* (Catholic University of America Press, 2005); P. C. Empie, T. A. Murphy and J. A. Burgess, *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> The Encyclical *Pastor Aeternus*, (1870), Chapter 4.

1950 pope Pius XII gave the Church the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, the belief that Mary went to heaven without experiencing death, i.e. was “assumed body and soul into heavenly glory”. The next Council, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council 1962–65, reaffirmed the principle of infallibility, speaking of the “sacred primacy of the Roman Pontiff and of his infallible magisterium”, but did not state any new dogma, and the following popes have not used the prerogative. Some statements come close to it, though, but that will be discussed later.

Papal infallibility is a special expression – the term often used is “manifestation” – of the infallibility of the Church as a whole, also called the indefectibility of the Church, or perennial in the truth. This belief states that the Holy Spirit will not allow the Church to err in belief or teaching, and is part of what is called the “Sacred Magisterium” (*magister* = teacher). This Magisterium is in principle undivided, but in practice has an extraordinary and an ordinary side; the first concerns the declarations of ecumenical (ecumene = the entire Catholic world) councils, which, if properly worded, are considered infallible as well; the second is the “ordinary and universal” magisterium, in principle the consensus of the catholic bishops all over the world church, including the pope, who is after all the *primus inter pares* as bishop of Rome. But they are two sides of the same coin, the Magisterium. Examples of the first kind are slightly more numerous, and include the decree on justification by faith plus works<sup>10</sup> of the council of Trent (1545–63), and the very notion of papal infallibility in 1870, in order to make the new dogma of papal infallibility valid. Examples of the second kind, the “ordinary magisterium” are more numerous; the decree by Pope John Paul II that priesthood ordination was reserved for males belongs to that category. However, the large majority of doctrine never has been formulated in “infallible” terms, simply because there has been no dissent on it, or not enough to warrant such a heavy institutional mechanism.

Historically, the dogma on papal infallibility took a long time in emerging. Though set in stone as recently as 1870, it has early roots: already in the 6<sup>th</sup> century the bishop of Rome was defined as the preserver of apostolic truth.<sup>11</sup> In 1075 pope Gregory VII wrote that the

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<sup>10</sup> A decree countering the Reformation belief in justification by faith alone.

<sup>11</sup> The Encyclical *Formulae of Hormisdas*. In fact, this stemmed from a much earlier and broader definition of Christian orthodoxy in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, where in order to be counted as orthodoxy, one had to follow one of the four estab-

papacy “will never err to all eternity according to the testimony of Holy Scripture”.<sup>12</sup> Papal decrees, however, never stood alone, as they were the “manifestation”<sup>13</sup> of the general Magisterium of the church. The reasons for formalizing and solidifying the papal infallibility were political. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Italian unification had dethroned the pope as ruler of the Papal States, reducing the territory of the church to the Vatican mini-state. The reduction in mundane power triggered, in all probability, a move to spiritual centralization, also the reason why this Council was held in the Vatican itself, unlike all its predecessors.<sup>14</sup>

But in practice *Roma locuta* is not exactly *causa finita*. The doctrine of papal infallibility – in contrast with church indefectibility – was not without its critics, though, and still is the subject of fierce debate, also within the Catholic Church. One leading Catholic theologian, Hans Küng in 1980 lost his teaching rights as professor of theology at Tübingen University, over his well-informed, closely reasoned and strongly critical book on infallibility;<sup>15</sup> after and amidst a host of other critical commentaries he wrote, it was his critique on this issue that brought him into open conflict with the bishops’ synod. And he is by no means alone. Internal critique uses various arguments. First, the Scriptural founding of the dogma is weak, as neither the Gospels nor the letters in the New Testament paint a clear picture of any central position of the apostle Peter; Paul seems to trump Peter in several instances, while James seem to have had the decisive voice in the first council in Jerusalem. Second, the long history of the Catholic Church has furnished quite a few examples of popes being, in retrospect, quite fallible. Third, the scriptural basis of the Bible should be considered infallible, not a human person, a Protestant argument that is shared by

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lished “metropolitans”, i.e. the bishops from Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and – indeed – Rome. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the other three had fallen away – and would soon become Muslim – and Rome alone was left.

<sup>12</sup> The Encyclical *Dictatus Papae* (1075).

<sup>13</sup> The instruction with the Encyclical *Donum Veritatis*, uses the term “manifest”, *Donum Veritatis* (1990), pt 15.

<sup>14</sup> B. Hasler and H. Küng, *Wie der Papst unfehlbar wurde: Macht und Ohnmacht eines Dogmas* (München: Piper & Co, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> Hans Küng, *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage* (Zürich: Benzinger, 1970), pp. 178 and 181.

some Catholic scholars as well.<sup>16</sup> Four, power configurations seem to have been crucial in the attention for infallibility, at least for the processes leading up to its definition.<sup>17</sup> A detailed analysis of the First Vatican Council shows how much of a political struggle the establishment of the dogma has been, in 1870.<sup>18</sup> The simple conclusion is that the pope won.

#### NO INFALLIBILITY? THE LDS CASE

The quip at the start states that the Mormons are taught that their prophet is not infallible. Is that so? How different is the LDS church in fact from the Roman Catholic one? The term “infallibility” is seldom used, as the Catholic flavour is not appreciated. On the other hand “fallible” is definitely a word that Mormon leaders use, also when describing themselves. Joseph Smith is often depicted as a prophet who liked to shock visitors, by welcoming them when he emerged from a jocular bout of wrestling. Sweaty and covered with dirt he would introduce himself as: “Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet”. This became more evident in the Nauvoo part of his career, when he had accrued enough self-confidence for such a confrontational approach.<sup>19</sup> But in any of part of his career Joseph Smith took great pains to deny any kind of infallibility; in fact at several times he just escaped being considered a fallen prophet. Throughout he made it clear that he could make mistakes, and that a prophet was only a prophet when he was acting as such. However, even when he felt himself at first inspired, he later acknowledged that things had gone wrong, so failed predictions abound.<sup>20</sup> But for his followers the difference between a *fallible* prophet and a *fallen* prophet was never easy. Simply, the position as a prophet of

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<sup>16</sup> M.E. Powell, *Papal Infallibility: A Protestant Evaluation of an Ecumenical Issue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> An early example is the struggle for monastic power by Franciscan monks for whom papal infallibility simply was convenient. See B. Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility, 1150–1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty and Tradition in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> Hasler and Küng, *Wie der Papst unfehlbar wurde*.

<sup>19</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), p. 84.

the Lord, plus the concomitant inspiration that belongs to that office – in fact forms the very foundation of that office – makes the notion of some form of infallibility almost inevitable. After all, it is not easy to see someone who speaks with the voice of the Lord as fallible; in principle Mormons agree with Küng: “In the strict sense of the word, only God is infallible”.<sup>21</sup> And living at close quarters with the religious leader, it is not easy to separate the things the prophet officially says from what one hears and sees in daily life. Mormons always had their prophets next door. Thus, many crises for Joseph Smith originated from wrong decisions, which then reflected on his religious status. The collapse of the Kirtland ‘bank’ was an obvious example, which in retrospect showed that he was either not an adroit banker or set out on a mission impossible, probably both.<sup>22</sup> Other instances are his severe misjudgment of John Bennett, and on a larger scale the failure of the Missouri settlement<sup>23</sup>. When some of his predictions for which inspiration was claimed, did not pan out, Joseph Smith was the first to admit that he could make mistakes, or he was in his own eyes and words, a fallible prophet. Also, he was the one who applied numerous corrections to the Book of Mormon manuscript before it was sent in print, considering it both a revealed text and his own.

As in the RC Church, the attitude towards infallibility has shifted in the LDS Church in the direction of infallibility. In the early Church, as Michael Quinn showed, the leadership after Joseph Smith repeatedly stressed its fallibility.<sup>24</sup> In a situation in which the cohesion of the Utah Saints was never in doubt, given their exilic situation in Deseret, the LDS leadership could function without spiritual centralization; in fact till WW II, the leadership could well stress: “We are not infallible in our judgment, and we err”.<sup>25</sup> Quinn views this as a grasp for political control of the membership,<sup>26</sup> but external growth might be a factor as well. A more global church needed to be redirected towards

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<sup>21</sup> Küng, *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage*, p. 173.

<sup>22</sup> The Kirtland bank had no official legal statute, so could not call itself a bank, but a ‘safety society’. But it operated like a bank, and definitely folded like a bank; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 330.

<sup>23</sup> See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, Chapter 9.

<sup>24</sup> Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), p. 368.

<sup>25</sup> *Conference Report, April 1940*, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, p. 369, like the Catholic example, thus.

its organizational apex. Anyway, the trend towards centralization was clear in the '70s and the '80s, with a personality cult developing around David McKay, Spencer Kimball and Gordon Hinckley. At the end of the century, under the influence of Hinckley, this shifted to some extent from the person of the president – Hinckley hated adulation – to the collective of the First Presidency and the Twelve. Whether this shift will last is not clear, but it does fit in an increased focus on collective leadership in the Church as a whole, which also reflects in the new *Handbook of Instructions*.<sup>27</sup> And, as Shepherd and Shepherd stated some time ago: “The increased distance between members and leaders undoubtedly contributes to the awe with which church authorities are held and to the successful routinization of charisma in the ecclesiastical structure.”<sup>28</sup> However much inerrant authority the fifteen apostles as a body are allotted, the president of the Church still is, in Catholic terms, the *manifestation* of that “de facto infallibility”.<sup>29</sup>

How close is the LDS Church position to the Roman one? First, human frailty indicates that we all are fallible as persons, both in LDS and RC thought, though with some slight differences in anthropology. In Catholic thought we are sinners by nature and by inheritance, from the original sin onwards, to be saved by the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ, mediated through sacraments administered by a priesthood that derives its authority from apostolic succession. In Mormon thought we are sinners by nature, without inherited original sin, to be saved by the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ, through entering into a covenant with him mediated by a priesthood that derives its authority from an apostolic succession after restoration. So both are variations on the theme of authority and succession, in fact of the heavenly mandate.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In this important internal administrative document, the traditional leader-oriented administration is – to some extent – supplemented by a reliance on councils, amply represented in the Church.

<sup>28</sup> Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984), p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> Cole R. Capaner, ‘Individual conscience and de facto infallibility’, *Sunstone* 9 (Autumn 1984), pp. 26 and 30.

<sup>30</sup> The lemma “Catholic and Mormon” in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* gives the differences in doctrines between the two churches; though presented as

So for the church as an institution this anthropo-theological difference has little impact, and the Catholic notion of the infallible Sacred Magisterium is quite recognizable in Mormonism. Numerous are the declarations from General Authorities that the “Church shall not fall again”, that the “prophet shall not lead the church astray”; thus, in many different wordings the message is preached loud and clear: the church will not err. Though not voiced as “infallibility”, the notion of inerrancy of the Church is similar to the Catholic position, with the Catholic term “indefectibility” being quite apt. The notions of “infallibility”, “inerrancy”, “not leading astray” and “indefectibility” are not exactly synonyms; infallible concerns – if anything – statements, indefectibility the institution, inerrancy script or human authority, but to separate them strictly is not very relevant, as they all are based on the same process, that of sacralization of authority.

Who, then, is the Church? That question is seldom posed in LDS circles, but answers itself once formulated, but in opposite ways. One could be the total of the membership, in its internal organization, similar to the way CS Lewis defined the Christian Church, as the huge, historical conglomerate of Christ-inspired organizations and people throughout the ages, amounting an enormous mass movement fired by “peace and good will”. And at times fired by petty resentment and bigotry,<sup>31</sup> one has to admit. Thus, in the Mormon case, the broad panorama of Mormon experience would define the LDS church: the deacon gathering in fast money in small town Utah; the home teacher reluctantly making an appointment with his assigned family at the last day of the month; the high priest group leader exhorting his high priests group to attend the temple next month; the relief society teacher preparing her lesson for next Sunday; the high school girl rubbing her eyes while her mother drives her to early morning seminary; the priest’ quorum clearing the garden of an old sister; the ward enjoying an outing in the warm summer sunshine; a missionary trying desperately to offer his testimony in understandable Dutch; a father taking his newborn child in his arms to give him a blessing, assisted by two of his kinsmen; a couple checking their food storage before trying to get the children together for family home evening. The list is endless, and of course has to be completed with the meetings themselves, in the

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different theological systems, close reading shows how much they are alike, indeed variations on a theme.

<sup>31</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper & Collins, 2009 [1942]).

branches, wards, stakes and – also – general conference, as well as in the temple, but with the most important aspect of all included, i.e. the social visiting, exchange news, greetings and some gossip. This inclusive view clearly is my definition of choice, but this is not the church that could be characterized as “indefectible”.

The other definition is the top down one: the Church is the prophet, the First Presidency, the Apostles, the Seventies, in short the whole amalgam indicated as “General Authorities”. And after them come all the lay priesthood, in their many functions and positions, and then the rest of the membership. Any statement on inerrancy of the church, views this as the core of the church: the Authorities of the church leading the membership, under the divine mandate, which is handed top down from prophet to the young deacon. That is the Church that which will neither err nor lead “astray” (a popular expression, by the way).<sup>32</sup> And it is here that notions on infallibility pop up, not only on the church but also of individual leaders. Papal infallibility, we saw, is a special manifestation of church infallibility. Though rejecting the notion of papal infallibility, LDS culture clearly flirts with the same notion with respect to its prophet. In August 1979 the Church’s *Ensign* magazine publishes first counsellor N. Eldon Tanner’s talk: “When the prophet speaks the debate is over”; he there quoted with full support Young Women President Elaine Cannon, who at a Church-wide fireside meeting for the women of the Church, phrased, the now famous dictum: “When the prophet speaks, ... the debate is over.”<sup>33</sup>

Basing themselves on a content analysis of General Conference talks, Shepherd and Shepherd have shown that the themes of acceptance of authority, obedience and proprietorship of exclusive religious truth run as a common theme throughout talks of General Authorities,<sup>34</sup> or: “Reverence for the oracular authority of the prophets has ... been a consistent and powerful conference theme throughout Mormon

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<sup>32</sup> As one among many possible examples, I give a quote from Hinckley at General Conference in October 1996: “It is in the hands of God, and should any of its leaders ever attempt to lead it astray, His is the power to remove them. He has said that He has restored His work for the last time, ‘never again to be destroyed nor given to other people’ (D&C 138:44)”.

<sup>33</sup> Speech given in November 1978, published in *Ensign* (August 1979), p. 108.

<sup>34</sup> Shepherd and Shepherd, *Kingdom Transformed*, pp. 88, 96, 99 and 272 n5.

history.”<sup>35</sup> If the routinized charisma of authority is a permanent feature in Mormonism, so the question is at what time the more pointed expressions and manifestations of the doctrine emerge, like the RC example in 1870.

The speeches of Cannon and Tanner were given at the very moment the debate over the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment raged in the USA,<sup>36</sup> so the fact that it was addressed in a Women’s conference, by a Young Women’s president, is significant.<sup>37</sup> Timing did not change content, though, but led to a more pointed formulation, or “manifestation”. An earlier *Improvement Era* message of June 1945 had already given the same message. The October 2010 General Conference listened with approval to brother Costa, a Seventy who repeated an injunction of Ezra Taft Benson, an earlier Apostle, from 1980.<sup>38</sup> He quoted Benson’s 14 “fundamentals” highlighting the special position of the prophet, as the only one who could speak for the Lord in everything; the living prophet is considered more vital to the members than the standard works, and more important than a dead prophet, and, most important of all, the prophet will never lead the Church astray. These points were later at the same conference repeated verbatim. So far, the prophet is clearly ascribed infallibility inside his ecclesiastical mandate, but then the “14 fundamentals” move to other fields as well, extending the “infallibility claim”: “The prophet is not limited by men’s reasoning”; “The prophet is not required to have any particular earthly training or credentials to speak on any subject or act on any matter at any time”.<sup>39</sup> Finally, an indictment reminiscent of the

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>36</sup> In 1979 the campaign for the ratification of the ERA, approved in 1972, just had been extended, in order to arrive at the needed number of 38 ratifying states. Utah did not sign, Idaho rescinded its earlier ratification, and the total number never came above 35.

<sup>37</sup> One early claim to infallibility came as a response to huge internal debates, i.e. to the Manifesto. Wilford Woodruff, in his defence of the Manifesto during the sixth session of the 1893 dedication of the Salt Lake Temple, stressed: “The Lord will never permit me or any other man to lead you astray”; see *Doctrine and Covenants*, Official Declaration 1.

<sup>38</sup> 1980 *Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1981), 26 ff. The Benson speech was given in the wake of the ERA campaign, see former footnote.

<sup>39</sup> In the Catholic case the range of papal decrees is a matter of serious debate: can the pope give decrees on things which have not been revealed? See J.F.

Catholic *anathema* is there as well: “The prophet and the presidency – the living prophet and the first presidency – follow them and be blessed; reject them and suffer”. With the latter expression we are completely on Roman turf.

This broader definition of the “expertise field” of the prophet is highly problematic, especially in our scientific day and age. If the prophet really has his authority in any field, without any other credentials for that particular field, the notion of infallibility collapses under its own weight, as he then is deemed to “know everything about anything under inspiration”. That is blatantly impossible. The only solution to such a quandary would be to say nothing at all, or limit oneself to doctrine and morals. In effect, that is exactly what is happening: the prophet as well as the other Fifteen, concentrate themselves mainly on moral matters,<sup>40</sup> except when they move into political issues, as we will see below.

Are the “living oracles”<sup>41</sup> more vital than the standard works? The relationship between the living prophet and the Standard Works, the Scriptures, is rather complicated, but usually defined not that one-sided in the LDS discourse: new revelations should be consonant with Scripture, and one living prophet should not contradict the dead ones. The Scriptures are much more than a thing of the past, as in Mormon thought they are the loadstone of doctrine. A quote from an apostle who wrote much about doctrine, Bruce R. McConkie:

As Joseph Smith so pointedly taught, a prophet is not always a prophet, only when he is acting as such. Prophets are men and they make mistakes. Sometimes they err in doctrine. This is one of the reasons the Lord has given us the Standard Works. They become the standards and the rules that govern where doctrine and philosophy are concerned. If this were not so, we

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Chiron, *L'infalibilité et son objet: l'autorité du magistère infallible de l'Église s'étend-elle sur des vérités non-révélees?* (Paris: Cerf, 1999). The LDS answer would be that the prophet could, but in practice never does.

<sup>40</sup> Shepherd and Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed*, (1984). The Proclamation of the Family, though, does make a significant statement about gender. See especially Gary J. Bergera, *Statements of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007). This small encyclopedic book does have the lemma “infallibility”, but the quotes under that heading do not use the term, even if they point in the direction.

<sup>41</sup> A favorite expression of Brigham Young.

would believe one thing when one man was president of the Church and another thing in the days of his successors.

Wise gospel students do not build their philosophies of life on quotations of individuals, even though those quotations come from presidents of the Church. Wise people anchor their doctrine on the Standard Works.<sup>42</sup>

Why did the claim on prophetic infallibility surface again in October 2010? These surges in ‘follow the leader’ rhetoric seem to coincide with the political battles the Church engages in, so like with the ERA campaign, one major reason might be the debate on homosexuality in general same and sex marriage in particular. This is one of the few issues on which ‘the Church’ (in the second definition) has taken an overt political stance,<sup>43</sup> and one which is also hotly debated within the church. Basis of the debate was the denial by the leadership of a genetic basis for homosexuality, a denial not in terms of a scholarly discussion, as nowhere the mounting evidence for a genetic basis of sexual orientation was even touched upon. Packer simply said of the evidence: ‘I do not accept it’, an *argumentum ad autoritatem* that might be appropriate when facing opinions but not facts.<sup>44</sup> Evidently, the authorities try to define such a venture into politics as a purely moral one, as they did with the ERA.<sup>45</sup> For instance, Oaks tried to build up an argument that the public political action for proposition 8 fell under the rubric of ‘freedom of religion’; in doing so he stretched the meaning of ‘freedom of religion’ from the right of any denomination to worship as it sees fit, into going into the public arena in order to influence laws.<sup>46</sup> However,

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<sup>42</sup> From a published letter to Eugene England, a BYU professor, dated February 19, 1981.

<sup>43</sup> On Proposition 8, in California, which aimed at ending same-sex marriages in the state. Later a Federal judge declared the proposition to be unconstitutional, because of its discriminatory nature. The issue is still pending.

<sup>44</sup> One straightforward illustration of a major genetic factor for sexual preference is the following statistic: If one is homosexual oneself, the chances that a random stranger is homosexual is 1:32, if the other is one’s brother 1:9, if the other is one’s identical twin 1:2. R.C. Kirkpatrick, ‘The evolution of human homosexual behaviour’, *Current Anthropology*, 41, 33, pp. 385–413.

<sup>45</sup> Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, p. 384 ff.

<sup>46</sup> Speech by Oaks to BYU Idaho on 13 October 2009, available at <http://www.lds.org>, accessed 14 April 2011.

also when the issue itself might be construed as moral (here the definition of marriage) any political action on the issue (such as the right of homosexuals to legal marriage) is the exercise of democratic freedom, i.e. of the political right of a minority to become a majority through legitimate means. Of course, the Church has this democratic right like any player in the public arena, but it still is a political right, which has no inherent relation with freedom of religion. Even if religious convictions urge towards activities in the public arena, the implementation of that urge is still a political issue. And a political move to “freedom from religion”, i.e. freedom from religious interference, is just as legitimate as any other ideologically based political stance.<sup>47</sup> In short, public action is political action, also for moral issues. Furthermore, many political issues do have a moral side to them, as morals are an inherent aspect of politics anywhere, not in the least in the USA.

But the political action on Proposition 8 was more an exception than the rule, as overt political stances of the church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are rather rare, in fact limited to opposing the end of abolition, the Equal Rights Amendment and nuclear testing. These topics are all domestic debates within the USA, and this domesticity of church politics breathes a general conservative outlook, conform the – unofficial but pervading – Republican political allegiance. World political issues are never object of political church action; the main worries for the planet, such as climate change, are beyond leadership interest.<sup>48</sup> Thus, as the church upholds itself image as being beyond – or outside – politics, when it does engage in USA politics, it does so in a defensive mode, protecting those areas where the church feels threatened, or sees a menace. On the other hand, political reticence has the advantage of freeing the church’s hand for humanitarian efforts in natural disasters, irrespective of political signature of the “other”, and the LDS church has built up quite a reputation in this field.

So the religious infallibility tends to spill over into more mundane issues, and religious authority may come face to face with scientific findings. The classic case is, evidently, biological evolution, and here some caution shows on the side of the LDS authorities. Even inside a religious American scene where a dominant evangelical strain has large

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<sup>47</sup> The current direction in gay and lesbian civil movements.

<sup>48</sup> The author has personally inquired of the General Authorities what the church position was on climate change. The written answer was that the Brethren had no opinion on the matter.

problems with evolutionary theory, the LDS church has showed itself quite restrained, defining the matter as an issue for scientists, the proper realm of religion being that of saving mankind. In the present debate on homosexuality the church still has to regain that attitude. The usual reaction of the leadership has been to say less, not more, and to refrain from statements on issues outside the realm of religion as such. This amounts to an internal secularization of the church itself, as it more and more defines itself as an institution with a specific function in modern society, no longer as a complete society in itself.

In the public discourses, such as General Conference talks, one aspect stands out: the infallible individual is always the “other”, the “prophet”. The Twelve or the Seventies who speak out about the prophetic infallibility, not the office holder himself. The discourse is on “follow the prophet”, not “follow me”. Prophets themselves are more reticent with this discourse – as we clearly saw with Joseph Smith – and with an increasing media exposure also show a mounting reserve. Gordon Hinckley, the 15<sup>th</sup> prophet, was especially modest and honest, defining his prophethood as a form of gentle inspiration, while denying all insider knowledge concerning the future (the popular interpretation of prophethood). In his administration a gentle shift was discernible, away from the personal “infallibility” to the collective inerrancy of the First presidency plus the Twelve Apostles. Both Hinckley and the apostles stressed the collective nature of inerrancy at several occasions. On November 6, 1994, Apostle Russell Ballard told 25,000 students at BYU, that general authorities “will not lead you astray. We cannot.” This claim was officially published, and was repeated at another BYU devotional meeting in March 1996.

“We cannot” is an intriguing expression. It may have a mystical component, that God would intervene directly, either by confounding the speech of the one concerned, or strike him down. Woodruff’s words in the official declaration would lead to that view: “If I were to attempt that, the Lord would remove me out of my place ...”<sup>49</sup> The other interpretation is an inherent infallibility which is not personal, but purely institutional: the institution of the Presidency plus the Twelve is of such a nature that the collective will not and cannot err. This is the more probable one. Otherwise we would have to read the early demise of presidents who stayed much shorter in office than ex-

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<sup>49</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants*, Official Declaration 1.

pected, as corrective acts of God. And I never heard explanations on the short “reigns” of Harold Lee or Howard Hunter as a divine steering mechanism. Also, when actual prophecies did not pan out, the prophets did not suffer from divine intervention either.

All in all the resemblance between the RC and LDS goes a long way. We saw that the Catholic Church made a great effort to formulate the principle of papal infallibility as manifestation of the general Magisterium, and then almost never used it. Even the declaration by Pope John Paul II that ordination to the priesthood would remain reserved for men, was not issued as a papal infallible decree, but kept under the ordinary Magisterium. What is much more common is that the many encyclicals, the pastoral “letters” the pope regularly sends to the whole Church, take a form like a papal decree but with slightly different phraseology. The popes seem to flirt with infallibility, without going the whole way, carefully choosing his words in order to be similar to a decree, but not the same. The kind of “creeping infallibility” is not unknown in LDS circles, too. A full papal decree becoming dogma has a similar status as a new revelation, in Mormonism, in fact as a new section in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. The encyclicals which skim the infallible status are recognizable as the Official Declarations the LDS church issues from time to time, the last one being on Marriage and the Family. These do not have the full weight of the Standard Works, are not scripture, and do not require the sustaining vote of the church for acceptance. Yet, they are considered important and more or less decisive. RC bishops’ synods may issue statements which have a considerable authority, a position recognizable as the talks of General Authorities, either at General Conferences or large devotionals (at BYU e.g.). A fourth echelon in the RC Church would be theological treatises, which find their parallels in the writings, books, pamphlets and articles by General Authorities, including the semi-official *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.<sup>50</sup>

This pyramid of statements illustrates two essential points: the trickling down of religious authority under the umbrella of something like “inerrancy”, and the parallel trickling down of legitimate inspiration. The combination is a heady one. As said, the early Mormon Church quickly transformed from a charismatic church with a free-for-all inspiration, into one where inspiration was linked to position; the

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<sup>50</sup> *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. by Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

idea that an office holder is entitled to inspiration over his administrative fief only, is well-engrained in the church. This process is often called “the domestication of inspiration”<sup>51</sup> and is crucial in the trickling down of the institutional infallibility to the power of priesthood officers in the lower echelons of the church. If anything, it does avoid the “holy bedlam”<sup>52</sup> of charismatic movements, but also easily leads to abuse of authority. The present-day Catholic Church, again, is a not-so-shining example in this respect as well.

But our main attention here is on the dynamics of sacralization of authority between leaders and followers; after all, our epigraph indicates that the view from on high need not be the same as the one from below and “sacred authority” does impact on the functioning of the membership in general. The discourse is done in different terms, those of “authority” and “inspiration”, so we turn now to the definition of the church from the grass roots: what actually happens vis-à-vis the “infallibility”, and here the story becomes more personal.

#### CREEPING INFALLIBILITY IN MORMONISM: AUTHORITY AS A SACRED CONCEPT

I start here with a story about obedience, at least which is how Latter-day Saints would define it, but obedience evidently is intricately linked with authority. An acquaintance of mine, living near Salt Lake City was to be called, by the “Brethren” to serve in a Language Translation Committee. The stake president extending the call, felt truly honoured to represent the General Church Leadership in this capacity, fully expecting that the candidate would be honoured and flattered as well. To his huge amazement the brother in question said that heeding to that call was highly inconvenient at that very moment, and that he had to decline for the time being, respectfully of course. For the coming month he was preparing for final exams of a Master’s Program and he could not afford being distracted, not with the enormous pressure on him to finish his schooling on time. He was willing to accept the call after a month, when final exams were over. The stake president could not believe his ears: “What do you mean, ‘No’?” This was unheard of

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<sup>51</sup> Walter E.A. Van Beek, ‘Mormon Europeans or European Mormons?’, pp. 3–36.

<sup>52</sup> Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

and completely unacceptable. The candidate gently requested the stake president to explain the situation to the Brethren. The stake president explained he would send a message to the Brethren that the call had been extended, the person was worthy and that he did accept the call. After all, one could not decline a calling from an Apostle. And sure enough, not long after that the candidate received a telephone call from the Central Office thanking him for accepting the call and requesting to set up an appointment for training. He then had to set the stake president straight by explaining he had not accepted the call for the time being. But also at the central level, a decline to a calling was no option. Under pressure an appointment for training was set despite his strong opposition. Whether the stake president had any fallout on his “wishful reporting” is unknown, but my point here is the sheer impossibility, in the eyes of the stake president and the Translation office in Salt Lake, of saying “No” to a General Authority. Unthinkable, unimaginable and almost heretical.

The problem is that refusing a call would not only be disobedience – the usual definition of the situation – but would imply that the call was wrong, so the caller was wrong; thus the refusal would reflect back on the calling authority, i.e. on the principle of authority itself. How can a GA make a wrong call? The obvious answer would be that he had been poorly informed and that inspiration does not usually supersede information, but that is not an easy concept, especially not in a culture which hallows inspiration beyond information, thinking in terms of right or wrong and true or false. Obedience, after all, is the major constant in General Conference talks, and is stressed in a very somatic way during the ritual sustaining of the Church authorities at General Conference, but also yearly in each stake and each ward or branch. Simply by raising their hands, the membership signals its consent in the leaders themselves, in their heavenly mandate.<sup>53</sup>

A similar example from my own past illustrates this at a more modest level. It was early 1972 (yes, indeed, some time ago) and I was preparing for my Ph.D. project, for which I would spend one and a half year in North Cameroon, with my family, for anthropological fieldwork. At that very moment I was called by the counsellor of the Mission President (we were still a district under the Mission Presidency) to be-

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<sup>53</sup> See also Shepherd and Shepherd, *Kingdom Transformed*, p. 125. The focus on obedience is constant, that on dissent waned with the decline of dissent itself; *ibid.*, p. 169.

come branch president of Zeist. He heard my rebuttal: “But I am preparing to go to Africa.” He answered that a lot of water would flow through the river Rhine before I would be in Africa (a Dutch expression indicating an indeterminate time). I had to convince him that my departure was close, but he did not believe me, and left, not fully convinced of my dedication. I left for Africa two months later for a field period of one and a half year. He would later become the first Dutch General Authority as a Seventy.

Such an example from the International Church might not have the same weight as the first one from the heart of the Domestic Church, but the principle is the same. The notion of authority itself is at stake, inspired religious authority and its relation to inerrancy or infallibility. My thesis is that “authority” in LDS discourse is a theological derivate of “infallibility”, and thus represents a “creeping infallibility”.

For a further interpretation I rely on the work of the sociologists Bourdieu and Giddens, in their analysis of power and authority.<sup>54</sup> Anthony Giddens zooms in on structural power, the interaction between structure and agency; through the structure in which the actor operates, the agency of the actor is both limited and empowered. For him power is transfer of agency, with both restrictive and constructive aspects, the structure operating as an “enabling restraint”. Authority then is the dominance of a legitimating structure, producing a moral order through the internalization of values and norms. With Pierre Bourdieu I zoom in on the importance of symbolic capital for power relations. He distinguishes several sources for power and authority: economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. The latter one includes control over the expressions and conceptualisations, thus the power of definition.

In this view power is agency transfer; authority is an internalized transfer of agency, when a legitimated structure creates an internalized hierarchical relationship between agent and structure. If defined in terms of cultural capital, authority for Bourdieu would mean the recognized expertise of the power holder in a particular field: a recognized artist, scientist, scholar, sportsman or the like. Mastery of foreign languages is a good example of cultural capital: the mastery gives

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<sup>54</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

both expertise about that foreign language itself, plus the general recognition that this is a desirable and admirable expertise, knowledge with a rarity value. So, cultural authority is based on content, on proven expertise and on societal recognition of that expertise. On the other hand, symbolic capital is based on recognized access to the means of public definition of a discourse. Religion is a symbol dominated field, in which symbolic capital means the right to define doctrine, even the right to define the standards by which others have to judge themselves. An exclusive dominance over symbolic capital may lead to what Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence”. Thus symbolic capital can be one major factor in the construction of hegemony, which happens when the dominating party ensures that the dominated other will not recognize the arbitrary character of the social order. Hegemony shows in a homogenized discourse, where concepts and arguments all are shaped according to the defining power of the dominating group.

The LDS Church obviously is a good example of symbolic power. Authority is a crucial notion, embedded in the organisation itself which is led by self-styled “General Authorities”. In terms of cultural capital, i.e. in the realm of content, this notion of “general authority” would be self-contradictory, just as the notions of “general specialist”, or “universal expertise” would be. In terms of content, no one can be an authority on everything, so in terms of cultural capital “General Authority” would read as “authority in no particular field at all”. However, in terms of symbolic capital the notion reads quite differently: “The one holding the power of definition within our joint field”. And it is exactly from the position in the religious structure that the power holder (GA) derives this symbolic power, as his positional charisma, the cluster of values and emotions attached to the office itself. Though charisma is usually defined as a personal gift (the Greek *χαρις*, *charis* = gift, often translated as grace), the one that makes the bearer attractive and fascinating for other people, also social positions have their charisma. With Giddens I define “positional charisma”,<sup>55</sup> as the values, emotions and attractions that are part and parcel of the office one holds. Monarchs have it,<sup>56</sup> the pope has it, and so do the LDS “General Authorities”. Not only is becoming a General Authority the apex for many an aspir-

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<sup>55</sup> The term originated with the German sociologist Max Weber.

<sup>56</sup> For a magnificent overview of the “*religio regis*” in early modern Europe, see E. Bertelli, *The King’s Body* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

ing priesthood bearer, any GA is met with reverence, awe and an obedient attitude in the church. Well, not always, as we saw in the opening example, but the complete incomprehension of that stake president forms a perfect indication of the positional charisma. Who of the Brethren was inconsequential, “Authority” demanded it, so it had to be delivered.

The LDS notion of authority as positional charisma is firmly rooted in the authority structure, or as Giddens would have it, the structure is enabling for the agent, the office holder, but at the same time limiting as well. A GA is endowed with great symbolic power, but then has to behave accordingly, conform the rules of the office and the expectations from below. He is part of a hierarchy, and as such imbued with sacredness, with the paradox that the higher the office the less leeway one has. His assigned power severely limits his freedom in expressing himself.

In LDS culture hierarchy itself has some *ἅγιος*, holiness as well. The Mormon leadership operates in the shadow of the prophet’s mantle, sharing some of his huge authority. The First Presidency and the Quorum of Apostles together form the highly visible leadership (the “Brethren”), under which the quorums of “Seventies” operate, all of them General Authorities. Any General Authority shares in the tremendous charisma of the top leadership, based upon the chair he occupies. The authority of “the Brethren” is unchallenged and any appeal they make to the membership should not and does not go unheeded. Authority, in the LDS Church, is a property, a “thing” conferred by calling and setting apart, something “conferred” and not earned, something “one has to live up to”, and not build up.

A specific characteristic of the LDS hierarchy is its high visibility. The members know their “Authorities” from seeing them at the six-monthly General Conferences and through televised conference sessions relayed to numerous stake centers around the world. The rest of the General Authorities are less well known, and new Seventies can come and go unnoticed by the majority of the Saints. However, if they appear at a stake conference, their being a GA is sufficient to generate the proper respect and distance from the members. Telling is the virtual reception that automatically develops after the meeting: many of the members want to introduce themselves to the visiting GA, have a small chat, in order to have touched flesh with the Authority, making it

sometimes hard for the GA to leave after his talk, and I witnessed some General Authorities who just made it in time to their flight.<sup>57</sup> In 2004 the National Public Affairs Committee of the Dutch province was instructed in these matters: we<sup>58</sup> had to screen the GA in this “reception”, to shield him from all kind of idiosyncratic members and – nonmembers. In the Netherlands, however, it is not the deviant members who are a problem, but the sheer enthusiasm of the “regular” members who cannot get enough of an Authority, any Authority.<sup>59</sup>

Any GA visiting a church function is automatically the presiding officer, and any stake president is relegated to second rank immediately, as the conductor of the meeting. I learned that the hard way when I was stake president of the Rotterdam, Netherlands stake in the ‘80s. During the Saturday leadership session of “my” stake, the visiting Authority was the last speaker, and he had a long drawn-out talk. I knew that a part of the audience for the next meeting was coming in, a whole bunch of youngsters who just had their sports competition, and now were waiting, rather boisterously, in the hall. As the meeting drew on and went severely over time, I signaled the speaking GA that his time was up and we had to close. He immediately drew himself up to his full length (still considerably shorter than me, though) and gave me a severe public dressing down. If I was ignorant of the fact that any GA was always the presiding officer of the meeting, and could go on speaking as long as he wanted, then I had still a lot to learn as a stake president. He went on for some time, then turned back to his audience and finished his talk, not too quickly. Of course I knew he was in charge, but the schedule had been discussed with him, had received his approval and I simply thought that he should keep to our joint arrangements. Punctuality, as the saying goes in Europe, is the quality of kings, but that seemed not to hold for his kind of rule.

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<sup>57</sup> This phenomenon is by no means restricted to the “International Church”, and seems a factor for changes in Church security protocols.

<sup>58</sup> The author is member of the Dutch National Committee for Public Affairs, and high councilman for Public Affairs in the Rotterdam, Netherlands Stake.

<sup>59</sup> Not too different, though, from the audience reaction to Mormon pop hero Donny Osmond, when he recently (17 April 2011) gave a series of firesides when he visited his son Chris in the Dutch mission field. The fans flocking around Osmond were strangely reminiscent of the members crowding on the General Authority, with the only difference that a GA does not have to hand out signatures.

He thought that he had put me on my place, but actually I was not overly impressed. He made a severe mistake here as the audience did not understand his attitude and had no appreciation whatever for his action. In their eyes he failed in one major aspect of his calling, as that is not how a General Authority should behave, at least not in Dutch definition of a church official: those things should be handled with gentleness, and any correction should have been done afterwards in private. So he lost quite some authority here, and I gained a reputation of someone who stood his ground, a real Dutchman. Everyone in the audience knew that the kids were knocking at the door, and for them I was simply doing what should be done. Of course, they were right. Later I heard that his report in Salt Lake City has shocked people at Church Headquarters: a stake president who shuts up a General Authority, how unspeakable, how unthinkable! He never realized how harmful his action had been.<sup>60</sup> Of course, there is a cultural issue here as well, the Dutch culture being much more egalitarian and less deferential than the LDS Deseret one,<sup>61</sup> so this particular GA missed out in cultural capital.

Later, during one of the instruction meetings at General Conference in Salt Lake City, he, again, reproached me, though more gently and privately, that I had the ‘wrong view of my calling’, i.e. I saw it as my duty to shield the stake members from the full impact of the general authorities, instead of being the extension of the leadership top down. I interpreted this as being an umbrella instead of an amplifier. By then I knew how to handle those things, so I just sat down and nodded, noting for myself that this was an excellent job description for a stake president: to be an umbrella for the members (Holland is a wet country!), and not simply an amplifier, a good analysis, though the wrong advice. After finishing my term, I have seen to it that my successors adopted the same job description, and in our stake it still holds: umbrellas!

A similar choice is voiced, slightly more polarized, by the Catholic Church in the Netherlands. In a small booklet called “Herder of huurling”, (“shepherd or mercenary”), some bishops (the structural equivalents of stake presidents in the Catholic sphere) took on the same question. Is it the task of a

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<sup>60</sup> It is clear I will not reveal his name here: not all GAs are equal.

<sup>61</sup> The same holds for the Vatican culture, compared to Northwestern Europe.

bishop to guide his 'sheep' in their own values and rights, or should he just be an amplifier for anything that comes out of the Roman Curia? The choice made in the booklet – nobody should be astonished – is the first. Also in the very hierarchic Roman Catholic Church, the 'middle management' is carving out its own mandate.<sup>62</sup>

The discourse on authority is contagious. Another example of various attitudes versus authority is a petition that recently has been offered to the General Authorities.<sup>63</sup> The idea originated with some members from Alberta, Canada, who noticed a severe problem at weddings where one of the partners is a recent convert.<sup>64</sup> Non-LDS parents and family of a bride or groom are not allowed inside the temple. In most areas of the Church, usually called the "International Church", civil law requires that couples have a civil wedding first, and this ceremony everyone can attend; after the public festivities bride and groom head for the temple for the "sealing" of the marriage, attended by family and friends that happen to be members. In North America and Canada, however, temple marriages are recognized as legal, and the Church does not allow having a civil wedding first. Church policy rules that if these LDS couples have a civil wedding first, they have to wait a year before their temple sealing. Thus, under this pressure most couples in the "Deseret Church" marry in the temple without a prior civil wedding; this means that many non-LDS parents of a member bride or groom are prohibited from participating in their son's or daughter's wedding. In fact, most LDS couples being sealed in any temple, do have some relatives or friends who are barred from attending the ritual. Especially with close kin like father and mother, this is both a terrible affront to these parents and a public relations disaster. If any policy incites calling the LDS church a "sect" or "cult", it is this one, and it is impossible to counter.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Herder of Hurling*, ed. by Jan Jans (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 2006).

<sup>63</sup> Presented officially 15 October 2010 to the Church Headquarters.

<sup>64</sup> Or, for that matter, when part of the family has left the church.

<sup>65</sup> As member of the Public Affairs Committee in the Netherlands, I often have to counter the term "sect" in the press, regarding the LDS Church. Luckily, this argument is never used in the Dutch press, as I would simply have to acknowledge defeat.

So the petition asked for a change in policy, simply to allow for a civil wedding before the temple sealing, like the saints in other continents enjoyed, without any sanction. Actually, in many other countries this is the normal procedure, and fully accepted by the Church leadership; in the Netherlands, like in most European countries, all couples have to have a civil wedding first, before their confessional celebration or sealing. That means that all family and friends, which are routinely non-LDS, can participate; after the wedding the couple goes to the nearest temple in a reasonable delay, and gets sealed. The best solution is the procedure in Great Britain, where the civil ceremony is done inside an LDS (or other) chapel, with the civil registrar sitting in the service and performing the formal wedding as part of the liturgy. So in most of Europe we see no weeping moms and dads on the steps of the temple, a sorry sight all too familiar in North America. And in no way this detracts from the special position of the temple (which the General Authorities fear), but if fact heightens it.

I brought the petition into our ward, one Sunday, both in priesthood and relief society meetings. All the women immediately signed the petition, without any ado: mothers should be at their child's wedding! The men, however, became engaged in a lively discussion on the matter. Not on the content of the petition, as everyone agreed that having an option for a civil wedding in North America was a good thing, surely the petition pointed the brethren in the right direction. However, the discussion centered on the proper way to address authorities: "We are dealing here with General Authorities, inspired men who will get their directions from God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This is not how revelations work, from beneath".

Actually, viewing church history, this is exactly how revelation does often work. Many revelations in the *Doctrine and Covenants* originated in questions or observations by members, which Joseph Smith then took to the Lord.<sup>66</sup> Revelation is a far more interactive process than the rank and file realizes.

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<sup>66</sup> Out of the 140 sections in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, at least 61 stem directly from questions from "below", especially the earlier ones, as indicated by the captions of each Section. See for instance Sections 1-18 (except 2, 13), 22-28 (except 24, 26, 27), 32, 35, 40-58 (except 42, 44, 46, 52), 61, 63, 66-68, 71, 75-77, 85, 87, 89, 91, 96, 100, 103, 107, 108, 113, 118, 119, 133, and both Official Declarations.

It took the whole hour, and in the end half of the men signed, a few of them later in private. Reporting this back to the Canadian members who started the initiative, they assured me that in their ward or any other in North America, such a discussion would have been impossible, would simply have been cut off at the start, and the petition never would have stood any chance of entering the group debate. This may be a cultural difference, but it is definitely a difference in control and in the permeated character of institutional authority. One does not – especially in North America – give any advice up the ladder, and one definitely does not offer criticism, however positive, on the policies of the leadership. It would be denying their inspiration, thus their authority.

This was shown also in the presentation of the petition in question. After announcing their coming in advance, the petitioners came to SLC (from Canada) with a cameraman, but were kept off professionally. First by security personnel, who advised them they would put the petition into the right hands, then by the Public Affairs representative, who wanted just to sit down and talk with them, off camera. They are planning for another presentation later.

One inherent problem of positional charisma in a “holy hierarchy” is denial of the possibility for feedback. Some GAs are on record stating that they feel to be out of touch with the experiences of the common membership. Viewing the above, this is hardly surprising, as the very structure they embody, is effectively blocking any relevant communication from bottom to top. And the hegemonic definition of doctrinal discourse does not help either, a hegemony the Brethren stress often enough, thus effectively blocking feedback:

Those at the head of the Church have the obligation to proclaim that which is in harmony with the Standard Works. If they err then be silent on the point and leave the events in the hands of the Lord. Someday all of us will stand before the judgement bar and be accountable for our teachings. And where there have been disagreements the Lord will judge between us.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> From the same letter, quoted above in note 21, by Bruce R. McConkie to Professor Eugene England.

Long time church professionals<sup>68</sup> see two ways in which the upwards flow of communication is blocked. The professionals themselves never relay bad news to a superior, unless it is clearly part of a job description and one has the needed goodwill “upstairs”. And then they only give only negative information that is explicitly demanded. Whistle blowers are not appreciated, but are considered whiners or losers who cannot adequately perform their duties. And anyway “the Brethren are too busy to hear bad news”. Second, the lay priesthood, in fact the local leadership, is judged on their meticulously following of the instructions of their superiors; if not they are considered disobedient, a recipe for failure.<sup>69</sup>

Also on the lower echelons, position-*cum*-inspiration can lead to symbolic violence. Local callings, like the one I described above, but also lower echelon callings within wards, easily use a discourse on inspiration. Coming from “above”, such a claim on divine inspiration can easily function as a kind of white blackmail on the one called: if the bishop, counsellor, quorum president says he is inspired, how can the underlying party counter it? The fact that such a heavy-handed discourse may stem from insecurity, misunderstanding or simply ill applied good intentions, makes this all the more serious and such priesthood abuse is an all-too-ready example of symbolic violence, especially where it happens between the genders.

Symbolic capital is the most important asset in the world, and has to be defined and defended. In any dispute on authority the self-image of the church is at stake. Just like the Catholic Church, the LDS Church defines itself as the one and only church enjoying the full acknowledgement of Christ, so the very authority of the church is in LDS view equal to the mandate of heaven. Though the RC notion of the *vicarius Christi* is not used in LDS discourse, essentially the same is the case in LDS. One implication is that there is no leeway between the gospel and the church, and thus no theological margin between Christ

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<sup>68</sup> Though a lay church, the LDS church does employ a fair number of professionals: translators, staff at the various central and regional offices, lawyers, and teaching staff in the Church Educational System (CES), the teaching arm of the church serving secondary and tertiary schooling.

<sup>69</sup> Thanks to several good friends serving as professionals in the European setting. My Roman Catholic reviewer of this article readily recognized this admonition to obedience as pertaining to the Roman Catholic situation as well.

and the church hierarchy. Hierarchy is authority, authority is the heavenly mandate, and thus hierarchy is holy<sup>70</sup> and authority is inviolate.

A different view would be that the Church viewed itself as a spiritual resource, a foundation of priesthood aiming to be a helpmate for salvation, in fact a vehicle on individual pathway for spiritual and priesthood growth and development. That is not the dominant discourse – even if it is the leading discourse among most of the cultural and liberal Mormons in the church. The clearest expression of that difference was the famous incident of Poelman’s speech in 1984. Ronald Poelman, a General Authority (a Seventy), once was the visiting authority at my stake conference, and we connected very well. He had just remarried as a widower, was happy to be back in his old Dutch mission field as a General Authority, and even spoke quite acceptable Dutch. At the next October General Conference he gave a talk that has become famous. In this speech, which was broadcasted, he expressed the same as indicated above: the church as a gateway, a facilitator into Christ, our real goal and test being our relationship with Christ, with the church as a means, not a goal in itself. An inspiring talk, but the upper echelon leadership was not amused. They persuaded him to re-write the speech and then perform the whole speech again,<sup>71</sup> in an empty Tabernacle, to be taped and distributed with the other General Conference tapes to the International Church. So when we got it on video tape, as was the custom these days, it was changed, a canned performance without an audience but with a cough track dubbed in.<sup>72</sup> The message was clear: there was to be no space between the “church” and the “gospel”, no possibility that the hierarchical authority was anything less than crucial for salvation; in short, authority was to remain infallibly sacred.

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<sup>70</sup> Walter E.A. van Beek, ‘Hierarchies of Holiness: The Mormon Temple in Zoetermeer, Netherlands’, in *Holy grounds in the Netherlands*, ed. by Paul Post and Arie L. Molendijk (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), pp. 255–300.

<sup>71</sup> Peggy Fletcher, ‘Poelman revises conference speech’, *Sunstone* (1985, 1), pp. 44–45.

<sup>72</sup> Elbert E. Peck, ‘The editing of a General Authority’, *Sunstone* (1990, 4), pp. 50–53.

## CONCLUSION

Given the “mandate of heaven” as symbolic capital, given a religious hierarchy as social capital, and given the means to define and control the symbolic expressions in a hegemonic fashion, infallibility will creep in, almost inevitably. The Roman Catholic and LDS churches show a remarkable similarity here, following only slightly diverging pathways to hegemonic control of symbolic capital. In practice this can, in both cases lead to symbolic violence, the overuse of symbolic hegemony. The Catholic predicament is these days is the celibacy related history of pedophilia on the one hand, and on the other the institutional culture of almost “*omerta*”, silence, the overall policy of covering up. Protecting the institution is deemed more important than protecting or comforting victims, and that is exactly the risk any institution runs based upon a discourse of – creeping – infallibility. Who is infallible cannot be seen to make mistakes, so also has a huge problem apologizing for past mistakes. Who has the monopoly on atonement, has no means to atone himself. *Time Magazine* ran a major article on 7 June 2010, titled “Why being pope means never having to say you’re sorry”. Indeed, at the head of an infallible church, one’s hands are severely bound, too much so; Giddens’ notion of “enabling constraint” is apt here: any structure makes agency more efficacious, but also restricts its leeway. Each institutions has dark corners in its past. The LDS church has been accused of a lot of things – though never of celibacy! – and of course does have its dark pages, and indeed had similar problems in acknowledging these past errors as serious mistakes. It took the LDS Church over a century to come clean with the Mountain Meadows Massacre, as the ultimate judgment hinged on the measure in which the prophet, Brigham Young implicated.<sup>73</sup> Past detours in theology, like the Adam-God theology or blood-atonement still are difficult to acknowledge, and sometimes are denied. Thus, one other arena is created by the notion of infallibility, the struggle for historiography. For any hierarchical church claiming divine guidance and mandated authority, its own history often is a threat, a potential minefield, which the leadership would like to control. In the RC Church the papacy has

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<sup>73</sup> Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960). The consensus is that he was involved, possibly directly but in any way indirectly by producing a culture of vengeance, through the doctrine of “blood atonement”, and by rousing speeches against the “gentiles”.

lost this battle long ago, in the LDS case the struggle still is on. As in the RC case, ecclesiastical leadership and LDS academia are on perpendicular courses. The '80s and '90s of the last century have seen some clashes, but it seems that the leadership has become less combative.

How to avoid this theological trap? The Roman Catholic Church has domesticated the notion of infallibility inside a huge and complicated network of theological reasoning, limiting it severely but keeping it intact as the ultimate authority to which one can sneak up: it works as long as one does not use it. That will not be the way of the LDS, as this kind of systematic internal discussion is neither developed, nor wished for.<sup>74</sup> A major help in LDS is the deep practicality that pervades much of LDS church practice; in many ways the present Handbook of Instructions is a condensation of common sense. One of the most important commentaries I ever heard as a stake president came from my Regional Representative,<sup>75</sup> after hearing a General Authority talk on inspired guidance. He said: "But we are still human". I do not know whether he consciously referred to Triumph marches of old imperial Rome, but the parallel is striking. During the entire glorious Triumph a slave stood behind the proud victorious general, whispering in his ear: "You are still mortal". We all need such a whispering voice, and the higher up, the more we need it.

In short, infallibility is a trap, a conundrum that is hard to escape, but has to be avoided or softened as much as possible. The *argumentum ad auctoritatem* that "When the prophet speaks, the debate is over" in the long run is counterproductive, one that has to give way to empathic debate, in which the spirit is allowed to run free, undomesticated, in order for truth to emerge, and after which errors can be avowed and conflicts mended. In short, we better see sacred history as a slow and gentle unfolding of grace and deep humanity, and one's own personal history as a series of inspiring mistakes.

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<sup>74</sup> Walter E.A. van Beek, 'Meaning and Authority in Mormon Ritual', *International Journal of Mormon Studies*, 3 (2010), pp. 17-40.

<sup>75</sup> A liaison function between stake and Church Office, in the '80s, discontinued after the creation of Area Presidencies.