

# Canticle of the Sacred Grove: an encounter between Joseph Smith and St. Francis of Assisi

## Defining of Mysticism

According to theologian Matthew Fox, the Greek *mystikos* has two meanings: “to shut one’s senses” and to “enter the mysteries” (Fox). A mystic then is a seeker, one who strives to transcend the appearances of the ordinary senses and unite with the divine mystery. Mystics of all traditions have emphasized *experience* over orthodoxy. Despite an elusive definition, Mark Koltko in his piece in *Sunstone* suggests that mysticism shares in one of several *experiential* characteristics. For example, mystics often achieve a loosened sense of self, becoming absorbed in the greater reality; they often report experiencing everything as one. Mystics also begin to see the world of things with an inner subjective quality, such as ascribing soul to trees and animals; mystics experience a deep noetic quality to life and feel that the experience is related to true knowledge and its source; and finally mystics always struggle to articulate their experience in descriptive language and thus the mystical experience is often expressed as feelings of joy intrinsic sacredness, ecstasy and love.

With a slightly different definition, Raymond Baily discusses entering the mysteries as “one who had been *initiated* into certain mysteries. Through the possession of certain formulas or participation in secret rites, he entered into a special status” (Baily, 20). Enter Mormon Prophet and mystic Joseph Smith; whose initial divine encounter led to an elaborate mystery cult whose praxis is alive and well within Mormon temples.

Matthew Fox suggests that to ‘shut one’s senses’ has been practiced in two ways: on the one hand there is intense self-denial and austerities aimed at transcending the body. This is the praxis of the Hindu aesthetics and the young Siddhartha; attempting to put away the body, to reach the soul. Many Christian mystics have also cultivated a virtual hatred for the body and the things of this world. Yet, on the other hand, it seems that we are only fully open to God’s mysteries when we learn to see past our ordinary senses. For the other side, entering the mysteries is about transcending the world of forms for the world of the formless. Meister Eckhart, echoing many Zen Buddhists would talk about this as Emptiness. Others have deconstructed the dualism of body and soul melting into oneness with the ground of being. This is the mysticism of Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,

Gerald Manley Hopkins, Thomas Merton, Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr and Saint Francis of Assisi. These mystics see creation, as Hildegard of Bingen put it, as “a song of God.” The senses and the sensual are not evil, but do not speak the whole truth. For the 12<sup>th</sup> century mystic Saint Francis, this took on a characteristic celebration of the earthly, the place where God meets humanity in fire, water, earth, creature and especially the Eucharist. However, there is a strong aversion to the body in Francis, who lived an uncompromising commitment to poverty. Nevertheless Francis’s own body became a reflection of Christ through the Stigmata. For Joseph Smith the body was everything, never to be denied, and God’s mysteries, revealed to him in stochastic whirlwinds of frontier zeal, were to be performed *by* the body, to unite with God as institution.

Entering the mysteries through the senses means that mystical experience and theology is grounded in and expands from the body. One’s own body, for better or worse is a guidepost on the road to the body of God. Whether we are talking about Francis’s sacramental Body, or Joseph Smith’s trans-humanist Body; our bodies matter in relationship to God. Each of these profoundly influential mystics had a different approach: For Francis of Assisi entering the mysteries was achieved through an ascetic life, praise of creation and his reflection of the Body of Christ in his own suffering. His mysticism and theology was deeply Trinitarian and Eucharistic. Joseph Smith presents a less straightforward case when compared to Francis, particularly in his theology of the body, and especially *God’s* body. Joseph Smith’s story shares many mystical characteristics, but it remains to be seen if Smith qualifies for the mystic hall of fame. Let us then compare Joseph Smith’s mysticism and theology with Franciscan theology and mysticism of the body and see what these religious men have to say to one another.

## **A Dialogue**

Joseph had been working all day clearing the forest. Chopping, burning, heaving, and ripping stumps out of the ground. He returned to his favorite spot, laid his head on a log and began to day dream and dose. Suddenly he heard a crunching of leaves and sat up with a start. ‘Whose there!?’ he shouted, rubbing his eyes and squinting at what appeared to be a man in a monk’s tunic approaching. He was singing in French and had a peaceful look on his face.

‘Bon dia!’ said the stranger.

‘Ha!’ said Joseph, ‘My angel-guide may be named Moroni, but I don’t speak Italian!’

‘Well, I speak a little bit of English; let me try it out on you!’ Said the monk. ‘I am Francis. This is a beautiful forest you have here, why are you cutting it down?’

‘We have to!’ said Joseph, ‘to grow grain to sell at market. Though this particular spot is pretty special to me...I saw...I had a vision here. It was then that I knew I was saved.’

‘How delightful!’ Said Francis. ‘It was in the forests and caves of mount Subasio that I began to hear the voice of Christ speaking to me.’

‘Did you see God the Father and Jesus too?’ asked Joseph, curiously.

‘What do you mean God *and* the son? Is not Jesus, God made flesh?’

Joseph snuffed, and retorted, ‘That is not how I see it these days! In my visions, they are so real, like real people, but surrounded by light! I am starting to think that God has a body like you or I but a body more perfect. Wouldn’t that be something, if God was a man like you or I!’

‘But, my brother, if God our Father has a body, then he could only be in one place at a time. And if God the Father and Jesus are separate, then there are two Gods instead of One...’ Francis returned politely.

Joseph, not really listening, turned toward an opening in the trees and stared up saying under his breath, ‘I bet he lives on some beautiful world like this one, at the center of the universe.’

Overhearing, Francis gasped, ‘Oh no my Brother, God is everywhere! He cannot be limited to a single body or a single planet with only his spirit to nourish our souls from afar. I see God in the rocks and trees! The sun, the earth, the wind and even the fire! God is in our bodies...but God is not *a* body.’

‘There you go! Sounding like one of those theologizing preachers, with your God that is no God at all! My ideas will liberate Christianity from its Nicene delusions and bring us back to a God of passions *and* perfections.’ announced Joseph proudly.

‘But when I fast and pray in the forest, I don’t see a God I can comprehend with my mind, I feel I am melting *into* God. In fact, “I” melts away all together and becomes one with God and all of creation.’ Said Francis.

Picking up his ax, Joseph replied confidently ‘But I don’t want to melt away! I want to become like God and progress from eternity to eternity...’

Francis, sounding exasperated muttered, ‘But the journey of the soul is not about becoming a God oneself, it is about merging with God and all being...’

Joseph Bellowed, ‘but I can hear God speaking to me! He gives me revelations and I write them down. Just like Moses, Abraham and Jesus himself!’

Francis trying to remain calm said, ‘when God speaks to me, I get a feeling like everything is one big thing...the Ground of all Being, God is speaking to me *through* this beautiful forest right now!’

‘Look Francy, I saw God and Jesus right over there. They appeared to me in their glory. Now, I am beginning to write down his words, and people are listening, they will follow me because I am prophet of this dispensation.’ Joseph paused, looking at his boots, ‘Well Francy it was nice to meet ya, but I gotta get back to work.’ When he looked up Francis was gone. ‘Well I’ll be’ Joseph said starting as he woke up looking around him. He rose grabbing his ax and began to chop at the base of a thin birch tree.

## **Franciscan Mysticism**

Francesco Bernardone was born in 1181 in Assisi, Italy to a wealthy textile merchant who was on the forefront of an emerging capitalist Europe. A playboy, soldier and rabble rouser, Francis soon turned to a life of penance, poverty and deep contemplation of the crucified Jesus. He began making frequent pilgrimages to the top of Mount Subasio under the pretext, interestingly enough, of looking for treasure. He would then pray in silence for hours seeking direction from God. In 1206, kneeling in front of an icon of the Crucified Jesus in the crumbling San Damiano Church, Francis heard a voice: “Francis, don’t you see that my house is destroyed? Go, then, and repair it for me” (McGinn, 44).

Francis was exhilarated; he finally felt a sense of calling. So, naturally, he began to repair San Damiano with bricks and mortar. To raise funds for more extensive repairs, he borrowed some of his father’s most valuable cloth and sold in the market. Triumphant, he brought the money to Bishop Guido, who refused it (knowing Francis’s father would be furious). Confronted by his father, he renounced his earthly family and embraced the life of the primitive Gospel; a life of poverty, compassion, penance and prayer. Francis eventually realized his mission was broader than simply repairing the San Damiano chapel. Francis would later say of his call: “No one showed me what I ought to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I ought to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel” (McGinn, 45).

Francis sought to imitate as closely as possible the life of Jesus in the joyful key of a Troubadour. He considered himself a fool for God and would often sing in bad French before preaching a sermon. Soon he had a retinue of devoted followers; he was not interested in creating a separate institution but rather an *order* within the Catholic fold. In 1209 he went to Rome to seek official approval from Pope Innocent III, which he received. Francis’s order was not seen as threatening as the contemporary radical dualists like the Donatists or Waldenses, but as a renewal of primitive Christianity (Flowering, 46).

Francis is controversial as a mystic because he did not explicitly write a theology of mystical experience or of personal transformation (McGinn, 55). His scant writings are deeply Trinitarian and in many ways strictly orthodox. He admonishes the brothers of the order to obey the Minister General, not to criticize the (often corrupt) clergy, and to participate worthily in the Eucharist every day. However, Francis’s life experience was deeply mystical. From the beginning of his call he strove to unite his body with the body of Christ through an unwavering devotion to a life of poverty, penance and long spells of contemplative prayer. He refused

property and books, and wore only a ragged tunic which he would often give away. For Francis God was a mysterious, ineffable, and interpenetrating being that became a man in the person Jesus of Nazareth. His simple writings focus deep and obsessive attention on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist (McGinn, 51). “[D]aily He comes from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest. And as He appeared to the holy apostles in true flesh, so now He reveals Himself to us in the sacred bread” (Admonitions, 26-27). God became man, the priest stands for Christ as high priest and the devotee unites himself with the body of Christ through the Eucharist. Francis is smitten by this deeply mystical experience and centers all of his scant writings on this fact.

“Let the whole of mankind tremble  
The whole world shake  
And the heavens exult  
When Christ, the Son of the living God,  
Is present on the altar  
In the hands of a priest.  
O admirable heights and sublime lowliness!  
O sublime humility!  
O humble sublimity!  
That the Lord of the universe,  
God and the Son of God,  
So humbles Himself  
That for our salvation  
He hides Himself under the little form of bread!” (? , 58).

In addition, human beings are literally created in God’s image. Which Francis took very seriously in his life; in everything Francis sought to imitate Christ. “Be conscious, O man, of the wondrous state in which the Lord God has placed you, for He created you and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body, and to His likeness according to the spirit” (Admon. 29). This fact leads Francis to feel a deep intimacy between God and humanity to the extent that he uses the language of kinship: “And they will be sons of the Heavenly Father whose works they perform. And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are

brothers when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven. We are mothers when we bear him in our heart and body through love and pure and sincere conscience, [and when] we give birth through holy and pure action which ought to shine as an example to others” (Mcginn, 52).

This is not a literal kinship as you may guess Joseph Smith will do. Despite these deeply bodily metaphors, Francis did not believe God possessed physical body. The use of kinship language is characteristic of mystics who strive to put ineffable experiences into words.

For Francis, the body of Christ on the Cross was also the Cosmic Christ of John’s Gospel present in all things from the beginning. Creation itself becomes a sacred theophany of God who is everywhere present (Mcginn, 55). Francis’s ‘Canticle of Brother Sun’, which is a beautiful vernacular poem about God *in* creation, earned him the official title of Patron Saint of ecology in 1978.

“Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,  
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.  
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,  
And no man is worthy to mention Your name.  
Praised be Your, my Lord, with all your creatures,  
Especially Sir Brother Sun,  
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.  
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;  
And bears a likeness of You, Most High One.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
In heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,  
And through the air, cloudy, and serene, and every kind of weather  
Through which You give sustenance to Your creatures.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
Which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.  
Praised be You, my Lord through Brother Fire,  
Through whom you light the night  
And he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,

Who sustains and governs us,  
And who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for  
Your love  
And bear infirmity and tribulation.  
Blessed are those who endure in peace  
For by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,  
From whom no living man can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.  
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,  
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks  
And serve Him with great humility” (Francis, 39).

Hagiographical accounts of Francis show how deeply he *lived* this sacramental view of creation. On one occasion he was said to have preached a sermon to a flock birds, which did not fly away when he approached. He was reported to have said: “My brother birds, much ought ye to praise your Creator, and ever to love Him who has given you feathers for clothing, wings for flight, and all the ye need of. God has made you noble among His creatures, for He has given you a habitation in the purity of the air, and, whereas ye neither sow nor reap, He Himself doth still protect and govern you without any care of your own” (Armstrong).

In another account, he confronts a wolf in Gubbio who had been terrorizing the people. Francis finds the wolf and exhorts it to stop its terror; he shakes his paw, and declares a truce between humans and wolf so long as the villagers would feed him. Thomas of Celano, Francis’s biographer said of him, “When he found many flowers growing together, it might happen that he would speak to them and encourage them, as though they could understand and praise the Lord. It was the same with the fields of corn and the vineyards, the stones in the earth and in the woods, all the beautiful meadows, the tinkling brooks, the sprouting gardens, earth, fire, air and wind—all these he exhorted in his pure childlike spirit to love God and to serve Him joyfully” (Celano 80, 81). Francis would walk carefully where water had been poured because it was used in baptism, he walked with reverence over stones, he would not allow a tree to be fully cut down



because Christ died on a tree, he reserved a plot of his garden for flowers –he would keep the borders of his garden untilled.

Francis had many visions throughout his life, however he never wrote about any of them and we are left to speculate about the veracity of second and third hand accounts. Hagiographers describe Francis as “in frequent ecstasy” and saw him as a “true image of the cross” (McGinn, 58). The culmination of Francis’s lifelong emulation of the crucified Jesus was his receiving of the Stigmata in 1224 while on an intense 40 day retreat on Mount Alverna in Tuscany (McGinn, 50). In the stigmata, Francis takes Christ’s body onto his own and is unified in suffering with the Crucified Jesus. His body *becomes* the body of Christ. In his final years, nearly blind, Francis concealed his wounds. He died naked on a dirt floor surrounded by his closest brothers, without a single possession, in communion with the dust to which he would return.

Contemporary Franciscan mysticism is exemplified by Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan Friar who runs a school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Describing his own mystical experience through Francis, Rohr states: “What we see again and again is a joyful and unitive consciousness that intuits and experiences what Duns Scotus called ‘the univocity of being.’ By this Duns Scotus meant that we can speak with one consistent and true voice about a rock, a tree, an animal, a human, an angel, and God! They all participate in the identical and same state of Being to varying degrees. ‘God is Being itself.’ This eliminates any clear distinction between the sacred and the profane, because Christ existed in matter from all eternity, ever since God decided to materialize and reveal who God is through creation. It is summarized on our Franciscan coat of arms by the Latin phrase *Deus Meus et Omnia*: “My God and All things!” (Rohr). Franciscan mysticism continues to be deeply Incarnational: God became Christ through creation in the beginning (15 billion years ago), not just in the person Jesus. Franciscan mysticism is thus *panentheistic*: God is not equal to everything, but mysteriously shot through, connected to everything. This makes God radically present; especially in us, our own bodies. In fact as Hindu mystics would affirm our truest self is God-self, or Atman. God is inside, not like a little person sitting in your heart, but within the inner most depths of one’s being. But in addition to this familiar Trinitarian view, God’s presence is also deeply felt in nature; which is why so many mystics were also *nature* mystics; reduced to awe by the night sky, the wind, water, a beetle, a sacred grove. They express a deep and abiding joy in creation, an acute and almost ecological

attention to nature's workings and detail. The body of God is the body of all things; and he is thus radically present and hopelessly in love with his creatures.

### **Mormon Mysticism**

How does Mormon founder Joseph Smith compare? He is rarely cited in mystical literature as an exemplar of mystical theology, yet claimed more visionary/prophetic experience than most mystics would admit. From the 1820s Smith saw himself as having a special role in the history of Christianity. A frontier farmer, Joseph soon became a frontier prophet. Producing a new world sacred text and forming a church he believed would spread throughout the world in preparation for Christ's Second Advent. His theology was raucous, changing on a whim, but always spoken with passion of conviction.

Joseph's theology of God though evolving, never fully fits our Franciscan Trinitarian, Incarnational Panentheism. As Dan Vogel and others have suggested (), the earliest Mormon theology found in the *Book of Mormon* was closer to what is called Modalism than Trinitarianism. Here, God is One but takes on different *modes*; as Father in the spirit, and Son in the flesh. So in Ether 3:14 Jesus can say: "Behold, I am Jesus Christ, I am the Father and the Son..." Yet, in the early 1830s Smith's theology becomes more cosmic, at least looking in the direction of the Cosmic Christ. In an 1834 sermon he paints God as a grandiose being of total Cosmic power: "We admit that God is the great source and fountain from whence proceeds all good; that He is perfect intelligence, and that His wisdom is alone sufficient to govern and regulate the mighty creations and worlds which shine and blaze with such magnificence and splendor over our heads, as though touched with His finger and moved by His Almighty word. And if so, it is done and regulated by law; for without law all must certainly fall into chaos" (Teachings, 55).

Again in D & C 88 Christ is a cosmic force with mystical implications:

"...This is the light of Christ.

As also he is in the sun, and the light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made.  
As also he is in the moon, and is the light of the moon, and the power thereof by which it was made;

As also the light of the stars, and the power thereof by which they were made;

And the earth also, and the power thereof, even the earth upon which you stand.

And the light which shines, which gives you light, is through him who enlightens your eyes, which is the same light that quickens your understandings; Which light proceeds from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space— The light which is in all things, which gives life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sits upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things.”

Like Francis’s Canticle to Brother Sun, Joseph refers to the celestial spheres with separate genders: the Moon, her; the Sun, his. This could have certainly evolved into a more panentheistic mysticism. However, in 1843-1844 Joseph began preaching a peculiar theology: God has a body of flesh and bone. Taking Francis’s intimacy into entirely uncharted waters. In Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 Joseph writes: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Where it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us.”

By the Nauvoo period then Joseph had moved away from modalism and traditional Trinitarianism toward what I would call *Finitist Tritheistic Henotheism* where God and Jesus are separate personages of flesh and bone and the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit. These God’s were stuck to one place at a time (Finite) and were each Gods in their own right (Tritheism). In addition, these God’s were embedded in an ancient pedigree of father and son going back in time immemorial. Father Son and Holy Ghost are the *current* Gods with all *possible* power, which makes them worthy objects for worship and emulation.

When Joseph speaks of God as Father he means it literally. God is the father of our spirits which were begotten during an undetermined preexistence. Being created in the image of God means being the same species as God. Yet, despite Joseph’s radical theology of embodiment, the sacrament of bread and wine remained as *symbols* of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, dwelt upon in the *minds* of the faithful during Sunday *meetings*. There is no transubstantiation of the finite God’s flesh and bones only a reminder that they are real...somewhere else. Smith radically altered the implications of an *imminent* God who is not immanent in creation *through* his body yet becomes embedded in the universe of space and time *in* his body. Joseph’s revelations would even give these newly enfleshed beings a cosmic location in the neighborhood of Kolob. Ironically, however immanent and intimate God’s body became, it remained transcendent and out of reach for everyone but him.

Though not a panentheist like Francis, there are potentialities of an inter-subjectivity in Joseph's Finitist theology. In Joseph Smith's Moses chapter 3, a revision of Genesis 1-2, Joseph erases the King James Version's distinction between *living creature* when referring to animals and plants and *living soul* when referring to human beings. Joseph's interpretation equalizes humanity with creation by proclaiming us all as living souls. This interpretation is not closer to the original Hebrew which calls both humans and non-humans *living creatures*, but there emerges a new kinship between humans and creation that is hard to pin down in contemporary Mormonism. We are not equal in our status as God's creatures, because humans are God's progeny, yet because Joseph rejects ex nihilo creation, there is something cosmically creative and eternal about creatureliness. For example, Joseph Smith's Abraham 4:18 allows for the agency of other bodies in their own creation when it states: "And the Gods watched those things which they had ordered until they obeyed" suggesting a deep cosmic agency within our mystical primordial *Intelligences*; and an unfolding of the universe that Gods merely *participate* in rather than master. In Joseph Smith's Moses chapter 7:48 the earth herself speaks as a person, mourning the sins of the people of Enoch's day: "Wo, wo is me, the mother of men [and women]; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I find rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?"

Despite his eccentric theology, like Francis, Joseph had direct experience of God through his visions. Joseph claimed to have experienced God in the body: "I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me....When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—this is My Beloved Son, Hear Him!"

Unlike Francis's Stigmata, where he took on the image of Christ, Joseph was a witness to the body of Christ and the Father. Whereas as Francis was unified with the suffering body of Christ through his experience of the Stigmata and his life of poverty, in addition to his visions of Christ, Joseph produced an extensive theology and ritual practice of unification with God. Joseph's Masonic endowment institutionalized a uniquely American praxis of *Theosis*. In Mormonism, one could become not just one *with* God, but one *of* God. Theosis for Joseph was not a mystical union, but a rational, even capitalist one; we join the institution of Godhood by

possessing more and more secret knowledge or truth. The *mysteries* of God became the ordinances necessary to become a God. We participate in the mystery by becoming Gods ourselves. The universe that is mysterious to us now, is promised to become a classroom for future Godly creativity. Taking his Finitist theology a step further is the famous ‘King Follett Discourse’: “God himself was once as we are now, and is exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, and talked and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another...” (King Follet, 245)...“When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the Gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world...It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did...” (JS, King Follet, 247). Like the Dark night of the Soul of John of the Cross, we must sojourn toward Godhood.

## **Analysis**

While Francis and Joseph are both uncontroversial mystics, Francis bears more similarities to the classical mysticism of the world’s religions. Paradoxically, a Finitist, embodied God which Joseph saw as clarifying and bringing God closer to human spiritual experience simultaneously distances God’s body. Joseph Smith brought God into the universe, into a humanoid body, into a kinship. This is the “God who weeps,” a God who is close by, comprehensible, rational, working within the laws of the universe in which he evolved. But despite a radical ontological proximity, the body of Joseph’s Father in Heaven remains out of reach, transcendent, unknown. Whereas the God of the mystics, and in particular Francis, may be ontologically distant, He is deeply and universally present. This intimacy is best illustrated by

Sufi poet Rumi, who like many Christian mystics sought to articulate their experiences in *bodily* terms. He wrote: “I am filled with you. Skin, blood, bone, brain, and soul.” Or “You are an ocean in a drop of dew, All the universe in a thin sack of blood!” And Meister Eckhart: “all creatures speak God.”

Another comparison would be on the merits of Theosis and unification. Trappist monk and mystic Thomas Merton in his final address stated “What we have to be is what we are.” The classical mystic seeks a union with God that is already there. Francis was in constant ecstatic prayer, seeking unification with God, this unification finally came in the stigmata, where he took on the wounds of the crucified Christ. Francis did not create an elaborate program of spiritual discipline, or establish any new rites or rituals. His Friars were to renounce the world and devote themselves to being one with Christ in as real a sense as possible. Joseph Smith’s union with God took a different tact. In Mormon esoteric mysticism, there are stages or ordinances of sacred knowledge that allow one to progress toward God. One must be initiated into Godhood, rather than discover it within oneself. And there is the very real possibility that you will not achieve Godhood for lack of faith, sin, or failure to complete the required ordinances.

What might the implications of personal praxis be from the very unique perspectives of Francis and Joseph? While there could certainly be many assessments, the one I would like to discuss has to do with our own access to God through the body. Taking an ontological view of the existence of God, I would assert that if God’s primary nature is *as* a body; our individual knowledge of him should be *in* the body. However, if God’s primary nature is not *in* a body, but deeply *bodily* or incarnational, then God is primarily experienced deep within ourselves and in the natural world. As Franciscan mystic Richard Rohr puts it “the divine indwelling is never earned by any behavior or any ritual, only *recognized and realized* (Rohr, 22).

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