

Joseph Smith Sr.: The Link between Universalism and Mormonism
By James J. Buckley

A Universalist fathered the founder of the Mormon Church. Joseph Smith Sr. of upstate New York, was the father of the controversial founder of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (LSD), Joseph Smith Jr.

But the senior Smith's unique place in this country's annals does not rest solely on his paternal association with the originator of the only worldwide religion to have been created on our soil. A persuasive case can be made that the elder Smith was the most dominant influence during Joseph Smith Jr.'s formative years and thus fostered the creation of Mormonism.(1)

Today, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify anyone as the most dominant person in the life of any given young man or woman. There are just too many competing forces that daily bombard young persons. If one were to list them, they would include the internet, Facebook, Twitter, cell-phones, text messaging, apps., radio, television, motion pictures, and print publications.

Such was not the case in the early years of the nineteenth century. Instead of having a plethora of influential entities such as prevail today, the average child was exposed to very few influences. . To get an accurate picture of life at that period in our history, we would have to strip away all these entities we have just listed. And then eliminate telephones, the telegraph and yes, even a fully functioning post office from the scene and milieu we are trying to re-create.

This distillation process would finally end with the identification of the few influential forces to which a young man was exposed then: his family and his family's religion.

You might suggest that surely there were books that could have influenced Joseph. That suggestion presupposes that everyone was able to read and write in those days and that therefore, it was natural for the boy to be exposed to ideas beyond his family's collection of books. In fact, however, in those days relatively few persons possessed books because they had not learned to read and had not acquired the ability to print or to write cursively. Why? The prevailing attitude was: There is no need to teach reading and writing to a youngster who was going to be a farmer. Remember, until post-World War II, people acquired not what they wanted but rather only what they needed. Today, young people have a difficult time understanding the difference between Needing and Wanting, but in early 19th century, virtually everyone knew the difference.

Although young Joseph was taught how to read, he wasn't able to drop by the local Barnes and Noble and purchase any book he pleased. Whatever books he had at his disposal were those meager few his family had acquired.

So we are left with the youngster's family and the family's religion as being the prevailing influences in his life. And the one person who was most important in this regard was Joseph Smith Sr.

Born on July 12,1771 in Topsfield MA, he married Lucy Mack in Tunbridge VT on January 26,1795.They had eleven children. Not content to be a farmer, Joseph Sr. explored several other career possibilities, including being a shop-keeper. But none proved to be lucrative enough so he moved his family to Palmyra NY in 1816 and resumed farming there.(2)

All the while, he taught his sons such survival skills as how to hunt, fish, plow, build and farm. But unlike many other farmers of that day, he also taught them how to read and write well. This was due to the fact that, at one point in his adult life, the senior Joseph Smith had also been a teacher. Make no mistake: we are not implying that Joseph Sr. was trained as a teacher at

Colombia University. But in the day and age of which we speak he was generally known and respected as a teacher. This reputation was based in part on the fact that he had taught a full school year at Sharon N.Y.(3) Consequently he was well equipped to teach his own children how to read and write. But Joseph Sr. did so for one reason and one reason only: so that his children could read religious tracts. Consequently, the only printed literature available to young Joseph was what was made available to him by his father and they contained the beliefs his parents had adopted.

True, his mother Lucy Mack Smith had some influence on the development of her children. But in those days women were expected to acquiesce to their husbands' decisions. Indeed, any woman who did not adhere to this unwritten but nevertheless ironclad rule did so at her peril.

What gave the elder Smith the confidence to impart his beliefs to his children? Unlike many other men of that time whose confidence rested solely on the fact that they were the head of the house, Joseph Sr. had an unusual upbringing that well prepared him to be the secular and religious teacher of his family. Joseph Smith Sr.'s own father was a Universalist minister who had created a household where spiritual matters were an integral part of every day life.

At the time in which John Murray was preaching the precepts of Universalism in Gloucester MA and nurturing that infant religion, there was another Universalist minister in the nearby town of Topsfield named Asael Smith who was assiduously spreading the belief in Universal Salvation.(4)

Born in Topsfield on March 7,1744, Asael also believed throughout his life that in order for a democracy to survive, everyone must be actively involved in its growth and maintenance. Such a concept is generally accepted today in theory if not in practice. But in the middle of the 18th century the idea that Democracy can only survive if everyone participates in its functioning, was radical. If known, the Founding Fathers would certainly have been dismayed by Asael's beliefs which were tantamount to advocating, among other things, universal suffrage.

When he moved his family to Tunbridge, VT. , Asael practiced both the civic and religious concepts he preached. He assumed a wide variety of civic positions including Selectman, Town Moderator, highway surveyor, and grand juror.(5)

But such a commitment to Democracy never diminished his commitment to his beloved ministry. In a letter written to his family that began with the typical salutation, "My Dear Selfs," he wrote,

*" God is just to all and his tender mercies are over all his works...
there is no respect of persons with God, who will have all mankind to be saved..."* (6)

Clearly, Asael firmly believed in Universal Salvation and communicated that belief daily to his family members.

As Asael's third children, Joseph, married and relocated to New York, shared his Universalist beliefs with his wife and –in time- with their children As a result, Joseph Jr, the founder of Mormonism, was thoroughly imbued with the precepts of Universalism from his birth in December 1805 through to his teenage years.

But what about the claim by young Joseph that he had visions? Surely his father did nothing that would encourage the teenager to feel comfortable about proclaiming the existence and content of these visions?

The truth the matter is that his father had indeed made a major contribution to his son's belief in the viability of visions. He was also well acquainted with the firm belief of his parents that they had experienced divine intervention at a crucial period in their married life.

At one point when the Smiths were living in Palmyra N.Y., Lucy Smith began to observe that her husband appeared to be losing interest in all religious activities. Because this troubled her, she began to pray that her husband's religious fervor would be reinvigorated. She later wrote that she knew her prayers had been answered when her husband related to her that he had experienced seven divine episodes or epiphanies which led him back to his Universalist beliefs.(7)

Five of these visions were entitled (by Lucy Smith):

- The barren field, magic box, and beasts
- The desolate field, broad and narrow ways, delicious white fruit, and spacious building
- The flower garden and bowing wooden images
- Judgment day and Jesus' name
- Just one more thing. (8)

When Joseph the Younger announced in 1827 that an angel had appeared to him ,announcing that sometime before, Jesus had appeared to the indigenous peoples of America, his claims might have been considered the ravings of a demented soul. But instead, they were given credence, certainly among members of his family and subsequently among some who knew his family. Given the fact that his father had previously reported spiritual encounters with the Divine, it appeared that young Joseph was simply reporting the latest divine interaction of that family. Certainly his parents were in no position to discount his claims. And some of their neighbors and friends who had believed the parental earlier reports had little trouble believing their son's accounts.

In addition, those who were strict Christians were confronted with the fact that the Old Testament is filled with instances of the Lord speaking to a man. For example, in Jeremiah 18:6, he says

"Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying..."

If the Lord could speak to the prophets, why couldn't an angel speak to Joseph Smith Jr.?

Subsequent to these encounters with angels, Joseph Smith Jr. rejected all organized religions. Nevertheless, he appears to have used his Universalist background as the basis of his belief in the concept of Universal Sainthood. Indeed he was so convinced of this concept that he incorporated that belief into the title of his church. After all, if every true believer is going to be saved, then it is logical to assume that they are entitled to sainthood.

The next precept of the founder of Mormonism that appears to have flowed from Universalism was the belief in Universal Priesthood. Again, if all true believers are to be saved, and all are saints, then all are entitled to be considered priests.

Those who may question the validity of this linkage between the two faiths should note that in the past, Mormons have acknowledged their Universalist lineage and continue to do so currently. In October 2008, while giving an address at the prestigious *Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, at Brigham Young University, Casey Paul Griffiths claimed that Joseph Smith Jr.'s family had "heavy" Universalist tendencies and traditions due to the intercession of his father and that such a background was an important stepping stone in the development of Mormonism.(9)

"Having Universalism in Joseph Smith's (Jr.) background was an important stepping stone in getting us(Mormons) a person who was malleable and changeable and had a

relationship with God by the time he walked into the grove, where he felt like he could ask questions and not be unbraided...”(10)

For example, Griffiths emphasized the fact that Universalists had always been outside the mainstream of established religions. Therefore, as far as this Mormon scholar was concerned, Smith’s break away from all other religions was eased by the fact that his father’s (and grandfather’s) beliefs were often condemned and were held in opprobrium by many Christians in his day.(11)

In addition, Griffiths said that Universalists’ concept of a Loving God probably helped Joseph Smith Jr. to feel he could advocate Universal Sainthood. And Universalists’ rejection of a priestly hierarchy made it easier for Smith to advocate universal priesthood.

Undoubtedly there are some Universalists who currently do not look kindly on Mormonism. But regardless of their opinions, it is prudent to know the existence of this linkage between the two denominations and to be aware that Mormons have acknowledged Joseph Smith Sr.’s role in creating that linkage.

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 2. Ibid.
 3. Richard Bushman JOSEPH SMITH: THE BEGINNINGS OF MORMONISM
 4. Michael D. Quinn THE MORMON HEIRARCHY
 5. Ibid
 6. Richard Lloyd Anderson, JOSEPH SMITH’S NEW ENGLAND HERITAGE:ASAEL SMITH’S LETTERS,15
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 8. Lavina Fielding Smith, ed., LUCY’S BOOK:A CRITICAL EDITION OF LUCY MACK SMITH’S FAMILY MEMOIR 2001.
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 11. Ibid