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Religious Dialogue across Lines of Difference: Mormons, Evangelicals, and Others Agreeing to Disagree

Roy Whitaker

Review of Richard J. Mouw. *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012; Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson. *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997; Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott. *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007; Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen, eds. *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007.

AS A PROFESSOR OF AMERICAN RELIGION who studies American religious diversity, I am interested in what historian J. Spencer Fluhman calls “vibrant, varied, and international academic engagement with Mormon institutions, lives, ideas, texts, and stories.”¹ My own study of Mormonism in 2008² is a vivid example of the decade-long, sociocultural,

1. J. Spencer Fluhman, “Friendship: An Editor’s Introduction,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 2, <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=2402&index=1> (accessed September 15, 2014).

2. In spring 2008 at Claremont Graduate University, I took a seminar (which happened to fit my schedule) with Dr. Brian Birch entitled “Mormonism and Christian Theologies.” In the same year I was invited to, and gladly participated in, two Sunstone symposiums as well. Fluhman’s comments on the relevancy of Mormon studies reflect my own academic evolution: “As scholars have grown more and more sophisticated in

paradigmatic shift³ and the emergent evangelical academic community's desire to talk with Mormons and accept Mormon theological studies as a viable discipline. Moreover, Mormon scholars are also more than ever publically participating in orthodox Christian dialogue so they can move beyond superficial analysis and easy classifications of the Other in the West. Christian theologian Donald Musser and Mormon philosopher David Paulsen agree that “[significant] conversation must precede judgment, lest we misunderstand each other.”⁴ The eleven dialogues in their book *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson's *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, Robert Millet and Gerald McDermott's *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate*, and Richard Mouw's *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* all provide evidence and promise for this new orientation. These four works signal the emotive sea change among academicians to include more of the voices that historically in the twenty-first century have been excluded from Christian theological discourses. Perhaps more importantly, these books embody broader conversations in the humanities and the arts that do not minimize the actual theological and philosophical differences between the varieties of religious communities around the world.

Mark Heim, Robert Wuthnow, and William Connolly are pluralism studies scholars who have expressed a clarion call for intrafaith and interfaith dialogue across real lines of difference⁵—that is, religious dialogue that resists forms of “religious relativism”⁶ (as Mouw puts it) that absorbs Otherness into sameness. In *Pluralism*, Connolly argues for a “critical ethos of engagement” between different groups and cultures.

their study of religion, and as it has assumed a more prominent place in many disciplines, academic interest in Mormonism has flowered correspondingly” (Fluhman, “Friendship,” 1).

3. Donald W. Musser, preface to Musser and Paulsen, *Mormonism in Dialogue*, xiii–xiv.

4. Musser and Paulsen, *Mormonism in Dialogue*, 1.

5. See S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995); Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2005).

6. Mouw, *Talking with Mormons*, 75.

He suggests that “common ground” can be discovered and negotiated without avoiding real differences. In the same vein, Wuthnow argues in *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* that “religious differences are actually quite deeply rooted. Their strength lies in their distinctive practices, rituals, and teachings. . . . Genuine pluralism will take these differences into account, respecting them and upholding them.”⁷ In both the content and the format of their debates, *Christian* evangelicals and *Christian* Mormons are as well sincere interlocutors on religious and ethical issues. They are agreeing where there is agreement, and disagreeing where there is difference. Consequently, these scholars are creating scholarly space for genuine and groundbreaking dialogue.

Hence, all the books under review are refreshingly unlike past evangelical-Mormon apologetics-polemics. Mouw’s *Talking with Mormons* defends his orthodox Christian faith, but unlike his fellow evangelical counterparts, he claims an academic should not rush to judgment. He refuses to treat Mormons and Mormon theology as the Other (pp. 8–10). He sympathetically says that he “[wants] to be sure that I understand what another person is really saying . . . [by not] jumping too quickly to the conclusion that a person is an enemy of the gospel” (pp. 22–23). The strength of Mouw’s approach is that he takes seriously the proclivities, possibilities, and problems of Mormon scholarship while recognizing that the evangelical approaches to Mormon dialogue have had their own theological and political interests and presuppositions. Unfortunately, these positions have heretofore thwarted “hopeful signs of dialogue” (p. 94). Generally speaking, because they have had more followers and a longer historical presence, evangelicals have flexed their political prowess by demarcating the conditions and parameters of Christian debates and what can be defined as original Christianity.⁸

Writing as a pastor-scholar, Mouw wants to turn the corner on cantankerous evangelical-Mormon relations. *Talking with Mormons* is a fruitful exercise in cross-cultural bridge building. As president and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary for over two decades, he represents the

7. Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 307.

8. Julia Corbett Hemeyer, *Religion in America* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 82–88.

quintessential “gatekeeper” (in the best sense of the word) between the divided evangelical-Mormon communities. As a reconciler, Mouw admits:

My main concern in what I’ve been saying thus far is to invite us to nurture friendlier relations with the Mormon community. I want us to *listen carefully* to our Mormon neighbors, without deciding ahead of time what they “really” believe. Patience, humility, a willingness to admit our own shortcomings—all of these are necessary to move the dialogue forward. But I’m not suggesting that by forming more positive relations all of our *differences* will magically melt away. (p. 43, emphasis added)

The anecdotal insights (p. 96) and personal prose (p. 97) in *Talking with Mormons* reveal Mouw’s care and intimacy with the topic and his knowledge about its dangers and pitfalls. A good example is his carefulness not to name every person who assisted him in “dialogic evangelicalism” (pp. vi–vii). Furthermore, he does not write in a typical evangelical anti-Mormon, “stark alternative” (pp. 86–89), “spiritual warfare” (p. 88) tone. Mouw effectively argues that evangelical antipathy and formulaic countercult discourse must be contested (pp. 12–24). Consequently, what is at stake for Mouw is not simply rehearsing or even confronting evangelical ad hominem arguments on Mormonism and the Prophet Joseph Smith. Similar to the ideas of George Santayana, Paul Tillich, and Martin Buber, a key aspect of Mouw’s overall thesis appears to be the notion that theology is a “communal experience” and something deeply biographical in nature. Although he does not convey it explicitly, an underlying theme of his book is that the study of Mormonism helps evangelicals to become better evangelicals.⁹ Mouw’s book, then, should not be understood as just talking about Mormonism *to* evangelicals, but as a book *for* evangelicals¹⁰ that is intended to change the punitive “atmosphere in Mormon-evangelical relations” (p. 4).

9. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). On this topic, Webb is explicit about such a project—namely, what other Christians can learn from Mormons.

10. Arguably, Mouw’s book is also an open invitation to Mormons, who may not have a grasp of key differences and similarities between themselves and evangelicals.

As is true for Søren Kierkegaard's devotional-ideational works, Mouw seeks to construct the proper ethical, theological, and epistemological disposition in which evangelicals can better understand their own faith and other Christian faith traditions. For Kierkegaard, and I would argue for Mouw, to *know* the truth one has to be in proper *relationship* with the truth. Basically, Mouw stresses that evangelicals have misread and misrepresented the Mormon people and their tradition for far too long. It is now time for open and honest dialogue that requires more than just a critique of the Other—a self-awareness and a self-assessment that acknowledges the real lines of difference. Appropriately, the “rhetoric of inclusion,” like the concept and aims of pluralism, has its limits.¹¹ Mouw does not, for example, consider Scientologists or Jehovah Witnesses as “Christian” (p. ix). He is not convinced about the biggest conviction for Mormons: Joseph Smith is *the* prophet and *the* restorer. Nor does he subscribe to other key Mormon dogmas such as continuing revelation, divine corporeality, and eternal progression. These Mormon doctrines, even after rich dialogue, are heterodox and heretical from an evangelical perspective. According to Mouw, many Mormon beliefs do not conform to the biblical witness or church creeds (pp. 52–55). For their part, Latter-day Saints themselves find traditional orthodox beliefs suspect given that early church history has been tainted by Western philosophy and theology (pp. 52–55). In all, Mouw nimbly preserves orthodox doctrinal differences between Mormons and evangelicals while positing that “trust . . . allows genuine dialogue about our deepest convictions” (p. 94). By the same token, Connolly calls for a “critical responsiveness” in discourses. “Critical responsiveness takes the form of *careful listening and presumptive generosity* to constituencies struggling to move from an obscure or degraded subsistence below the field of recognition, justice, obligation, rights, or legitimacy to a place on one or more of those registers.”¹² In making these kinds of comments, Mouw

11. Richard Amesbury, “Plurality Beyond Pluralism: ‘World Religions,’ Secularization, and Theological Education” (Inaugural Faculty Lecture, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, March 4, 2009).

12. Connolly, *Pluralism*, 126.

and Connolly are both essentially saying that substantive debates are constitutive of a Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian *being-there* communicative model, which is to suggest that the greatest gift one can give to another is one's presence.

In just eleven brief chapters, Mouw's *Talking with Mormons* is the shortest and the most accessible for a novice in Mormon-evangelical studies. I do not consider its brevity a limitation as other critics have suggested, especially given Mouw's own admission that "longer books are necessary on the subject from an evangelical perspective" (p. x). As Lewis Gordon, a humanist scholar of methodologies has argued, novel methods are always warranted whenever relevant to help deepen understanding.¹³

To be sure, Blomberg and Robinson's *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* and Millet and McDermott's *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* should be read after Mouw's book. The other books provide greater details, additional comparative analysis, and more cogent arguments with scriptural evidence to fully frame the divergent and overlapping positions in the Mormon-evangelical debate. I have spent so much space in this review on Mouw's text because it is an entryway to the debate. Unlike Mouw's hope for dialogue (pp. 94–96) and commentary on Othering (pp. 21–22), *How Wide the Divide?* and *Claiming Christ* cover more substantive and broader theological terrain of the issues that divide Mormons and evangelicals—namely, the doctrines of Christology, the Trinity, deification, and soteriology.¹⁴ These two books are, frankly, companion pieces. Although *Claiming Christ* focuses on Christological issues, it and *How Wide the Divide?* have similar structures. Like the approach taken in *Mormonism in Dialogue*, Blomberg or Robinson will first present a position, then the other responds to it by presenting it from his tradition, and then a final rebuttal—or a "joint conclusion"—is offered. Thus, the methodology of these books supports the argument that *authentic* dialogue is *organic* dialogue, and it ought to

13. Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–21.

14. See Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, where these doctrines are treated respectively on pp. 111–42, 77–110, and 143–88.

be (re)produced in *how* scholars *do* their work.¹⁵ Like Mouw, the authors of *How Wide the Divide?* and *Claiming Christ* contend that new scholarship and novel methodologies are needed that appreciate ostracized institutions, traditions, and identities in Western culture on their own terms. “Successful interfaith dialogue involves much more than winning an argument,” Millet and McDermott contend. “It also entails building and enhancing a friendship” (p. 12). In other words, the medium is part of the message.

Of the four books considered here, *Mormonism in Dialogue* is the most expansive work—not only in terms of length of pages and breadth of topics, but also because of the vast cadre and caliber of leading scholars participating in Mormon dialogue. For instance, Rosemary Radford Ruether has published in feminist theology for well over three decades now. Dwight Hopkins is just as respected in black theological studies. David Tracey in hermeneutics and theological method and David Griffin in process theology and postmodern theory also figure in the stellar list of scholars—all of whom have not formally written in a sustained way about Mormon studies in the past.

Unlike in *Claiming Christ* and *How Wide the Divide?*, the non-Mormon authors in Musser and Paulsen’s anthology are not overtly evangelical and fundamentalist in their respective theological orientations. Yet they clearly remain committed to their unique theo-ethical positions and philosophical frameworks. In interreligious and intercultural dialogue, there is “no view from nowhere.” Going well beyond Mormon and evangelical debates about whose Jesus and which Christianity, the scholars whom Musser and Paulsen recruited for the volume are willing to discuss rare topics such as Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich, as well as contemporary movements such as liberation theology, myth theology, and openness theology. The scholars take these topics

15. Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2010), xxvii. Parenthetically, what Mormon and evangelical scholars are attempting to do is also evident in hip-hop pedagogical studies today. Dyson argues that hip-hop scholarship needs to “strive to reflect the form it interrogates.” Taking his own advice literally, Dyson presents his book not in traditional chapter form but in a CD-track form.

and show how they relate to Mormon thought. In this light, Musser and Paulsen's primer signals the larger academic turn toward more multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to the study of religion and theology. The book gives the reader a wider and different lens to accurately discern just how wide the divide is between the two faith traditions. In this respect, *Mormonism in Dialogue* is more dialogical and dialectical than the other two books. It affords the audience a richer theological mosaic and a less parochial lens with which to compare and contrast Mormon-evangelical theology. As a result, their book can appeal to a larger market and more mature readers in religious studies. While it may be a bit too advanced for lower-division or first-year religious studies students, I believe that graduate schools, seminaries, and religious studies programs would serve their faculty, students, and communities well by having a copy as a library resource.

Therefore, Musser and Paulsen's collaboration stands as an audaciously ambitious magnum opus in the field of Mormon-Christian studies. To ignore *Mormonism in Dialogue* would be analogous to ignoring Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* when examining LDS life and thought in American religious history. The book's existence dispels trite cultural prejudices that say Mormon thinking is oxymoronic, and also stale theological misnomers that conclude that Mormon theologizing is not possible (p. vii). As is true for the other Mormon-evangelical books under review, I concur with Martin Marty's observation of the anthology: "Here readers are likely to *agree* that the scholars are forthright in stating their *differences*, open to listening to the other, and courteous about the way they handle both the self-assurance and the self-criticism of the other" (p. x, emphasis added). Mouw, Wuthnow, and Paulsen call for more empathetic dialogue and a "[careful] *speaking and attentive listening* on both sides" (p. 17, emphasis added). Simply put, Paulsen's point and an underlying message of the entire anthology is that honest and healthy dialogue is possible between Mormons and evangelicals.

At the outset, Paulsen admits that the anthology (as Mouw suggests of his own book, p. x) "pleads for a volume two" (p. 13). Paulsen is correct. Speaking about space where open debate is readily encouraged, Mouw fleshes out my point: "As a longtime subscriber to *Sunstone*, I could have

recommended some of *Sunstone's* other writers to add yet more diversity to the mix: Jungian Mormons, Deconstructionist Mormons, Process Theology Mormons" (p. 59). Possibly a section entitled "A Dialogue on Mormonism and Atheism" or "A Dialogue on Mormonism and Secularism" and another section entitled "A Dialogue on Mormonism, Pop Culture, and Media Studies"¹⁶ would be welcome additions to Musser and Paulsen's next volume. Examining salient contemporary theoretical and ethical issues under a Mormon horizon would keep with the spirit of their vision of creating "mutual understanding and building bridges" (p. xi).

Although the topics and themes are still relevant, *Mormonism in Dialogue* was published in 2007. In today's media-driven, Facebook-Instagram, Twitter-word world, seven years is a long time. Since the book's publication, we have seen for the first time the real possibility of a US president who happened to be Mormon. We have a grassroots surge by LDS women laity and scholars—as evident in Joanna Brooks's *The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of an American Faith*—who are advocating for women's rights and shared governance in church affairs. There is also an American cultural sea change over the past decade in the acceptance—though not fully—of LGBTQIA persons, identities, and institutions in society. Mormon theologians need to be more engaged and more nuanced about these critical issues. If not a volume 2 for *Mormonism in Dialogue*, the equivalent of a *Cambridge Companion to Mormonism* is now needed to continue to nurture and challenge Mormon scholarship.¹⁷

While scholars of Mormon and evangelical literature have good reason to applaud the four publications under review as invaluable contributions to the Mormon-evangelical debate, some scholars may be disgruntled with certain elements. For one, there is a lack of gender and racial diversity among the principal authors and main editors of the books. All of the authors and editors are white and male. Why is this? What does this say about the Mormon-evangelical divide? Is this

16. For example, the ongoing success of the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* suggests that critical analysis about the relationship between Mormon identity, aesthetics, and American popular consciousness is continually needed.

17. On this point, an *Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* is due in 2015.

reflective of the larger evangelical and Mormon authoritarian culture? In the long run, a uniform and dominant-white-male, straight gaze hinders new avenues of self-discovery as Mormonism studies comes of age in a multicultural, multiethnic, gendered, and queer America. For example, the dialogue in *Mormonism in Dialogue* between Dwight Hopkins and Eugene England on black theology (pp. 341–84), as well as the chapter on womanist theology (pp. 303–39), is a substantive dialogue about race and religion. But racial discourse, as critical race theorists argue, is always a subtext, or is sublimated within the dominant, normative “white” discourse. That is to say, the concept of race, along with class and gender, implicitly frames not only Hopkins-England conversation but also feminist, myth, process, and the other dialogues in the text. My point is that the volume would be more inclusive by naming this for the reader and exposing its own methodological limitations, since the book is the beginning of a new frontier. That is, Musser and Paulsen are socially constructing the field for future scholars.

Another observation is that Musser and Paulsen’s thematic approach (e.g., a chapter on myth theology, a chapter on openness theology, and a chapter on feminist theology) is undeniably thoroughly analyzed by the foremost scholars. But in addition to the helpful foreword, acknowledgments, preface, and introduction that provide the context and rationale for the project, a concluding chapter like that in Blomberg and Robinson’s book would have provided the reader with an understanding of how the various areas fit together and the possibilities of future dialogue.

Last but not least, there needs to be more debate about what exactly constitutes “Mormonism.” Who gets to be a Mormon and a viable speaker in the evangelical-Mormon discourse? By this I mean it appears that the four books under review seem to have settled on the contours of the LDS tradition, when in fact there are several other sects and strands of Mormonism that deserve some attention and a voice.¹⁸

Given all these points, evangelicals and Mormons have not always seen each other as legitimate actors having proper authority in Christian

18. An example of a group that has often been neglected in Mormon studies and marginalized in LDS culture is Fundamentalist Mormons.

matters. Despite this, the new chorus of Mormon-evangelical books portends the nascent age of the “Mormon Ecumenical Moment,”¹⁹ in which we as teacher-scholars are privileged to investigate. Taken as a whole, Latter-day Saints and their brand of Christian theology can no longer be considered a footnote or a whitewashed form of modern American religious thought. Without a doubt, Mormon thinkers are, as Paulsen rightly urges, players on today’s Christian theological stage (p. 18). What is significant is that it is not only Mormons saying it. Mouw is proof that evangelicals are now saying it as well (p. 14). He writes, “Brigham Young University is world class. . . . Some devout Mormons are well-known scholars at major secular schools” (p. 30). While it is true that Mormons and evangelicals do differ on core issues of tradition, scripture, and experience, it does not mean that respect cannot be the undergirding heuristic principle in how they relate to each other. In essence, the four books help to demystify Mormon theology and to remove the stigma existing in the popular imagination about being Mormon. With works like *Mormonism in Dialogue*, *How Wide the Divide?*, *Claiming Christ*, and *Talking with Mormons*, the future looks bright for greater understanding of religious dialogue across lines of difference.

Roy Whitaker is an assistant professor of American religious diversity at San Diego State University. He holds a PhD in philosophy of religion and theology from Claremont Graduate University (2014). His research pushes beyond traditional topics in African American religious studies by examining how African Americans construct and navigate their religious and racial identity outside a Black Church context. He is particularly interested in comparative religion, atheist and humanist studies, and hip-hop religious studies. He is presently researching and writing on Martin Luther King Jr. and the age of religious pluralism and on hip-hop as an indigenous religious category.

19. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 1–10.