



1-1-2015

Stephen H. Webb, Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints

Reviewed by James E. Faulconer

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Faulconer, Reviewed by James E. (2015) "Stephen H. Webb, Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 20.

Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol2/iss1/20>

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To improve these future volumes, the contributing authors would do well to include more context to situate readers within the time these women lived, for readers will wonder if these biographies are representative of Mormon women or are also typical of other North American women at the time. Providing a stronger historical context will help readers to better appreciate these women and their contributions to society. Though readers will at times be left with questions about the more complex aspects of these women's lives, the volume editors hope that any such concerns will serve to stimulate further contributions to this fertile area of study (1:xiv). *Women of Faith* amply illustrates that early Latter-day Saint women's lives are worthy of continued study and that, in fact, much work remains to be done. Readers of the first three volumes will certainly walk away with a new appreciation for and awareness of the diversity of women's experiences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and researchers will continue to discover additional personalities and sources that may be profitably mined.

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Stephen H. Webb. *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Reviewed by James E. Faulconer

MUCH OF THIS BOOK READS like an extended love letter, not one from the lover to his beloved, but from the lover to his family explaining what he loves about her and responding to the family's objections. Stephen

Webb is a lover of Mormons, and we should be pleased that he is. The first thing he says in his acknowledgments is “Studying Mormonism has made me a better Christian.” Perhaps Mormons who read what he has to say about them will be able to respond, “Studying Webb has made us better Mormons.”

Webb recognizes the strengths of the LDS Church and its members that people often talk about: their interest in family, their work ethic, their strong communities. His book begins with that recognition, and it comes up throughout. Webb is also interested in Mormon history, and he discusses some aspect of it in each chapter. But in the end he is more interested in Mormon metaphysics—beliefs about ultimate reality and how they are related to one another—than in relationships and practices: “I think that Mormon metaphysics provides the best gateway into the whole range of Mormon religious beliefs and practices” (p. 9).

Though that is a questionable assumption, as I will argue later, the approach is nevertheless reasonable and helpful. By far most criticisms of Mormonism by those of other faiths concern history or theology rather than practices. There have been several books in which an LDS scholar engages with non-LDS scholars to discuss Mormon beliefs, but this is perhaps the first to look at Mormon metaphysics in a more or less systematic way and to compare it favorably with other Christian beliefs. It is surely the first book to do so for a general audience. But Webb does more than defend LDS belief against criticism—he argues that the religious beliefs originating in the prophecies of Joseph Smith have something to say not only to Latter-day Saints but to all Christians. I know of nothing comparable.

Specifically, Webb focuses on the LDS belief that even spirits are material, what is often called “Mormon materialism.” That belief is made explicit in the Doctrine and Covenants: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter” (D&C 131:7). Webb says, “By arguing that only the physical is real and that the divine is physical in ways that we can only glimpse in this world, Mormon metaphysics actually has some advantages over traditional metaphysical schemes that emphasize the immateriality of the divine” (p. 9). The heart of his argument comes in

chapter 3, “What’s Up with Mormons and Matter?” There Webb outlines the approach that philosophers and theologians have traditionally taken: for many people, there are material things and immaterial things, like souls; for others there is only the material. So there are two ways of seeing the world, the immaterialist way and its contradiction, materialism. The latter view appears to be the dominant view today, though it is contested strongly by religious people who take the former view. But “Mormon metaphysics,” he says, “opens the possibility of a third way between these stark alternatives” (p. 82), an alternative in which “the sacred exists in continuity with the physical world” (p. 33) rather than as something wholly other than the human world and beyond human experience, as much of traditional Christian theology understands the realm of God.

Mormon materialism, Webb says, is a powerful tool for thinking about religious belief. For example, it can help solve the traditional problem of how to account for visions of God, which seem impossible if he is utterly immaterial and beyond human understanding (p. 86). It makes all human relationships with God more understandable (p. 108). And if, with Orson Pratt, we understand materiality to be resistance or the ability to affect and be affected (which is, I believe, the most charitable way of understanding Pratt’s definition of materiality as solidity), we end up with “a more robust understanding of the individuality of each member of the Trinity” (p. 99). Webb argues that adopting Joseph Smith’s teaching that everything is material would be useful to Christian theology in general and not only to LDS belief.

In the previous book where Webb discussed Mormon theology, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh Theology and the Metaphysics of Matter*, there was an ongoing though underlying engagement with the Orthodox Christian theologian David B. Hart. There is a similar underlying engagement in this book with Richard Mouw, and through him with contemporary Calvinist theology. Those engagements are a subtle demonstration of Webb’s thesis that Mormon theology can be used in wider theological debates.

Although the book takes on such figures as Hart and Mouw, its audience is educated people with little or no training in philosophy or theology.

Webb succeeds in writing for that audience. He is a readable writer, quite capable of explaining technical philosophical ideas in nonphilosophical terms. In the process of making his argument, Webb successfully gives brief but accurate and accessible accounts of the thought of Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and others. One need not be a specialist to read this book nor have a dictionary at one's elbow while doing so.

Two chapters are not obviously part of that discussion of Mormon materialism: chapter 2, "The Magic of Being Mormon," and chapter 5, "Mormon Overreach? Brigham Young and Parley Pratt." The first is a defense of Joseph Smith's early treasure seeking and his use of so-called magical means for doing so. The second looks at the lives and teachings of Brigham Young and Parley Pratt and suggests that perhaps they went too far, Brigham Young in his theologizing about Adam and his desire for a theocracy and Parley Pratt in his practice of polygamy.

It is not that Webb has no appreciation for these early LDS leaders. Referring to a quotation from Young, Webb says:

Young had such a vivid understanding of Christ's presence in the world that he dared to imagine that Jesus instructs every human being, whether they know it or not, in the way of holiness and righteousness. Restoration, then, has nothing to do with the search for lost moral purity and everything to do with establishing the cosmic truth of Christianity. (p. 165)

The chapters in question are part of the love letter, recognizing criticisms that are often leveled against Mormonism and dealing with them honestly but sympathetically. Webb gives a sympathetic and reasonable explanation of Smith's magical practices. He connects Young's work to build the kingdom of God on earth with the LDS Church's contemporary engagement in businesses such as City Creek Mall, and he argues that contemporary LDS emphases on self-reliance and industriousness are outgrowths of Young's kingdom building. Though he is critical of Pratt's marriage to Eleanor McLean, Pratt's twelfth and final wife, he recognizes the unparalleled importance of Pratt's missionary work to the LDS Church.

Three appendixes appear at the end of the book. They are somewhat more technical than the chapters that form the book's body. Two of them further show how Webb thinks that non-Mormons can benefit from Mormon theological insights. The third raises interesting questions that anyone doing Mormon systematic theology must consider. These appendixes are, of course, not essential to the book, but readers with a deeper interest in theological questions are likely to enjoy and profit from them.

I have only two relatively minor criticisms of Webb's book and one stronger one, though they are really friendly disagreements rather than criticisms. First, I believe he gives too much authority to nineteenth-century LDS theologizing. Joseph Smith gave us a tremendous amount to think about, but reflecting on his teachings didn't end in the nineteenth century, though Latter-day Saints also sometimes seem to think it did. In particular, Webb relies too heavily on the thought of Orson Pratt. Pratt was a brilliant contributor to nineteenth-century Mormon theological speculation. It would be a mistake to ignore what he did. But it is equally a mistake to assume that he defines Mormon belief. Webb too often says "Mormons believe . . ." when "Many Mormons have believed . . ." would be more accurate. Most of the beliefs he discusses are not established LDS doctrine, but "Mormons believe" suggests they are.

In addition, Latter-day Saints often hold different beliefs than those he attributes to them. For example, Webb says, "Mormons believe that Jesus was begotten by an immortal (but not immaterial) heavenly father" (p. 188), but many Mormons are agnostic about how Christ was conceived. He says as well, "The Saints also believe that God the Father progressed into his bodily form, as did Jesus Christ in his premortal state" (p. 123). There is no question that this is a common LDS belief. But it is not doctrinal—the King Follett discourse has not been canonized—and there are faithful, reflective Saints who do not believe this. Though Webb points out that LDS beliefs are "elastic" (pp. 21–22), the way he goes on to discuss them may give the impression that they are not.

Webb regularly connects his theological understanding with contemporary quantum mechanics, also a concern. In the nineteenth century many LDS thinkers made the mistake of thinking that Newtonian

mechanics, even if it needed refinement, was the final word in physics. As such, they thought it was useful as a theological tool, helping to show the believability of their speculations. But with the relative fall of Newtonian mechanics came also the fall of theological explanations too closely tied to it. A similar fate may await any theology that ties itself too closely to contemporary physical theories. Metaphysics and physics need not be correlated.

But my strongest disagreement has to do with Webb's belief that Mormonism has and needs a stable metaphysical foundation. I am one of those to whom he refers when he says:

These anti-foundationalist scholars [those who do not believe that a systematic Mormon metaphysics is necessary] celebrate Mormonism as a uniquely fluid and flexible Christian tradition that is unconstrained by doctrinal principles and philosophical commitments. I think that they are wrong, but the reader should know that I am offering an interpretation of Mormonism that emphasizes its philosophical consistency and logical coherence, while some Mormon scholars would argue that Mormonism does not have (and should not have) methodical and metaphysical ambitions. (p. 25)

Webb is up-front about the different ways of seeing the relationship between theology and Mormonism, and he is honest about there being Mormons who disagree with him.

I doubt that anyone doing work in LDS theology would go so far as to say that Mormonism is unconstrained by doctrinal principles. That is too strong. I would say that, though individual Mormons may well engage in thinking about Mormonism philosophically and logically, and though there are certainly people who may benefit spiritually from reading or engaging in such thought, the LDS Church itself does not need it. Theologizing can be useful to the church and its members, but it is not essential to its or their identity.

Two quick explanations of that claim, the first historical: Judaism has survived for thousands of years without relying on theology. (The same can be said of a number of other religions.) Judaism has had its

theologians, but unlike most of the Christian tradition, its theology is not what defines it. What does define Judaism may be difficult to decide, but it isn't theology. Mormons are more like Jews in that regard than they are like other Christians.

The second explanation is a rejoinder to a possible objection. The objection is that without a theology it is difficult to stop the complete evisceration of religious belief. The presumption is that the result of a lack of theology is likely to be the slide from religion to mere culture: practices not tied to theologized beliefs may end up being informed by no beliefs at all. But those (like me) who don't share Webb's belief in the importance of theology think that living prophets and continuing revelation provide the safeguard against that slide. As they see it, in Mormonism continuing revelation takes the structural place of theology.

In spite of these friendly disagreements, I strongly recommend Webb's book, not just to the non-Mormons at whom it is aimed but also to Mormons. Latter-day Saints will learn a great deal about Catholicism by reading it. Webb's belief that "Mormonism has a deeply Catholic sensibility" (p. 15) is news that Mormons need to hear. Mormons tend to think that they are more like Protestants than Catholics, resulting sometimes in an anti-Catholicism inherited from nineteenth-century Protestantism. It is usually mild, even under the surface, but it is often there. Webb's book offers non-Mormons a love letter explaining why he loves Mormons and giving them reasons why they might also. He does a good job of that. At the same time, in doing so he offers Mormons a love letter that may help them learn to love and appreciate their Catholic brothers and sisters more.

James E. Faulconer obtained his BA in English from Brigham Young University and his MA and PhD in philosophy from Pennsylvania State University. He has taught in the Department of Philosophy at BYU since 1975 and is a past holder of the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding. He has edited several books and published many

articles and book chapters on philosophy. Among his Maxwell Institute publications are *The Life of Holiness: Notes and Reflections on Romans 1, 5–8; Faith, Philosophy, Scripture*; and the “Made Harder” series covering the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. He writes a weekly online column on LDS beliefs for Patheos.

Janet Bennion. *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012.

Reviewed by Megan Goodwin

JANET BENNION COMPELLINGLY CONVEYS the “variability in experience” among contemporary Mormon fundamentalists in her latest monograph (p. xiv). *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism* encompasses two decades of ethnographic fieldwork in the North American Intermountain West, as well as an analysis of seventy to ninety hours of popular media consumption. Bennion explores the variegated and troubled histories of polygynous sects and contemporary American mainstream investment in religio-sexual difference repackaged as popular entertainment. *Polygamy in Primetime* demonstrates the multiplicity and complexity of Mormon fundamentalist belief and practice, both complicating fundamentalist identity beyond plural marriage and arguing strenuously for the decriminalization of the practice.

Bennion is professor of sociology and anthropology at Lyndon State College. *Polygamy in Primetime* is her fourth monograph. Her previous books addressed gender hierarchy among minority religious communities in northern Mexico’s Chihuahua Valley and women’s networks within and among polygynous families. She has contributed articles to several edited scholarly volumes critiquing the 2008 raid on the FLDS Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado, Texas. As a vocal advocate for the