



1-1-1969

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Recommended Citation

Madsen, Truman G. (1969) "*The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* Sterling M. McMurrin," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol9/iss1/12>

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Book Reviews

Sterling M. McMurrin. *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*. University of Utah Press, 1965. 151 pp. \$1.95 paperback.

(Reviewed by Truman G. Madsen, professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University. The author of *How to Stop Forgetting and Start Remembering* (1961) and *Eternal Man* (1966), Dr. Madsen has also published in *The Improvement Era*, *The Instructor*, *Dialogue*, and *BYU Studies*.)

It may or may not have been calculated, but there is an awesome appropriateness in the Michelangelo segment—the hand of God extended toward the hand of Adam—which appears on the cover of Sterling McMurrin's *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*. For the central conclusion of this essay is that in Mormonism "there is not a total disparity of the Divine and human natures." (p. 23) Christendom owns the painting but firmly disowns the thesis. Official theology insists on an "infinite qualitative distinction" between divine and human, a mysterious chasm that is only the more mysterious in the "bridging" supposed to have been achieved by Christ. Powerful religious motives have no doubt contributed to this dualism. But McMurrin's task is to trace the technical philosophical involvements and offshoots of the conception, comparing them at crucial points with the Mormon view.

It has been observed that any author is easy once you master the center of his vision. Already by selection I am presuming on McMurrin's. And since both Mormon and non-Mormon readers are likely to find this a difficult book, it may be helpful to recall the author's intent before asking, as a reviewer should, how his performance measures up to it.

Several years ago McMurrin announced a long-range project: five pieces on Mormonism. In print so far are two: one on the philosophical foundations, the other, the present volume, on theological distinctions. "I have composed a comparative commentary," he says in his latest foreward. And once again

he defines his role as a describer who seeks neither to justify nor to criticize. Still anticipated are pieces on Mormon religion, the Mormon Church, and the Mormon. Even this categorical breakdown has a certain freshness, and it is quite irrelevant to say, as some will, that the topics are inseparable. Clarity can result from careful, if temporary, disentangling of threads.

McMurrin has kept reminding his critics (on all sides) that he is attempting to speak with a measured neutrality. He is not a philosophical evangelist, and he is outside what it is elsewhere fashionable to call "the circle of faith." Is he therefore unreliable? Not so. His role allows and even forces upon him a psychic stance that permits neither the enchantment nor the indifference of distance. And he is more reliable in the execution of his task than most reviewers allow.

But let us note two important and significant exceptions to his descriptive enterprise, one where he is critic and one where he is justifier. The first has to do with a certain undergirding polemic on the nature of man.

McMurrin has long been convinced that the original sin of Christendom was the intrusion of a non-Christian doctrine, that is, the doctrine of original sin. And that though Mormonism in its early days avoided this error, now, under the impact of an increasingly pessimistic and even nihilistic culture, it is in danger of slipping into it.

In his Reynolds lecture he warned against the "twin evils" of authoritarianism and irrationalism which often grow out of radical disparagements of the nature of man. (I remember him saying that if the existentialists' talk of the "abyss of life" could move a scientific naturalist to tears, the more was the pity.) He has stoutly maintained that the bleakness of life is no argument for the ultimate depravity or "finitude" or "total self-estrangement" of man. In an earlier piece on the "Promethean religion" of one of his mentors, W. P. Montague, McMurrin, with inbuilt approval, described the view that God needs man (much but perhaps not *as* much?) as man needs God. This courageous, life-affirming, bold and adventurous approach to religion is altogether rare in the midst of contemporary trends. But McMurrin continues to find and admire similar facets in the authentic Mormon heritage.

By describing he is therefore also prescribing, hoping to immunize Mormons against the "fallout" of neoorthodox,

existential, and Catholic pessimism. Here he is critic. And it seems to me that this implicit criticism shows through much of what he has written and said in recent years, including the present volume. I, for one, applaud the motive.

There are two supplemental additions in perspective concerning man's fall and self-sufficiency. Regarding involvement in the fall, Mormonism, as McMurrin astutely shows, renounces the metaphysical explanations that impute stain or guilt through Adam. The second Article of Faith is, for Mormons, an article of fact. But there is a unique note in the Mormon outlook which Roberts saw fit to add to the third edition of *The Gospel*:

The whole purpose of God with reference to man's earth-life being made known to men in the spirit world, and the spirits of men accepting the plan marked out for their progress, makes them parties to that plan—to the Fall as well as to the rest of it . . . it is questionable if it can be said with the strictest accuracy that man's agency was not involved in the Fall. (p. v)

What then of man's freedom or power to avoid sin or to achieve salvation? There is a line in the fifth Lecture on Faith (part of the Kirtland period) which McMurrin might well have cited. After describing the mastery of Christ's life in keeping the law and remaining without sin, it says, "showing thereby that it is in the power of man to keep the law and remain also without sin."

But if one may theoretically imitate the behavior patterns of Christ and "remain without sin," he still falls short of his destiny. The Christ of Mormonism points to higher objectives: to receive his power as he received the Eternal Father's, thus to become like both in nature. This is a higher order of existence than the much-praised salvation or beatific vision described in other traditions. Question: Is this essentially a matter of growth or a matter of transformation: the coming to fruit of latent possibilities by obedience to the law without, or the healing and removing of a sinful overlay by reception of divine powers within? Mormon theologians say it is both. McMurrin's emphasis on Christ's major role in achieving the resurrection should not (and does not in the writers I have in mind) obscure Christ's added role in achieving the kind or degree of resurrection. That depends upon the measure of His trans-

formation which brings us back to sin and sinfulness, to what Joseph Smith called "losing the very desire for sin."

If I am not mistaken that is the point, replete and complete, of the Book of Mormon. Indeed it is the point of the much-disputed passage on the "natural man" in Mosiah. (Those who read Calvinism into or out of that passage either lack the Mormon bent or conceptual imagination, or both.) It is the presupposition of the doctrines of begetting and becoming that permeate Sections 84, 88, 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants. And it is the nerve of meaning and power not just of so-called Mormon legalism but also of its ritualism, its ordinances and temple worship.

These elements may come to focus in McMurrin's later piece on the "Mormon Religion." If so, it is to be hoped his discussion will be enriched by the remarkable but neglected *4th Yearbook Study Course* for the seventies. Here B. H. Roberts (who incidentally found the clearest statement of the atonement, especially the balancing of justice and mercy, in the Book of Mormon) presents the cumulative outlooks both of orthodox Christendom and of Mormonism on soteriology. And he laces his treatment with copious references to Henry Drummond and "spiritual biogenesis." McMurrin thinks Mormon theologians have yet to clarify the idea of spiritual death. But the other side of that question is of spiritual life. Roberts is clear as were his predecessors in saying that life can only come from life. At this level the core of Mormonism may be called Christogenesis.

McMurrin's second, and explicit, digression relates to the nature of God. It is the final section of the volume, a separate lecture that is uncharacteristic of him for he has typically undertaken both in his lectures and writing to represent the position of the subject-author.

Here in "Theses on the Idea That God Is a Person" he is both descriptive and argumentative. But his readers may easily miss his point. The chapter is not, on the one hand, a philosophical defense of the Mormon God, or if so only indirectly. It is a carefully constructed analysis of the futility of much classical effort to make theological and religious sense out of a combined Greek absolutism and Hebrew-Christian personalism. What emerges is this: that absolutism cannot logically be combined with personalism, or to put it positively, that per-

sonalism inevitably means "finitism"—the recognition that the very nature of personality is such that it involves being this and not that, being conscious, willing, moving, feeling, therefore not "absolute" in the traditional sense. Further, unless we can affirm the reality of such a person, and do so in a way that avoids "the veneer of their [the theologians'] life-destroying intellect," (p. 123) then what we call Christianity in the Western world is simply false. And, for McMurrin, one cannot legitimately go on to the razzle-dazzle of self-deception that says "anyway it is symbolically true." A correlate of this conclusion is that those who are defending absolutism and impersonalistic conceptions of God are not defending Christianity at all.

On the other hand, McMurrin is not withdrawing the question of God in favor of a leap of faith or sheer subjectivity. He is convinced (it is his positivistic bias which is shared, though not under that *rubric*, by many a Mormon) that the question, if it can be settled at all, is to be settled through experience, not speculation or dogmatic biblicalizing. What sort of experience? He says "perhaps mystical experience" and leaves (or more likely postpones) the question of whether he reduces Mormon revelation-experience to something mystical or something empirical. Will his absolutist critics then say that he simply has a life-preference, a temperamental bias, likely conditioned by his association with the Southern California personalists? If so, they will be evading a sympathetic, but profoundly uncompromising argument.

Aside from these two central backgrounds of the book, what of the substantive comparative chapters themselves? For this reviewer they are sensitive, cogent, and articulate. Moreover, some of the general misgivings I have become, on closer analysis, recommendations.

First, McMurrin's continuing outline and summation of historical alternatives, enlightening as it is, leaves out major contemporary philosophical and theological options. But perhaps this is a strength and a service since many of these "trends" (e.g., secular theology, Christian atheism, offshoots of existential outlooks, and the so-called "new Catholicism" in the work of men like Kuhn, Gogarten, and Congar,) are faddish and may have little lasting import.

Second, because of McMurrin's heavy emphasis on philosophy (which one might assume would have been restricted to the first monograph) he sometimes goes too lightly on theology. Yet his double interest and double competence in historical philosophy and philosophy of religion is as rare as it is valuable on the present scene. Few Mormons may realize how this historical-classic approach puts him in an academic no-man's-land in a day when philosophy is often just bits and pieces of linguistic analysis, and when theology is looking, perhaps desperately, for "relevance" at the sacrifice of all traditional perspective.

Third, McMurrin's admitted biases toward naturalistic humanism with a "positivistic flavor" (see his response to reviewers in *Dialogue*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 136, 19) may seem to some to dominate or to threaten to dominate what he calls his "Mormon attachments" so that he finds things in Mormonism that aren't there, or fails to find things that are. But again, that is (if I may be playful with the phrase) a fortunate windfall, for these are the very biases which have been prevalent (sometimes precariously) in the philosophical and theological world for the past three centuries. It is in that sense both accurate and appropriate to emphasize those perpetual notes in the Mormon outlook that make the supernatural an extension and refinement of the natural.

Suppose, in contrast, McMurrin had come to his task with the extreme mystical leanings of a W. T. Stace, or the anti-cultural theology of a Barth and Brunner, or the new-absolutist inclinations of the latest Thomists. Some elements of each of these parallel Mormonism, if one is careful about his definitions. But viewed through such spectacles alone, Mormonism would emerge a travesty. Even if one wants to say defensively that McMurrin's theological portrait is only "one side" of Mormonism, it is still very much worthwhile to have that portrait presented against the canvas of tradition. And whatever other sides there are must be consistent with it.

In summary, there is room, much room, for this kind of book; it points to the pressing need to concern ourselves less with the making of schools within the culture and more with the building of skills to reach beyond it so that we may hold up the clean linen of Mormon distinctions in the variety of lights and to the variety of eyes that are in the real world. Such

a task might well take precedence over (though, realistically, it is not likely to replace) the breeding and brooding of infighters which often proceed under the name of scholarship.

Here, in short, is a man of superb erudition in our Greco-Roman heritage and, though few of his reviewers seem to have noticed, not a little expertise in world religions. He has much to teach both Mormons and non-Mormons about the similarities and differences of their religious faiths. That leads to a final footnote for the easily intimidated. Philosophy and theology are languages, hard enough to read and harder still to speak. But it is a great mistake to suppose that only a few specialists do so and that the rest of us are in a different world. All of us, however amateurish may be our professions, are making our decisions and living our lives under the meaning-frameworks to which philosophers have given technical names. Rarely do we sit down to analyze where these frameworks lead in their bearings, implications and applications. Some say "Well, let the world learn *our* outlook through *our* language." But we don't know what they are *hearing* and therefore don't really know what we are saying until we understand *both* languages. There is no dearth of spokesmen for Mormonism, but there is a dearth of those who can speak on the very boundaries and peripheries where this kind of communication breaks down. McMurrin has put himself there, and there is where he is apparently highly motivated to stay. To say we don't care about the cultivation of this unusual language is to say we don't care about communicating, but that is to say we don't care about people. And how can any Mormon, any genuine Mormon, say that?