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## MORMONISM AS AN ECCLESIOLOGY AND SYSTEM OF RELATEDNESS

Charles W. Nuckolls

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Douglas Davies's *Introduction to Mormonism* presents an overview of the beliefs, doctrines, and opinions of Latter-day Saints (from an outsider's viewpoint) in relation to the church's sacred texts, epics, and revelations. However, the book is both more and less than the title suggests. It is more because the author's comparative theological perspective enables him to explore the special configuration of ideas that makes use by the Saints of familiar terms like *salvation* and *repentance* distinctive against the backdrop of mainstream Christianity. Latter-day Saints and other Christians often speak past each other despite an ostensibly common vocabulary, giving rise to misunderstanding or worse. Davies explains why, and this makes the book essential reading for those interested in interfaith dialogue. The book is less than the title suggests, however, because its overview is far from encompassing. Davies neglects to discuss Mormon social practices and customs, kinship and family structures, and barely mentions church auxiliary institutions despite their importance. Davies is, after all, a theologian, and it shows. Thus he is able to finish the book while mentioning the Relief Society only once.

Review of Douglas J. Davies. *An Introduction to Mormonism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. vi + 277 pp., with index. \$65.00, hardcover; \$22.99, paperback.

The book is organized thematically, not historically, into nine chapters dealing with topics as various as the relationship between sacred text and prophetic revelation, the conquest of death, and the difference between salvation and exaltation. Chapters are divided into sections, usually no longer than a paragraph or two, in which the author develops a point connected (sometimes loosely) to the theme. This gives the book a choppy, encyclopedia-like style, as if the author had taken a bunch of index cards scribbled with interesting ideas and then shuffled them. In the chapter “Organization and Leaders,” for example, Davies jumps from a discussion of presidential tenure to patriarchal blessings, to Joseph Smith’s first vision, to Brigham Young’s theology, and finally to missionary recruitment and training—all within the space of six pages. No doubt the author understands why he lumps all these issues together; but, unfortunately, he does not connect the dots, and this makes the book a frustrating experience for the reader who expects an orderly progression of ideas.

Still, Davies exhibits analytical skill, as, for example, when he considers Latter-day Saint concepts of personhood. One Mormon concept holds that the universe is populated by “intelligences,” refined bits of matter that cannot be created or made, only organized by God. Human beings are intelligences in this sense. The other view starts from the position of a self-revealing deity from whom humanity derived and to whom people are responsible. Sometimes these concepts are not entirely at ease with each other, Davies suggests, and this gives rise to confusion when Latter-day Saints discuss (with others and among themselves) the differences between “intelligence,” “spirit,” “soul,” and “self.” But Davies also points out that the diverse discourses of personhood by the Saints provoke further refinement of central doctrinal elements: “intelligences” move from being some kind of general property of matter to a capacity that comes increasingly under the control of “agency,” and it is through an increase in agency that an ever-increasing intensity of relationship can be experienced. The importance of what Davies calls “relationality” is one of the book’s most important insights. He correctly infers that “eternal intelligence that was once co-existent with God becomes increasingly related to God by being transformed into

spirit children of God and then, through human birth, by becoming obedient human children of God” (p. 89). Davies shows that differences in Latter-day Saint concepts of personhood are resolved by implicating them all in the development of relatedness.

Davies is surely correct in stressing the notion of relatedness. Ultimate salvation, in Mormon terms, is a corporate venture; it depends on relationships to other people, especially those to whom one is “sealed.” This is in contrast to the view now dominant in the West that when it comes to human relationships, the individual decides how much to become involved with others and in what way. As Davies puts it, “the self is more relational than essential despite the ‘eternal’ nature of the underlying ‘intelligence’” (p. 147). Mormonism thus inverts modernism’s popular “self-religion” by defining the self as the interplay of person and community. To me this has always suggested an interesting point of similarity between Mormonism and Confucianism, both highly corporate (or “relational,” in Davies’s terms) religions in which the development of the self is seen as one and the same with growing social responsibilities. The difference lies in the importance Latter-day Saint thought gives to agency.

The importance of agency in connection with a developing sense of relatedness underpins the symbolic importance accorded the Garden of Gethsemane in Latter-day Saint thought. Elsewhere and in other Christian traditions, one finds the garden scene relegated to a footnote or considered mainly with reference to Judas’s betrayal. For Mormons, however, Gethsemane is important because there Christ takes upon himself the sins of the world, not as a passive sacrifice but by an act of deliberate will. This emphasizes the importance of voluntary action and individual commitment—critical themes in Mormonism that make Gethsemane, as Davies puts it, “the quintessential expression of agency, obedience, and goodness: the holy one who possesses agency, employs it obediently” (p. 155).

Davies is correct to note, however, that individual agency and obedience to principle do not always coincide. “The relational view of self when associated with the need for adherence to the principles by which the universe operates produces a potential paradox, for the

logic of relationships is not entirely coherent with the logic of adherence to principles” (p. 148). The one tends to emphasize love and trust while the other emphasizes obligation and obedience. This is not, as Davies says, simply a restatement of the Protestant division between gospel and law because the Mormon dichotomy is not so much theorized as it is lived in the circumstances of everyday family life. There is much in the congregational life of the church, in its ward meetings and auxiliary functions, that fosters affection and mutual understanding. But there is also much in the formal rationale of temple rites that signifies obedience to invariant principles, whatever that might mean for the individual. Whereas in other religions reconciling the two might be the job of professional theologians, Mormonism invests the family with this responsibility. It is, in a word, up to them to figure it out. This is a burden that is likely to increase, says Davies, as greater importance is placed on the family as the primary corporate unit within the church.

Davies concludes that Mormon theology is in effect an ecclesiology—that is, a church structure whose organizing principles take the place of a formal philosophy developed by professional theologians. “Organization” looms large in Mormon thought. “A ‘Church’ was no afterthought, no accidental outcome of some personal religious experience that simply happened to be accepted by others” (p. 118). Right from the start, Joseph Smith set about to develop a structure whose hierarchical relations would govern the corporate relationships that the new faith defined as essential ingredients in the plan of salvation. It should, therefore, not surprise anyone that early Mormon society took the form of a theocracy. What is interesting, however, is how thoroughly the notion of organization permeates Mormonism’s cosmology. The Book of Abraham, for example, speaks of gods who, at the beginning, “organized and formed the heavens and the earth” (Abraham 4:27) and then organized the growth of plants, the sun, moon, and everything ready for the moment when they would “organize” man in their own image. In Mormonism, all necessary bureaucratic functions are extensions of divine activity and human responsibility, and not, as Davies puts it, “some irksome inevitability” (p. 116). Ecclesiastical organization is the dynamic

matrix within which human agency develops itself in the network of relations. Since Mormonism is sometimes criticized, from within and without, for its extensive authority structures, Davies's point deserves special consideration by all who ponder the purpose of ecclesiastical governance and priestly oversight.

Davies is at his best when he explores the connections among Mormon beliefs and compares these to their counterparts in mainstream Christianity. The transition within Mormonism from a faith concerned mostly with the second coming of Christ to one concerned as much (if not more) with the future godhood of individual married couples and their families has created a conceptual vocabulary not easily translated in terms other Christian communities can understand, despite having many words in common, such as *salvation* and even *Christ*. *An Introduction to Mormonism* will help to bridge the gap, enabling people of good will on all sides to talk to each other. That is a major contribution.

Davies is less effective when he speculates on matters unrelated to comparative theology, such as Joseph Smith's psychological history or the effect grief over his younger brother's death might have had on the development of vicarious baptism. Mormon readers will also find peculiar the extensive treatment Davies gives to the Adam-God doctrine and the notion of blood atonement—important historical issues, to be sure, but out of place in an introductory text whose primary emphasis is elsewhere. One wishes Davies's editors at Cambridge University Press had encouraged him to play to his strengths. Still, Davies must be congratulated for providing us with an important overview of Mormon thought and practice, in a work that might even deserve to be ranked with Rex Cooper's *Promises Made to the Fathers* or Marvin Hill's *Quest for Refuge*.