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Abstract Review of *An Introduction to Mormonism* (2003), by Douglas J. Davies.

A Comparative Exercise in Mormon Theology

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Douglas Davies—a trained anthropologist, a professor of divinity at the University of Durham, and an ordained priest in the Church of England—is rapidly becoming a main commentator on Mormonism and, one might say, the main theologian of Mormonism. With his earlier work in 2000, he has given us a solidly grounded analysis of what salvation means in Mormonism;[1] now he offers a comparative theological appraisal of the whole breadth of Mormon theology. The title might be misleading for those not used to British understatement or European academia. This is by no means an introduction to the gospel—it is an introduction in the classic European sense, a synthesis of long involvement and good research with a scholarly argument supplementing thorough descriptions of the phenomenon, in this case Mormonism. It could easily be called a comparative Christian theology of Mormonism, for that is what it actually is. In

1. Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000).

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.

this book a scholar of comparative religion, well schooled in the varieties of Christian theologies, analyzes the contributions of the restored church to this rich tapestry of deep and compassionate thinking about the relationship mankind has with the supernatural world through Jesus Christ.

For those used to dismissing Mormonism out of hand, but also for those Mormons who can only refer to the "sectarian" Christian world around them, this is a novel approach; for those who have been haunted too long by the artificial divide constructed by the discourse on "the one and only true . . . ," it is highly refreshing. Empathetic analysis is, of course, the hallmark of the academic study of comparative religion: its *ekdoche* (meaning "putting between brackets," i.e., studying without judgment) makes it possible to understand a religion one does not belong to but with which one has become familiar. This is Davies's goal, and he succeeds beautifully.

For various reasons, such a comparison—which is sometimes called systematic theology in Protestant traditions—is quite rare. Theologians are used to discussions, but mainly within their own religious traditions, and discussions with different traditions are either shot through with thorough misunderstandings (Davies gives a few examples of structural misunderstandings between Latter-day Saints and evangelicals, who only think they speak the same language) or are written in the idiom of "quaint and curious customs," relegating the other theological system to an anecdote without any existential weight. Here, Mormonism is neither the enemy nor a museum exhibit but a worthy topic for a scholar of repute, an effort to give Latter-day Saint faith a place in the main debates and disputes that have fired the history of Christianity throughout the ages.

The book offers an in-depth view of Mormon theology—its origin, development, various transformations, and eventual growth to a "global" phenomenon. It is not primarily a historical approach, as the fabric of ideas is the number one issue, but a historical approach is part and parcel of the study of ideas. This is clear in the first chapter, where the roots of Mormonism are briefly traced from three systems: millenarianism, popular magic, and intellectual curiosity mixed with

mysticism. From this, Davies outlines the main theological poles between which his argument develops: principles versus relations, cosmic oppositions and laws versus the attributes of the divine, all set in the dynamics of a "moving faith" in which the Zion message is retranslated from a particular geography to a global positioning and from an adventist inspiration to a well-structured organization.

In chapter 2, dealing with prophets and texts, Mormonism is placed squarely in the fundamental debate between Protestantism and Catholicism, a position that helps to highlight the particular contributions of Latter-day Saint theology to general Christianity. And, in the eyes of Davies, these are considerable, highly interesting, and quite creative, though he eschews passing any judgment. The main debate in this chapter centers on authority, with the Mormon insistence on prophetic authority counterbalancing both the tradition-oriented Roman Catholic authority and the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation. With the crucial notion of keys, Mormonism changes the relationship between community and text through the authority of a prophet, not only giving the text new roots but also adding new revelations. Davies discusses the Book of Mormon at length in this light and rightly concludes: "It is this complex relationship between prophet and text that makes the hermeneutic situation of Mormonism unlike that of other contemporary Christian churches" (p. 64).

In the next chapter Davies discusses those issues that have always dominated Christian theology: the nature of the Godhead, problems of Christology, and the nature of mankind. He traces the strong insistence on the embodiment of God and the gradual emergence of Latter-day Saint notions of the ultimate transformation of the human to the divine, giving a crucial place to covenants, resurrection, and human agency in this process of becoming gods. Here, as most Latter-day Saints may be aware, Mormonism parts company with the majority of Christendom, but the creativity of the Mormon position, the relationship of this particular theology to definitions of self and human agency, probably offer new insights for most of them.

The central Mormon message, according to Davies, centers on death and atonement, the subject of his earlier book. The Latter-day

Saint conquest of death has three faces: millenarianism, resurrection, and the crucial Mormon notion of exaltation (including, evidently, notions of plural marriage). Death is, of course, crucial in all Christian churches, but the uniquely Mormon approach to death through priesthood ordinances, and especially the link with marriage, introduces new elements in the generalized Christian message of immortality (which is nowadays underplayed). This leads to new interpretations of atonement, the spirit world, the relationship with ancestors, and notions of repentance and faith. For instance, in Mormon culture faith means something quite different from that in Protestant churches: for Latter-day Saints faith is a motor for agency, a reason for doing things that follows from mere belief, a "mode of operation energizing anything that is achieved" (p. 114). Faith is work, and thus the distinction between the two—one of the topics for heated arguments during the Reformation—is conflated in Mormon theology.

Distinctive as well is the setting of atonement within an organization and the rooting of authority in a hierarchical structure, which not only brings eternity within the authority of priesthood but also produces a communal identity otherwise unattainable. Here the flamboyant history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is highly relevant, of course; starting in upstate New York, with "geographical pauses at both Kirtland and Nauvoo . . . as staging posts to Utah" (p. 120), the church in moving westwards transformed itself from a millenarian, more or less "adventist" movement into something quite different: a temple-building corporate unity under central leadership. In one of his few judgments, Davies writes: "With the greatest of good fortune, as far as survival of the Church was concerned, Brigham Young and not Sidney Rigdon prevailed in the leadership succession" (p. 117). But, of course, though the Utah-based church is in large part Brigham's work, later developments—sketched more summarily—are relevant as well: the short flirtation with the United Order, the Negro ordination question (here Davies mentions "a strong theological argument about why Negro males could not have the priesthood" [p. 125], but I have to disagree, as I think the justification on this one has never been anything but flimsy at best), and the correlation move-

ment. Interested as he is in oppositions, Davies discusses the tensions between the organizational structure and "narrative theology"—the importance of specific events on which the restoration hinges, such as the first vision, the prophet's mantle falling on Brigham Young, and, more generally, the place of patriarchal blessings. Some of the tales are canonized, some are not, but the combination of tales and structure is shown to be a powerful one.

For many Christians today, the value of the message is measured against the ethics it inspires, so a pivotal chapter treats ethics, atonement, and agency. For Latter-day Saints, "principles" and "doctrine" are more commonly discussed than "ethics," but the relational aspects of LDS theology are clear: everyone depends on others for salvation and exaltation. Both the notion of being a "people" and the definition of one's own agency as a capacity to choose the right and consequently act upon this choice link the individual to his fellow seekers for salvation. But the relation to Christ is also crucial—within the specific Latter-day Saint notion of Christ's atonement, the cross is not the central feature but rather Christ's experiences in Gethsemane. According to Davies, this aspect is neglected in other churches, who all focus on Golgotha; this leads to a different place of suffering in the theology of the atonement and places a much greater emphasis on the agency of Christ, not as the passive victim of foul play and inverted Roman justice but as the Son of God who proactively takes upon himself the consequences of all human sin, all worldly evil. Now what does this mean for Mormon ethics? Using the time-honored Weber thesis on the relation of Calvinism to capitalism,[2] Davies shows that for Mormons too ethics means salvation in action but in a different way: "The Mormon ethic is typified by a dissonance between a firm belief that endowments can guarantee exaltation but uncertainty as to whether

2. Weber argues that Calvinism has boosted the rise of early Protestantism. Through the uncertainty of being chosen, Calvinists were urged toward a life of continuous activity, where daily work was also seen as a calling. Combined with frugality and a sober lifestyle, this provided a powerful motor for economic enterprises, thus developing capitalism. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* trans. Talcott Parsons (London: HarperCollinsAcademic, 1992).

one is properly fulfilling one's vows and obligations to the highest degree" (p. 161). In short, Mormon theology offers joy and hope, but has one really earned it? Here, the notion of grace, so little discussed in Mormon parlance, comes in, and as a religion student of Protestant extraction, Davies is well qualified to discuss this in full.

Crucial in the author's vision of Mormon theology is the difference between salvation and exaltation—the first dependent on grace, the second on works and covenants. This he links in the next chapters with the development of the priesthood, with church organization, and with family and marriage. Not only does the "priesthood of all believers" find a very creative expression in Mormonism, so do family links, patriarchal relations within and beyond the family, and—a very Mormon teaching—marriage (that is, plural/temple marriage). The discussion of the Mormon approach to grace, sin, and guilt that follows is a must for all engaged in pastoral care in the church (which is, in theory, everyone).

For Davies, the crux of the Latter-day Saint theory of salvation—*soteriology,* in the parlance of comparative religion—is to be found in temple rituals. Gradually he works toward the main point of the book: Mormonism as a church has transformed the immediacy of the second coming into the mystic participation of members in the salvation and exaltation of their fellow men and ancestors—transforming from an adventist-like movement into a priesthood-endowed conquest of death. The influence of ritual is absolutely essential. The historical roots of Mormonism, from either the Puritan movement or Adventism, are ritually poor, but Mormonism has created a plethora of ritual, even a sacred geography of ritual, that is, in Davies's eyes, the main medium that transforms a passive waiting for the millennium into an organized project of "supersalvation." This was also a mechanism by which early members replaced the many notions of their root churches with a fully developed theology that rendered all other traditions redundant. The history of Mormon theology parallels the history of its temples, which, according to the author, also meant a movement from the content of the Book of Mormon (which was largely Bible-oriented) toward the teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants, from chapel to Latter-day

temple. Baptisms for the dead, endowments, temple and plural marriages (the latter with its many subsequent changes), sealings, and second anointings all lead to a "post-Protestant priestly mystery-religion that prepares devotees for apotheosis in the afterlife" (p. 218).

The last chapter traces the later developments and transformations of the church, with some attention to both the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now known as the Community of Christ) and the fundamentalists (note the very different use of terminology here, compared to the habitual Protestant definition of fundamentalism). The question of whether the Church of Jesus Christ should be seen as a fundamentalist church—a question I treated about the same time Davies did—is briefly discussed.[3] But for Davies the Mormon experience lives in a "renewed theological charter for the family and family life" (p. 238), coupled with a mission to the dead and set in a framework of free agency. Davies then turns to the awkward relation between Mormonism and mainstream Christianity, noting the dilemma of a church that defines itself as co-Christian while defining all others as redundant. Thus, the Latter-day Saint quest for respect from other Christians is bound to fail; only the sheer increase in numbers and the active presence of the Church of Jesus Christ on the American scene make some recognition inevitable. But this global church (a much better fitting phrase than "world religion") "is still an extremely young institution that has many miles to travel, and many vestures to change, before its vision of Zion is realized" (p. 254).

Of course, such an ambitious endeavor as this book calls for some critical reactions as well, just as all scholarship does. Though Davies mentions covenants and the role they play, in my view this element could have received a more thorough treatment. The progression from salvation to exaltation is given tangible form with covenants, but the link between chapel and temple is also realized through covenants. Covenant making—both in the case of the clear covenants

3. Walter E. A. van Beek, "Pathways of Fundamentalisation: The Peculiar Case of Mormonism," in *The Freedom to Do God's Will: Religious Fundamentalism and Social Change,* ed. Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busuttil (London: Routledge, 2003), 111–43.

made at baptism (in the chapel) and of the covenants of the temple endowment—is a theological part of individual and collective identity, and may thus, in a Lévi-Straussian way, mediate the opposition between chapel and temple, forming a bridge between those two separate experiences. Of course, the immediacy of expectations of the second coming is mitigated and postponed, but not only by the introduction of temple rituals. The shifts in general conference discourse from adventist and apocalyptic messages to more generalized Christian and institutional messages have contributed to this as well, as have the new vistas of church growth. And, after all, date setting and calculations were never a part of Latter-day Saint theology.

If the notion of covenant may bridge the chapel-temple divide, it also highlights the relation of Latter-day Saint theology with one neglected aspect, the Old Testament. Indeed, the Book of Mormon throughout has a New Testament flavor, despite the inclusion of chapters from Isaiah, but that does not mean that the Old Testament plays a limited role in LDS theology. Discourses on latter-day Israel, geographical connections, and relations with Judaism are highly relevant for the formative phase of LDS theology; and, evidently, the whole concept of plural marriage, the patriarchal order, and the temple itself as central object—coupled with the Masonic inspiration—cannot be separated from a fascination with the Old Testament. Also, this notion of covenant might have helped to deepen the somewhat cursory treatment of the fundamentalist movement, where a further return to the Old Testament is clear and distinctive.

Finally, a comment on the notion of the creativity in Latter-day Saint theology: Davies rightly notes that the era of theological creativity has ended in mainstream Mormonism and has been replaced by a correlated definition of doctrine and a central insistence on unity. This has not only ended the more freely speculative theology but has also produced a shift from theology to doctrine and from an internal discourse on the scriptures toward one on the institutional church. Dominant in the narrative theology has become a discourse on truth—institutional truth, that is—which effectively shields internal LDS discourse from influences from abroad and from comparative endeavors such as

Davies has performed. The Latter-day Saint definition of truth, then, which used to be more inclusive in the formative phase, seems to bar an internal theological debate, substituting for it exercises in doctrinal clarification. On the other hand, this "truth"-centered discourse might have moved Mormon theological debate out of the chapels and beyond systematic theology into the realms of historical research and apologetics. For instance, the gradual change in Book of Mormon interpretation from an all-continent history toward a limited geography view is neither the result of any revelation nor of General Authority discourse, but of anthropological studies, for which, of course, John Sorenson has been crucial. This change from religious to scholarly authority, after all, is also a form of creativity. Yet, the tension between religious authority and scholarship remains, and probably should remain.

In short, this book is not only a must for everyone who takes Mormon studies seriously, but also for anyone interested in Mormon theology, which—in theory—should be about twelve million people.