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The New Mormon Ecumenicism

Thoughts on Mormonism at the Crossroads of Philosophy and Theology: Essays in Honor of David L. Paulsen

Stephen H. Webb

There is no doubt that a “Mormon Moment” swept through the publishing industry in the wake of Mitt Romney’s presidential ambitions. If a lasting and productive time of reflection on Mormonism’s relationship to traditional and creedal Christianity comes from this moment, David Paulsen will deserve much of the credit. I have to admit my biases about his writings up front. While working on a book about a heretical option in ancient Christology that I call “heavenly flesh metaphysics,” I came across several of his essays defending the notion of a corporeal God.¹ I had been inching my way in that theological direction, but reading Paulsen was like being pulled out from a lazy beach by a rip current into new philosophical seas. It wasn’t just the clarity of his prose or the carefulness of his scholarship; Paulsen writes with a generous voice that is nonetheless firm in its articulation of theological themes that have been nearly lost in the development of Western intellectual history. His ideas are like a rip current, but the destination where he wants to take you is a sea of startling splendor and serenity. He brings common theological sense to topics that are intellectually fantastic and spiritually revolutionary. I have had the pleasure of getting to know David as a colleague and brother in Christ. I have also enjoyed getting to know his Christian character. He brims with a quiet, confident joy that overflows in an easy, natural manner. There are fountains of wisdom in his work that will need to be appreciated for many years to come. Although I have never had a class with him, I am honored to consider myself one of his “untimely born” students.

Following Joseph Smith’s lead, early Mormon thinkers—men like the Pratt brothers and Brigham Young—were drawn to the epistemological rewards and speculative prospects of ideas like divinization, materialism, and ongoing prophecy. Their eagerness to explore newly

recovered, full-bodied conceptualizations of the divine strengthened them in the struggles they underwent for their faith. Yet their ideas hardly had any life outside of LDS circles. Early Mormon thinkers yelled and roared about their discoveries, but their supplications fell, in terms of America's class of trained theologians, on deaf ears. Paulsen's voice is a new tone for a new day.

Clearly, giving God a body, imagining salvation as a journey of divinization, and being open to the fullest reception of the gifts of the Spirit are all staging dramatic comebacks in contemporary theological circles. It is almost as if Smith was born too early, or perhaps we are witnessing a turn in the life of the universal church that he saw long before the rest of us. The rise of a truly global Christianity is breaking down not only geographical barriers but also intellectual walls that kept certain ideas quarantined for centuries. The possibility that God has a body has been so relegated to the dump heap of supposedly falsified propositions that even today, when new versions of embodiment are all the theological rage, it cannot be taken too literally. The assumption is that such ideas are remnants of a childish stage of Christian intellectual development. Yet visions of an embodied God gave the early Latter-day Saints such measures of spiritual intimacy, exuberance, and assurance that their testimonies demand the most careful examination.

At the very least, Mormon history is a reminder that the coming of the kingdom of God progresses according to switchbacks, reversals, and all manner of twists and turns rather than traveling along a nice and neat linear pathway. Characterizing the current point of time in religious history as a "Mormon Moment" seems to me to be a purely descriptive fact, but what are we to make of this moment in terms of a wider view of divine providence? Is it a fleeting, media-driven moment occasioned by a lost presidential election, or is the time now ripe for the rest of America to discover America's most American version of Christianity? Mormonism was born in America and preaches a gospel that puts America at the center of salvation history. Latter-day Saints embody the great biblical themes of prophecy, exodus, martyrdom, and entry into a promised land, but they also exemplify the great American themes of settling the frontier, trying to create a utopian community, democratizing religious authority, harnessing the power of capitalism, and making the family the foundation of religion. Whatever else his accomplishments, Romney helped introduce Mormonism to the very country that Latter-day Saints have endowed with all of their highest hopes and ambitions.

Paulsen's accomplishments hold out the hope that the Mormon Moment might become the occasion for a new Mormon ecumenism. There is much talk these days of global Christianity, and it is exciting to see Christians interested in various versions of their faith scattered across the planet. Christianity is truly a universal religion not only in size (it is the largest of all religions) but also in the breadth of its ideas and the passion of its adherents. Americans today can read books about strands of their faith that they did not know even existed, from underground churches in China to eclectic blends of the Bible with primordial traditions in Africa to the survival of ancient forms of the faith in Ethiopia. Perhaps the most exotic but also the most provocative form of Christianity, however, can be found in America's own backyard. Discovering Mormonism is like stumbling upon a rich stew of new flavors and unusual ingredients that nonetheless tastes familiar and soothing.

Mormonism, however, is not just another case study in the classroom of religious pluralism and civic tolerance. What sets Mormonism apart is its claim to restore the gospel to a fullness that has never before been imagined. Christianity today, for all of its success and growth, remains a divided and fragmented faith. What if Mormonism could help Christians find the unity that is so central to our faith?

Paulsen's work goes beyond the earnest and helpful but ultimately limited exercises in apologetic debates that often pass for theological dialogue. His work challenges conventional ideas without being the least bit polemical. He is not alone in this approach, of course. His many students and others influenced by him have followed the course he has set toward reflecting on Mormon religious claims in the largest possible contexts. The result is the possibility, I think, that Mormons can help lead Christianity forward into a true universality of faith.

As Christianity fulfills the great commission to go to all the nations of the earth, baptizing and making disciples of Jesus, the church needs to be united more than ever before. Yet how can the church have a global mission without having an inclusive message? It is doubtful that one size of theology can ever fit all of God's people, so Christian leaders need to expound a generous orthodoxy, moving beyond the old divisions that marked some theological options as heretical and others as beyond criticism. An expanding Christianity calls for an equally expansive theological imagination. This does not mean that anything goes. Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior of the world, is the highest affirmation and most personal passion of any faith that is worthy of the Christian name.

There is no limit to the greatness, power, or love of Jesus. Every theology that sincerely tries to fathom and honor him should be welcome at the Christian table.

Paulsen and company invite their readers to try on old ideas in new ways, and that is what I think makes for a great ecumenical project. Ecumenical means “of worldwide scope or application,” and Mormonism is certainly becoming a global religion of its own. But ecumenical also means the attempt to demonstrate how the various branches of Christianity are all nourished from (and contribute to) the same trunk and root. The ecumenical movement, unfortunately, has fallen on hard times. Old battles have not been won or lost, so stalemate seems the order of the day. A fresh start is needed. What better way to revisit Christianity’s past and re-envision Christianity’s future than to examine one of the youngest branches on the Christian tree?

The Mormon branch of Christianity is young, but it is also gnarled with the wisdom of the past. Scholars categorize Mormonism as an example of nineteenth-century restorationism. Many of the early leaders of and converts to Mormonism were inspired by Joseph Smith because they did not find what they were looking for in any other church. Lots of people on America’s frontiers shared this general dissatisfaction with the state of Christianity. I grew up in a restorationist church that is part of the Campbellite–Stone tradition. For us, restoration meant Bibli-cism. It also meant trying to carve out a space in American culture for a religious community that makes a real difference. We thought the only way we could withdraw from the world was by returning to the most narrowly defined vision of the New Testament church.

Mormon restoration is unlike this or any other version. It goes forward rather than backward, with both metaphysical ambition and biblical roots. Consequently, it is expansive rather than contractive. For Mormons, restoration means picking up all the pieces of Christianity that were discarded or destroyed in the church’s long march to becoming a stable and lasting institution. Mormonism is a smaller church than Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or the largest of the Protestant denominations, but the Mormons just might have their eyes on Christianity’s biggest ideas.

In Paulsen’s reading of church history, if I understand him correctly, there is no need to blame or shame anyone for Christianity’s falling away from some of its early richness and variety. Paulsen offers a philosophical and sociological, not a moral or psychological, account of the “Great Apostasy.”² Philosophically speaking, the key turning point in church

history occurred when theologians began adopting Greek philosophy, especially the thought of Plato. The idea that God, the soul, and all heavenly realities are immaterial became the touchstone of Christian philosophy. This same idea, however, pushed God beyond the reach of most people's imagination. The drive toward clarity of thought left God utterly removed from the world and nearly unknowable for anyone who longed for a direct experience of the divine. This process was gradual, not sudden, occurring first in technical theological treatises, but its long-term impact was felt most keenly in the separation of the institutional expression of the church from its revelatory ground. Sociologically speaking, the removal of God from the realm of what can be known and experienced in this world resulted in a crisis of religious authority. The systematic ambition of creedal formulations took the place of testimony and prophecy.

The problem that plagues church history for Paulsen is not institutionalization itself. After all, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has an elaborate institutional structure designed to preserve, shepherd, and transmit the gospel as it has been envisioned by Joseph Smith. The Saints, unlike radical reformation groups, are not wide-eyed decriers of the impulse to organize religious sentiment into hierarchical structures. Unlike churches in the Radical Reformation tradition, the Saints are not nostalgic for a form of primitive Christianity that preceded Christendom, the period in which Christianity united culture and political authority in Western Europe. The Saints are thus not tempted to privatize Christianity by denying credibility to any and every political authority and withdrawing from the world of social responsibility and civic engagement. The Saints are not even absolutely anticreedal, since they have their own Articles of Faith, written by Smith in 1842. The problem with creeds, from Paulsen's perspective, is that dogmatic consensus grounded in philosophical abstractions can never take the place of personal and charismatic proclamations of the reality and power of Jesus Christ. Religious authority, for Mormons, must be located ultimately in personal and charismatic rather than textual and academic sources.

Grounding religious authority in prophetic voices is risky, of course, since many are those who claim to speak on behalf of Christ and contradictory are some of their messages. That is precisely why Paulsen's ecumenical project is so important. Whatever you believe about Joseph Smith, he was an amazing man who had his finger on the pulse of ancient traditions that most Christians thought were long dead. He had an almost supernatural ability to gather wreckage from Christian

history to construct new vehicles for faith in Christ. The test of his prophetic insights is their utility in healing Christianity of its many divisions. The idea of a fall in church history is thus correlated, for Paulsen, in the possibility of genuine theological unity in Christianity's future.

Whatever else it is, Mormonism is a reminder that the past is never completely over and forgotten. Roads not taken can appear out of nowhere as possibilities for future exploration. Options and alternatives that once seemed closed can open up in surprising ways. As a Roman Catholic, I believe that the early church was guided by divine providence toward the creeds and hierarchies that were necessary for its institutional survival and expansion. Christianity had to set itself apart from the violent world of pagan mythologies and gnostic fantasies, where gods fought each other in a cosmos governed by neither law nor mercy. Most of the alternatives to Christianity portrayed the material world as evil, a proposition that struck most people as common sense, given how short and painful life can be. Those few gods on the side of the good existed in a state far and away from all the cruelty and carnage here below. Even the good gods, however, could hardly be bothered to take notice of human souls entrapped in heavy, decaying flesh, with its fleeting pleasures. In this cosmic drama, humans were nothing more than a sideshow with no one to save them and no guarantee of a happy ending.

The church, universal and apostolic, took a variety of measures to turn back the tide of these monstrous metaphysical implications. Theologians posited that God created the world out of nothing in order to show that matter was under God's complete authority and thus not mired in evil. The immortality (or preexistence) of the soul was denied in order to make sure that everyone understood that God has no competitors or even allies in his status as the only eternal being. The doctrine of providence began eclipsing the belief in human free will in order to assure the faithful that God is in control of the universe. All of these arguments were good and needful in their day, and they were affirmed by devout followers of Jesus Christ for the best of reasons. There might be reasons today to give the alternatives to these beliefs another look.

If there are such reasons, then this book, edited by Jacob Baker, is a good place to start. He provides the scholarly world with a long, hard look at the work of David Paulsen, and for that Christians of all convictions should be grateful. There are too many essays here to analyze in detail, but the collection is remarkably even in quality, and I learned something from each of the essays. Daniel Barron and Jacob Baker

begin with a reflection on Paulsen's life and work. They go right to the heart of their subject by describing how Paulsen balances a "conciliatory attitude" with an "analytical ability to evaluate philosophical propositions and truth claims" (xl). Evidence of Paulsen's generosity of spirit can be found in the fact that four contributors to this volume were authors of a book that was highly critical of Mormonism. Indeed, it was a book that Paulsen courteously criticized by asking for dialogue rather than polemic, and this volume shows the fruits of his own calm, irenic approach to theological differences.

Carl Mosser contributes a reflection on the difficulty of squeezing Mormonism into traditional categorical schemes. He points out that "counting gods cannot establish whether a theological tradition qualifies as atheistic, monotheistic, or polytheistic" (4). Scholars today debate whether ancient Judaism was monotheistic and whether that category is something of a modern invention. In a careful analysis of Mormon texts, Mosser concludes that Mormonism is not monotheistic but that it is also not polytheistic in any clear and obvious way. (See page 27 for his list of differences between Mormonism and polytheism.) Mormonism is a variant of theistic finitism, a term that Paulsen used early in his career but stopped using because it can be easily misunderstood. Whether the category of "finite theism" can emerge as the best way of locating Mormon belief, when so many other categories have proven unsuitable, remains to be seen.

In inviting Mormons and mainline Christians to enter into honest and faithful dialogue, Donald Musser admits that "Protestants have either officially, or unofficially, considered Mormons theologically perverse" (40). He uses the work of Paul Tillich to call for a mutually enriching and personally humbling conversation between diverse Christian traditions.

Brian Birch offers a fascinating examination of the "atheological" contours of Mormon theology. Mormon thinkers often use theology as a sign of the kind of reflection that is not a part of their tradition. "In a living gospel," he observes, "regulated by continuing revelation, theology has become a metaphor for a rootless Christianity in desperate search for truth" (51). Nevertheless, an incomplete body of revelation still has universal truths, even if they need to be indexed to a particular moment in time. It is ironic, to an outside observer like myself, that, as Birch puts it, "The earlier and more daring works in Mormon thought have given way to compendia, expositions, and commentaries, a persistent theme of which has been the conscientious effort to avoid any hint

of theological adventurism” (55). Mormon theology today is given the task of sorting out the connections, implications, and scriptural warrants for the extravagant claims of its first generation of leaders. Yet as Birch helpfully reminds us, “From the absence of theoretical language it does not follow that substantive theological claims are not being made” (55). Ongoing revelation is itself a theological category and as such it cannot be used to put an end to theological debate.

Those who want to see Mormonism move closer to evangelicalism are sometimes frustrated by the fact that Mormons do not appear to be fluent in the use of born-again language. Douglas Davies shows how testimony, with its evocation of external visions and historical events, takes the place of the more subjective and inward language of rebirth. Mormon metaphysics points in a more objective direction than typical Protestant calls for conversion. “Practically speaking, Christ’s most significant coming was not to individual hearts but in his presence at Joseph Smith’s first vision” (75). Mormons testify to the discovery of the true church, not a true self. Davies suggests that this makes them closer to Roman Catholics than Protestants.

Francis Beckwith, who continues to grow in his appreciation of Mormon thought, defends Mormonism from the charge that it does not have the resources to make a case for natural law ethics, while Paul Owen is evidence of how non-Mormon theologians, once they examine Mormon history, often end up in deep admiration of Joseph Smith. “For my own part, while I do not view the Book of Mormon as a literal historical record, nor do I accept its canonical authority, I do view Smith’s ministry as having a sort of prophetic character—a valid testimony from heaven to the people of God, albeit one outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church” (112). Craig Bloomberg, meanwhile, points out that “prior to Vatican II in the mid-1960s, it was virtually unheard of to call someone an Evangelical Catholic” (171). He asks if that development in Catholic circles can provide a useful analogy for what is happening in Mormonism today. He helpfully characterizes Mormon thought on grace as “salvation by grace but exaltation by works” (185). He also speculates that had Christianity not turned its back on spiritual gifts (by adopting theological cessationism), Joseph Smith might have been content “to put forward his revelations in the Pauline category of the results of the spiritual gift of prophecy—true words from the living God but not to be elevated to the level of the Bible in accuracy or authority” (189).

There are two essays on divine embodiment, one skeptical (Stephen Davis) and one supportive (Clark Pinnock). The most powerful

theological essays in this volume, in my opinion, are by James Faulconer, Robert Millet, and Blake Oster, all of whom have worked closely with Paulsen at Brigham Young University. These essays especially demand more attention than I can give them here. Their work lies close to my own interests, and their essays are thick with argument and insight, so I simply cannot even begin to describe them. I hope to return to this trio of essays in my own future work.

In sum, this book demonstrates the lasting value of Paulsen's career. Paulsen asks his readers to put aside the categories of heresy and orthodoxy and instead to try to imagine what a church equipped with the fullest range of its ancient but still living theological ammunition might look like. Why face the secular world with anything less? If a Mormon Moment can usher in a period of Mormon Ecumenicism that will endure, then I welcome it wholeheartedly as a providential ripening of Smith's prophetic vocation. No other branch of the Christian tree is so entangled in complex and fascinating ways with the earliest and most neglected doctrines of the church, and no other branch extends so optimistically and brazenly upward as it stretches toward a cosmic horizon. May God bless David Paulsen and all of his students, past, present, and future, in their endeavors to draw together the people of God.

Stephen H. Webb (who can be contacted via email at byustudies@byu.edu) has taught philosophy and religion for twenty-five years. His recent publications include *The Dome of Eden: A New Solution to the Problem of Creation and Evolution* (Cascade Books, 2010), *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Brazos, 2004), and *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission* (Continuum, 2004). His newest book is *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

1. My book was subsequently published as Stephen H. Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). For one of Paulsen's essays that had the most impact on me, see David L. Paulsen, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995-96): 6-94. [^]

2. I base my analysis of Paulsen's view of church history on his review of Roger Olson's book, *The Story of Christian Theology*, published in *BYU Studies* 39, no. 4 (2000): 185-94. [^]