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Toward a Mormon Systematic Theology

Essay on *Wrestling the Angel* by Terryl L. Givens

Stephen H. Webb

Can Mormon theology be made systematic? That question presupposes, of course, that it is not systematic already, and this is where the skeptics of system building have an advantage. If Mormon theology appears to be a bit protracted, improvised, and even makeshift if not positively byzantine, then forcing it into a schematic form might be inappropriate. Organizing Mormon thought might even be a violent act, like cramming a lot of priceless pieces of glass art into a small, unpadded box for shipping. Under such conditions, how could any theologian guarantee that breakage won't occur?

Fortunately, ideas are not so fragile, and theology is not so immediately consequential. Every significant idea has built-in logical consequences, but it can take centuries for academic theology to have much impact on everyday religious beliefs and practices. Even the systematic theology of Thomas Aquinas, of which it can be said that nothing more theologically systematic can ever be thought, took centuries to become the standard teaching of the Catholic Church. I doubt if any church will ever have another Aquinas; the social conditions for such magisterial summation will never be so finely tuned.

Nonetheless, I think that Mormon theology is actually in a better position to become more systematic than most, if not all, of its theological competitors. Whatever we non-Mormons think about the origin of his revelations, Joseph Smith was a remarkable thinker who assimilated a variety of neglected, lost, misunderstood, or simply rejected aspects of the Christian tradition. He was fearless in affirming all truth wherever he found it, and his intuitive skills (what Christians in the ancient world would call spiritual perception) were unrivaled. Perhaps because of this interconnection in Joseph between insight and revelation, the

Latter-day Saints remain to this day open to ongoing clarifications, supplements, and expansions of those original claims. That Joseph Smith's theological vision is coherent is sufficiently established by the ongoing life and ministry of the Church he founded. But that leaves the crucial, if subsidiary, theological task of highlighting the lines of consistency that hold together the intellectual structure of those communal practices. Theologians will be able to find multiple ways to tinker with these connections, but a good systematic theology will show how the logical possibilities are not unlimited and that, in fact, there are reasons to prefer some connections over others.

Still, it is important to admit that even the best Mormon systematic theology will not look like Thomism, which is structured according to a set of metaphysical principles designed to isolate the singularity of God's necessary existence in starkest contrast to the common features of contingent creation. For Aquinas, God is the being of all that exists, but in such a way that God's own being is utterly beyond everything that we can know in this world. The world is knowable only in light of an essentially mysterious and absolutely "other" deity. Because Mormonism, in my view, makes personality ontologically basic, it makes God more like us and thus more intelligible. It also gives the world its own personality, one could say, in the sense that even matter is enlivened with yearnings and aims. There are other examples of personalist metaphysics in Western philosophy, but none as consistently personal as this.

For Aquinas, everything begins with the intelligibility of being and the interplay of act and potency. Metaphysics maps a hierarchical scale with matter (pure potency) at the bottom, indistinguishable from nothingness, and with God (pure act) so over the top that the scale doesn't reach to him either. For Mormons, reality is more like a bunch of people sitting around and talking to each other—and the chairs they are sitting on are as real as they are. Even God exists not as a unified substance but as three "distinct, fully individuated persons" (72). The resulting metaphysical geometry will be more circular than ladder-like.

While Aquinas's first metaphysical principle is the real distinction between essence and existence (which is not a distinction at all in God), Mormon metaphysics begins with the simple proposition that persons are always prior to ideas, with the understanding that persons are always physically embodied. The world is not anchored in anything outside of itself, just as personal freedom is not dependent on anything other than its own extended existence in time and space. Projected onto the Thomistic ladder, we would have to say that personality goes all the way

down the scale as well as all the way up. Ideas are important, but rather than enlightening the darkness of our knowing, they exist in the shadows of personal intentions, decisions, and desires.

Terryl Givens's magnificent new book *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford, 2015) is an exceptional representation of a Mormon systematic theology. It is breathtakingly comprehensive, full of historical finesse, and beautifully expressed. It could have been titled *Dancing with the Angels*, since Givens writes in a way that never lets the reader see him sweat. In fact, he writes too well to be a systematic theologian, by which I mean that he conveys the complexity of ideas by vividly representing their various façades rather than breaking them down into their smallest components. Ideas, for Givens, are more like people than complex formulae. They have personalities, and they grow in relation to each other, which makes their various interconnections more familial than logical. This is metaphysics with a decidedly human face. Christianity has never looked so anthropomorphically at home.

Nevertheless, for all its orderliness, Givens actually denies that his book is a work of systematic theology, calling it instead a “study of the foundations of Mormon thought and practice” (ix). I take such denials as a nod to nervousness in the Mormon community about attempts by individuals without a prophetic vocation to bring order to the capacious house of Joseph's many ideas. That is understandable, but I look forward to the day when Mormon theologians (and yes, while Givens is a professor of religion and literature, he is most assuredly a Mormon and a theologian) do not feel the need to use their church's “open canon” to claim that “Mormon doctrine is by definition impossible to fix” (x). Every Christian tradition that is open to the Holy Spirit is living and evolving and thus difficult to pin down. Even the most biblically focused Christian traditions tend to operate with a “canon within a canon” whose boundaries are hard to fix, and magisterial church traditions supplement the closed canon with the openness of creeds and councils. Mormons are in pretty much the same position as every other Christian tradition with regard to systematic theology; which is to say, there are lots of sources of authority to be juggled and few certainties to be found, but much delightful work to sustain the life of any curious mind. Brigham Young called theology a “celestial science” (6), and I couldn't agree more. When Givens emphasizes how Mormon theology must be provisional and incomplete, he is describing theology as such; on this point, Mormons, I regret to say, are not all that special.

I think Givens's book will go a long way toward calming Mormon theological worries that system building can assume creedal dimensions. Despite his occasional rhetoric to the contrary, his systematic ambitions are clear; yet his aim, appropriately, is doctrinal complexity, not creedal simplicity. Givens is convinced that Mormon foundations have to be put in the context of both continuities with and departures from ancient and contemporary Christian traditions. While systematic theology for churches that are more certain of their location within the broader stream of the faith can afford to be formal and abstract, the intelligibility of Mormon doctrine cannot be elaborated outside a comparative methodology grounded in a historical narrative about the development of church doctrine. Mormonism's claim to represent the fullness of Christian faith requires nothing less.

Givens points out that the Latter-day Saints do not have a counterpart to Catholicism's Catechism and that the 1842 Articles of Faith "contain relatively few of Mormonism's key beliefs" (6). Yet it is my experience that the Saints have done a better job than any other Christian church in instructing their members in the doctrinal basics of their faith. When it comes to theology, Mormons protest too much. The theological practices of the Saints are much more systematic than their rhetorical apologies for being unsystematic would suggest. What the Saints say about theology needs to be brought into closer alignment with what they actually accomplish through education, publishing, and conferencing venues, which is quite impressive indeed.

As demonstrated by his very fine analysis of Mormon views of apostasy, Givens keeps the fullness of the restored gospel front and center. "In Smith's scheme of restoration, any pruning of accretions is meant to clear the way for the tree's trunk to reattain the fullness of its original foliage" (19). Such flowery language is a testament to the decades Givens has spent immersed in the literature of the romantics, and indeed the overall aim of Givens's project is to situate Mormon thought in the ancient past of the church, with all of its exotic richness, rather than in the Protestant Reformation's narrower explication of the three solae (scripture, grace, and faith). In Givens's hands, Joseph comes across as a lot closer to Origen than Calvin—and Joseph also comes across as a more theologically explicit variant of Wordsworth, Blake, and Coleridge.

Origen was cosmologically speculative, anthropologically optimistic, biblically imaginative, and doctrinally unconventional, so that comparison provides an apt framework for this book. Givens argues that Mormon cosmology resists the ancient allure of spirit-matter dualism by

developing a two-tier monism instead, and it is at times like this that one can wish for more clarity, and less romance, in his language. The tiers of two monisms can easily collapse, leaving a muddle in its place. Givens makes the eternity of matter one of the basic principles of Mormon metaphysics, but he hesitates to take a position on whether Mormonism teaches that matter is essentially mind or that mind is essentially material.

Such indecisiveness is to be applauded, I think, if mind and matter are to be understood as the co-essential constituents of personhood, but Givens retreats from this commendable indeterminacy when he discusses the status of eternal law in Joseph's thought. According to Givens, Smith argued that self-existent principles "underlie the very structure of the universe and exist independently of God, though he is our source for knowing them" (63). Moreover, Givens explicitly sides with Mormon philosopher Kent Robson's opinion that natural and moral laws are "independent of God and to some extent out of God's control" (65). The law that governs matter is an example of what philosophers call an abstract object, and it exists as necessarily as God.

If this is true, then my own personalist interpretation of Mormon metaphysics is misguided and wrongheaded. Law measures movement, and if the teleological structure of the universe operates outside of and external to the nature of God, then it is, for all practical purposes, the functional equivalent of Being in the Platonic theologies that Smith so roundly rejected. Worse, we are right back to the eternity of Plato's forms, with the law taking the place of Being (or taking the place of the good beyond Being). Like Being, the law becomes the ground of intelligibility, but, for that very reason, it is immune to further explanation. The early Church Fathers were surely right to follow the Middle Platonists in moving the forms into the mind of God, although that raised the problem of why God needed to think them if God was not always creating the world. Mormons, by portraying God as mutable while advancing in perfection, have an easier way to grasp the forms as the content of God's thoughts. That is, Mormons give the eternal aspect of the forms more to do than the Church Fathers could, since the forms are the law of matter's own everlasting evolution. The law can be both God's law and nature's design because God is himself a physical being. More bluntly put, if God is a physical person who perfectly unites matter and mind, then the eternal law is nothing more than the divine self-consciousness. Mormonism pulls off the neat metaphysical trick of connecting the eternal law to both nature and God in such a way that its necessity does not contradict God's absolute sovereignty. Matter, here,

far from being the pure potentiality of Aristotle and Aquinas, is as actual as God and thus does not need to have form imposed on it from without; at its most natural, we could say, matter is the stuff of personhood. A modified or complex monism (or to give Givens his due, a two-tiered monism) thus takes the place of spirit-matter dualism.

The Mormon view of matter puts the Saints in a unique position to dialogue with the natural sciences, especially the idea of emergent naturalism, which imbues matter with a self-mobilizing momentum that compels it to achieve increasingly complex levels of biological organization. At the very least, the Mormon view of matter is far removed from Darwinism, which is why I was disappointed that Givens tries to assimilate orthodox evolutionary theory into Mormon theology (213). The origins of modernity can be traced to the severing of the natural law from the mind of God, but Mormon theology avoids that possibility by wagering that God's own self-consciousness is the culmination of processes inherent within matter itself. Intelligent design theorists defend consciousness as the source of information, an idea that finds resonance in the way Mormonism sees evidence of consciousness pervading matter at every level, in the sense that the development of personality is matter's innermost potential and *telos*. Thus does Mormonism achieve a materialism that avoids the dualism of the Gnostics as well as the impersonalism of pantheism; the latter could never do justice to the Mormon experience of "God's highly personal involvement in human life and his revelatory responsiveness to individual prayer" (79).

The uniqueness of the Mormon accomplishment should not be underappreciated. For the ancient Greeks, matter is just an idea, and for the scholastic metaphysicians, even God cannot create, know, or manipulate prime or pure matter, because matter is nothing until it is given a form. For Mormonism, matter has its own reality regardless of whether anyone, God or us, is thinking about it. That does not need to mean, however, that matter is as basic as personality. A better formulation would be to say that matter and mind meet in what persons are. When Mormons say "person," they mean an embodied individual who is free to think and act. God is the perfect unity of matter and mind, but the rest of us can only dream of what such unity might mean. Mormons can thus acknowledge the mystery of God as much as any other Christian tradition, with the caveat that they locate that mystery in the eternity of a divine body rather than in an infinite and immaterial spirit.

A physically real person is active, and Joseph's God is never without many things to do. Real people are also hard to describe, which means

that Mormonism provides a complex theory of a complex God. One of those complexities involves the category of intelligence, which Joseph associates with agency, spirit, and, at times, matter. When we think about consciousness (which I identify with the Mormon category of intelligence), it does seem metaphysically basic. Consciousness is a primordial phenomenon that science cannot explain because it appears to us to be completely uncaused, like God. So it makes sense to think of it (again, like God) as eternal. Givens is at his dancing best in sorting out the various Mormon positions concerning how intelligence came to be in relation to God's own becoming. Joseph envisions God as the one who lifts others up while bringing them into networks of family togetherness. But did God, manifest in both a father and a mother, give birth to these spirit intelligences, or adopt them? Is he more like a parent (the intimate source of all intelligences) or a community organizer (first among equals)?

While the feminine aspect of God in Mormonism should provide a tremendous hint concerning that question, Givens gives up on further clarity. "The impossibility of establishing with certainty Joseph's position on spirit birth as opposed to spirit adoption is one of many points of indeterminacy in the Mormon past, and a reminder of how much fog enshrouded a narrative that is at times depicted as clear and unfailingly linear in the modern church" (157). The greatest of those intelligences is, of course, Jesus Christ, but Mormons also "emphatically declare Christ to be an eternal God" (121). For Givens, Mormon Christology is the end of the road for Mormon metaphysics. "The question of how Christ could be fully divine premortally, and at the same time literally begotten in the spirit by the Father, has never been fully resolved in Mormon doctrine" (120). The Mormon *both/and* regarding spirit and matter hits an *either/or* concerning the divinity of Jesus Christ: is he truly God or not?

I think this is a false dilemma, not least because creedal Christianity is also agnostic about what "begotten" really means. Mormons actually have an advantage in thinking through the divinity of Jesus because they do not have to bracket his incarnational body. Since matter is, in some way, eternal, God does not create out of nothing, but that does not mean that God has always been just one of many intelligent beings. God is an organizer, as Givens repeatedly explains, but eternity is not overcrowded with a divine mob. I take it that intelligences are the precursors of the human soul, and that God creates them not out of nothing but, in a way, from the matter that he already is. That is, since the nature of God includes a material component, what God gives others is already part of what he is in himself. If that sounds complicated, classical theism is no less so.

Thomas Aquinas thought that souls were immaterial, of course, but by accepting Aristotle's dictum that matter is the principle of individuation, Aquinas could not explain how souls are individual, how they can survive the death of the body, and how they can be the bearers of personal identity. Mormon metaphysics has none of these particular problems because souls that are material are able to be individual and personal (see 211). Our souls are not exactly created by God, according to Mormon theology, but they are not equal to God, either. Obviously, there is a need to find in God the point where matter and mind meet, and that is Jesus Christ, who provides the eternal pattern for how spirit and matter join together in the fullest expression of personhood.

The great mystery of human personality is also the chief mystery of God. We are embodied intelligences, and while our bodies in this mortal state test and challenge our freedom to act like Jesus, he remains the model not only of our moral life but also of the harmony we seek between our bodies and our souls. It is Jesus who is the fullest personality we know, which is why Mormons have long tended to identify Jesus with "the Jehovah of the Old Testament" (118). Jesus's personality will also be the shining light of heaven, leaving plenty of room for each of the faithful to abide with God in all of their own individuality, and Givens shows that all Christians have much to learn from the Mormon conception of the afterlife.

So much of classical theism is devoted to the protection of God's divinity, as if it is a scarce quantity that would lose value were it to be widely shared, but Mormon metaphysics assumes that there is more than enough divinity to go around. Personality is, after all, a relational category, which means that it comes to be as it is shared. In Givens's moving words, eternal life is "a destiny modeled on the existence, character, and nature of God himself. . . . Eternal life is therefore the life that God lives" (266). Our bodies both enable and limit the ways in which we share ourselves in this mortal state, but in heaven, matter will be a pure conduit for unlimited personal development, guided by the dominating presence of the personality of God.

Stephen H. Webb received his PhD at the University of Chicago and has taught philosophy and religion for more than twenty-five years. He is widely published in journals such as *First Things*, and his recent book publications include *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (Oxford University Press, 2012).