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## Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation

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Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill.  
*Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation.*  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

*Reviewed by Elliott D. Wise*

*Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation*, by Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill, initiates a long-overdue dialogue in doctrine and religious practice between the Roman Catholic Church and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The book, which is as thoughtful and amicable as it is scholarly and stimulating, comes at an important moment in the rapport between the two faiths. Church headquarters in Utah has long had a warm relationship with the Catholic Diocese of Salt Lake City, but in recent years, Mormons have increasingly found themselves working closely with their Catholic sisters and brothers on a national and international level as they administer humanitarian aid, advocate religious liberty, and argue for similar moral and social issues. In November 2014, a delegation of Apostles and other General Authorities was invited to Vatican City to participate in a worldwide conference on marriage and family. Brigham Young University has itself hosted prominent Catholic scholars and clergy to deliver campuswide addresses. Moreover, a number of recent talks in the general conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have quoted Catholic leaders, including Pope Francis.<sup>1</sup>

One of the great achievements of Webb and Gaskill's book, however, is that it moves beyond solely social and charitable concerns to consider the doctrinal positions that bring these two faiths together. The authors, who refer to each other informally as Stephen and Alonzo, dislodge the assumption that certain characteristics of Mormonism, including the minimalistic

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1. See Dallin H. Oaks, "The Parable of the Sower," *Ensign* 45 (May 2015): 35; L. Tom Perry, "Why Marriage and Family Matter—Everywhere in the World," *Ensign* 45 (May 2015): 39–40; and Rosemary Wixom, "Returning to Faith," *Ensign* 45 (May 2015): 94.

nature of its Sunday worship, align it more closely with Protestantism than Catholicism. In fact, the Church's profound reverence for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the hierarchical structure of its leadership, its dependence on priesthood ordinances, its zealous concern for aiding the dead in their salvation, the unique place of the "feminine divine" in its doctrine, and its faith in living miracles and heavenly apparitions—to name just a few items—make Latter-day Saints important theological allies with Roman Catholics.

The book is organized around ten topics: authority, grace, Mary, revelation, ritual, matter, Jesus, heaven, history, and soul. Stephen, a former Campbellite Christian and convert to Roman Catholicism, discusses the Catholic position, while Alonzo, also a convert, but from Greek Orthodoxy to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, explains the Mormon position. Each chapter plays out as a doctrinal "conversation" between friends, whose sincerity, intellectual prowess, and admiration for each other model precisely the kind of Catholic-Mormon dialogue that the book hopes to foster.

Mormon readers will be touched by Stephen's unstinting praise for their most sacred beliefs: "Joseph [Smith] had the heart of a prophet combined with the mind of a pope" (34). "I personally think that Joseph had true and authentic visions of God . . . ; there is nothing stopping individual Catholics from entering into a prolonged, sympathetic, and serious investigation of how God has worked through Smith to deepen, clarify, and transform the lives of so many faithful Christians" (70). Stephen observes that "Mormon baptism for the dead is a beautiful ritual, and it is biblically grounded" (90), and he comments that "far from taking the place of the New Testament, the Book of Mormon deepens its witness to Jesus Christ. The Book of Mormon, in fact, could just as easily be called 'The Book of Jesus.' I would go so far as to assert that, page for page, it is just as focused on Jesus Christ as the New Testament" (121).

Likewise, Alonzo regularly expresses his esteem for Catholicism: "Becoming an LDS Christian has, in many ways, caused me to love and appreciate Catholicism in a way I did not prior to my conversion. It has made me more aware of the tremendous good that faith has done for Christianity, and for the world (and what God has done through it). I have prayed regularly (since his elevation) for Pope Francis—in the hope that God would use him for the good of the world" (20). As a scholar of the history of religious symbols, Alonzo forcefully acknowledges that "one aspect of history Catholics are good at—and all other denominations of Christianity could learn from—is having a sense of

the symbolically sacred” (161). He then relates his experience seeing the relic of the Holy Blood of Bruges. Whether or not it is an authentic remnant of Christ’s blood, “it functions for thousands upon thousands who have viewed and venerated it as a symbol of a historical reality—“That for me a sinner, He suffered, He bled and died”” (161).

The authors openly acknowledge theological positions that separate their faiths even while they discuss obvious and not-so-obvious bridges that unite them. In contrast to the Bible-centric, *sola scriptura* position espoused by many Protestants, both Mormons and Catholics accept binding truths and revelations outside of the Old and New Testaments. Regarding grace and works, Stephen and Alonzo envision a faithful Catholic or Mormon participating energetically in “rituals, moral effort, charity, prayer, [and] Bible study” but ultimately kneeling before “our suffering Lord, nailed to the cross on our behalf” (46), wholly dependent on his mercy (48). Quoting Brigham Young, Alonzo decries the vanity of works without a mind “riveted—yes, I may say riveted—on the cross of Christ” (48). In the chapter on the Virgin Mary, Stephen admires the “cosmic significance” (61) of Mormon belief in a Heavenly Mother, a significance that he feels was partially lost from Marian theology after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s (51). While Protestantism has, at times, had “something like an allergic reaction to all things Mary” (59), Alonzo eloquently expresses the esteem Latter-day Saints have for the Lord’s beloved Mother: “Mormons are taught that they cannot think too highly of Mary and they generally speak her name with reverence” (57). “In so many ways, she typifies Heavenly Mother. As finite beings, she enables us to grasp—even if only ever so slightly—what a divine, godlike woman would be” (62).

In the chapters on matter and souls, Stephen and Alonzo reconsider ancient dogma and the theological erudition of St. Thomas Aquinas as they explore the disparate positions of Mormons and Catholics on the nature of God and the premortal life of spirits. The chapter on Jesus addresses, among other things, the Eucharist, or sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Transubstantiation—the miraculous change of bread and wine into the body, blood, and soul of Christ during the Mass—is at the heart of Catholic worship. Although Latter-day Saints regard the sacramental emblems as “power-filled symbols” (136) rather than the Real Presence of Jesus, Alonzo rightly explains that something miraculous and *transformative* happens for Mormon communicants: “God sanctifies, cleanses and forgives them of their sins and endows them with the power to overcome more and more of their fallen, human, sinful nature” (135). The

chapter on history contains a moving account of Stephen's baptism, when he prostrated himself before the altar while the congregation intoned the Litany of the Saints, calling on the "spiritual warriors" of the Church to become his "personal bodyguards" (157). Alonzo then addresses the cooperation of the living and the dead from a Mormon perspective, both in proxy temple ordinances and personal spiritual experiences.

In no way does Stephen and Alonzo's book purport to expound official Church doctrines, and naturally they bring their personal perspectives and biases to the conversation. Progressive Catholics may look askance at Stephen's nostalgia for the devotional rigor of the pre-Vatican II Church. Other readers may raise an eyebrow at Alonzo's enthusiasm for the hypothetical canonization of non-Catholics or his objection to the mystery of transubstantiation on grounds of logic. Mormons may disagree with Stephen's sense that Church organization and authority under the Prophet Joseph Smith seem like "reinventing the [Catholic] wheel" (12). There are also a few instances when Stephen slightly misunderstands Latter-day Saint doctrine: the supposition that recent Presidents of the Church primarily guard past revelations rather than receiving new ones or the idea that other worlds created by God might have "forms of salvation" independent of Christ (134).

If any criticism is to be leveled at this remarkable book, it might be one of structure. Stephen begins the discussions in all but one chapter, followed by a response from Alonzo, then back to Stephen, and so forth. The authors explain that since Stephen represents a vastly larger religious group, it makes sense for him to "set the stage" (170). He introduces the topic, outlines doctrinal differences, and suggests points of intersection where Catholics could learn valuable lessons from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Alonzo then responds to Stephen's queries, clarifies misunderstandings, and expresses admiration for Catholicism. Because the format places him in the respondent position, however, some of his arguments acquire an apologetic cast. As a result, his musings on what Latter-day Saints could learn from the Catholic tradition lack the same specificity and frequency as Stephen's tributes. Stephen's praise carries the confidence of an ancient and firmly established church generously engaging in ecumenical dialogue with smaller religious organizations. Yet, as the authors point out, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' bold claim to apostolic authority and antiquity belies its size and age. It is precisely this critical similarity with Catholicism that justifies a more equal structure in introducing and responding to discussion points.

Had the roles of the authors been shared more equally, Alonzo might have had even more opportunities to commend aspects of Catholicism for the consideration of his Mormon readers. The text mentions the beloved and recently canonized Mother Teresa and quotes from the great Carmelite mystic St. John of the Cross, but among the laudatory ranks of Catholic saints, Mormons will also be interested in zealous missionaries, like the sixteenth-century Jesuit St. Francis Xavier or St. Damien De Veuster, a nineteenth-century missionary priest, who sacrificed his life to minister in the Hawaiian leper colony of Kalaupapa. Incidentally, Father Damien was joined by another man who volunteered to live and die among the lepers—the Mormon Jonathan Napela, who would not abandon his wife after she had contracted the disease.

A people who appreciate soul-enlarging art, music, and drama as much as Mormons do could learn much from Catholicism, which has inspired some of the most profound sacred paintings, sculptures, oratorios, hymns, and mystery plays in Christian history. Latter-day Saints, who, as Stephen rightly points out, “base their theolog[y] in the precious blood of Jesus” (120) and fervently sing and testify of “our Savior’s love,” would be moved by Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which bleeds in redemptive compassion and burns with love for the world. Church leaders have frequently encouraged Latter-day Saints to quietly prepare for the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper rather than visiting before Sunday services begin, and any Mormon who has attended Catholic Mass will have been impressed by the profound reverence of parishioners, many of whom await the commencement of the liturgy on their knees in silent prayer. This stirring book will both direct readers to the singular precepts of their own faiths and also broaden their perspective on truths they hold in common.

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