

CHAPTER FIVE

WHY A MORMON WON'T DRINK COFFEE  
BUT MIGHT HAVE A COKE:  
THE ATHEOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF  
THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF  
LATTER-DAY SAINTS



It is a matter of curiosity to many and an annoyance to a few that it is sometimes difficult to get definitive answers from members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to what seem like straightforward questions—questions of the form “Why do you believe or do *x*?”<sup>1</sup> Latter-day Saints subscribe to a few basic doctrines, most of which they share with other Christians (such as that Jesus is divine) and some of which differentiate them (such as the teaching that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God). They also accept general moral teachings, the kinds of things believed by both the religious and the nonreligious. Apart from those, seldom can one say without preface or explanation what Latter-day Saints believe.

I will argue that this apparently curious situation is a result of the fact that, like many, probably most, other religious people (including many Hindus and Jews), Latter-day Saints are atheological.<sup>2</sup> In other words, they are without an official or even semi-official philosophy that explains and gives rational support to their beliefs and teachings. To make that argument, I will argue that what we say about being Latter-day Saints is an expression of what it means to be Latter-day Saints,

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1. Occasionally that annoyance becomes a charge of duplicity or of an esoteric doctrine. Though I think the charge is seldom justifiable, I understand its origin and have some understanding of why some people make it.

2. I agree with Rémi Brague, who says “The project of a rational elucidation of divinity . . . is specific to Christianity.” Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 6.

but being Latter-day Saints is irreducible to a set of propositions.<sup>3</sup> As I use the word *theology* here, it begins with belief and uses the methods of rational philosophy to give support to that belief: I mean dogmatic, systematic, or rational theology. I recognize that, especially to someone who is not a member of the Church of Jesus Christ, it may seem a bit outdated to criticize rational theology since there are also other kinds of theology such as narrative, liberation, liturgical, and feminist theologies. Nevertheless, since rational theology is what most Latter-day Saints first think of when they think of theology, since dogmatic (in other words, church-sanctioned) theologies are rational, and since I think at least some of what I say of rational or systematic theology may also apply to other theologies, I think it reasonable to focus on rational theology.

In describing the Church of Jesus Christ as atheological I intend to explain why the church neither has an official theology, explicit or implicit, nor encourages theological speculation. My explanation will be that the absence of theology reflects the Latter-day Saint understanding of religion as a set of practices, beliefs, and attitudes and that such an understanding is fundamental to Latter-day Saint religion.

Of course, the absence of theology is also characteristic of many noncreedal denominations (and of many theologians). And, of course, some Latter-day Saint leaders and thinkers have devoted considerable energy to formulating theologies of various kinds. Nevertheless, none of those efforts have come to fruition (none has been accepted as official by the church, and none has articulated a theology exclusively accepted or adopted by authorities or members), and I think none will.

To argue that the Latter-day Saint religion is atheological I will look at what seems to be accepted, established practices among

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3. For purposes of my argument, I distinguish, roughly, between a provisional account (one that is adequate for its purposes, but provisional) and an adequate account (an account that can be submitted to the critical demands of reason without remainder). I deny Latter-day Saint theologies that claim (usually implicitly rather than explicitly) to be adequate rather than provisional, though that may be to deny the exception rather than the rule.

Latter-day Saints, and I will use the Word of Wisdom as my basic example. I think it will give us a foothold on which to rest a discussion of the place of theology in Mormon belief and practice. In February of 1833, Joseph Smith received a revelation that said, among other things: “Strong drinks are not for the belly. . . . And again, hot drinks are not for the body or belly” (Doctrine and Covenants 89:5–9). His brother and Assistant President of the church, Hyrum Smith, later clarified that “hot drinks” meant coffee and tea.<sup>4</sup>

Latter-day Saints often speak of the Word of Wisdom as a health law, and there is evidence for that way of understanding it. Nevertheless, there is no official explanation of its prohibitions and there is anything but a universal practice, especially regarding, for example, the consumption of caffeine. There is little consistency among Latter-day Saint practices regarding caffeinated drinks and no more consistency regarding the explanations of those practices. Consider that many Latter-day Saints abstain from all caffeinated drinks, presumably believing that it is the caffeine in coffee that makes it forbidden; and thus that other drinks with caffeine are also forbidden. However, only a few of those who abstain from caffeinated drinks in general will drink decaffeinated coffee, though consistency would dictate that decaffeinated coffee is not prohibited. The permutations are many: most who would drink neither a decaffeinated coffee nor caffeinated sodas might eat a chocolate bar, though its caffeine levels are on a par with those in decaffeinated coffee. Few would drink tea who do not feel obliged to abstain from sodas with caffeine. And so on. Just as it is possible to draw a line representing some equation through any set of points on a two-dimensional plane, it is perhaps possible to find some rule that will explain these variations in orthodox Mormon practice. But it will not be easy to do so, and it is doubtful that the resulting rule will be useable.

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4. Joseph Lynn Lyon, “Coffee,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:289. Latter-day Saints have not always taken the Word of Wisdom to be binding on them as a commandment. Indeed, the revelation was originally given “not by commandment or constraint” (D&C 89:2). Now, however, it has become a requirement for members in good standing.

The difficulties we encounter in explaining the ways in which Latter-day Saints practice the Word of Wisdom are illustrative of the difficulties we encounter with other Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices. There are few explanations of such things on which all Latter-day Saints in good standing agree.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned, there are basic beliefs, doctrines, and practices about which there is widespread and even universal agreement. Among these is the central doctrine that Jesus is the Messiah—that his life, suffering, death, and resurrection were literal. Other teachings include that Joseph Smith was the prophet through whom Jesus worked the restoration of his ancient gospel, that the Book of Mormon is a historical record of an ancient people, and that all human beings must be baptized. It is difficult, to the point of being inconceivable, to imagine the Church of Jesus Christ abandoning these. Nevertheless, though it is clear that such foundational beliefs and teachings exist, there is no official list of them.

Though it is easy to say that there must be foundational beliefs and it is easy to point to beliefs that appear to be among them, if we look closely at any particular belief, it isn't difficult to imagine changes in that belief that could come through the prophet and result in quite different practices and beliefs. Beyond whatever foundational beliefs Latter-day Saints hold, there are many other beliefs that are generally though not universally held, such as belief in the doctrine of eternal progression;<sup>6</sup> and there is considerable disagreement among those who do hold such beliefs as to what they mean or imply. Further,

5. I say "few" to be safe. I can think of none.

6. The belief is that we continue to progress after this life until, eventually, we are deified. Early Latter-day Saints were more clear about what deification means than are contemporary members of the church. For those mid- to late-nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints who considered the topic, it was clear that deification meant becoming like God the Father and creating worlds of one's own. Many Latter-day Saints continue to believe that, but there is also a number for whom the concept of deification is more ambiguous (see, for example, David Van Biema, S. C. Gwynne, and Richard N. Ostling, "Kingdom Come," *Time*, 4 August 1997, 56) or more in line with standard Christian doctrines of *theosis*. And, though they are a small minority, there are Latter-day Saints in good standing who do not at all believe in progression to deification.

whether we are talking about foundational or other beliefs, there is little thought about how to make those beliefs and practices a rational whole and even less agreement about whether to do so.

Thus, relatively few of what are often described as the beliefs and teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ are required of its members, and even fewer beliefs have a generally agreed-upon rational explanation or description. Yet most Latter-day Saints are not bothered by the absence of official theology—and the leadership of the church seems not to be looking to fill in that absence.

Joseph Smith's anticreedal feelings may be the origin of the continuing Latter-day Saint suspicion of theology. He said, "The Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time,"<sup>7</sup> and "the truth of the system, and power of God" had been "bound apart by cast-iron creeds, and fastened to set stakes by chain-cables, without revelation."<sup>8</sup> Though creed and theology are not the same, it is easy to see that someone opposed to the first might also be opposed to the second.

The absence of official explanations and rational descriptions of beliefs and practices, and of differing and inconsistent explanations and descriptions within the membership of the church, is what I will try to "explain." I will offer three possible responses to the question of Latter-day Saint atheology (only one of which is unique to Latter-day Saints). My responses will focus on prophets, practice, and scripture.<sup>9</sup>

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7. *History of the Church*, 5:215. In spite of this antipathy toward creeds, as Daniel Graham has pointed out, not only do we have something very like a creed in the Articles of Faith, we find something even more like one in D&C 20:17–28.

8. *History of the Church*, 6:75.

9. I recognize that theologians and philosophers of religion are likely to find nothing new in what I say and to know of more nuanced and informed discussions of these matters in other places. Given my lack of training in either area, that is not surprising. Nevertheless, I believe that what I say here gives reasonable explanations for the absence of theology among Latter-day Saints. It is at least a place from which one could begin talking about that absence.

## Prophets

My first response to the question of why Latter-day Saints are fundamentally atheological is that of my hairstylist, Geoffrey Huntington, who has not only the interest in philosophy common to those of his profession, but also some academic training in philosophy. When I asked him why we believe and do what we do, his answer was, “Because the prophet said so.” At first glance, this may seem to be a remark about obedience. But I think that Huntington’s response is not so much about obedience as it is about continuing revelation: if we take the idea of continuing revelation seriously, then anything we believe or do happens “under erasure,” and that is especially true of any explanation of what we believe or do. As individuals, we may find a theology helpful to our understanding, but no explanation or system of ideas will be adequate to tell us what it means to be a Latter-day Saint. For a Latter-day Saint, a theology is always in danger of becoming meaningless because it can always be undone by new revelation.

My point is a logical one: To believe in continuing revelation, to believe that God can do what he did when he commanded Abraham to go to Moriah, when he challenged Peter’s understanding of clean and unclean, when he ordained and then ended the practice of plural marriage, and when he told President Kimball that we should begin ordaining all worthy male members of the church is to believe that any account of our beliefs is, logically, in danger of being undone by new revelation. But we can go beyond the logical point: To believe in continuing revelation is more than to believe, as most Christians do, that no human-made theology will be adequate to God’s divine theology, and, therefore, require revision. It is to believe, though often only implicitly, that that-which-is may not be static, so *there may be no final, atemporal rational understanding of the totality of things*, no ultimate rational theology toward which our human theologies could strive but never reach.<sup>10</sup>

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10. The absence of a final, atemporal account of everything is frightening only if we assume that divine knowledge requires such an understanding. However, unlike the

The word *theology* comes from the Greek words *theos* (“God”) and *logos* (“reason” or “account”). Plato uses it in the *Republic*, where it means the account of divine things.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, except for scripture and what the prophet reveals, there is no authoritative *logos* of the *theos* for Latter-day Saints, and given that the prophet can and does continue to reveal things, there is no *logos* of what he reveals except the record of those revelations, scripture that remains an open canon.<sup>12</sup> For Latter-day Saints, the *logos* is both in principle and in practice always changing. Continuing revelation precludes an account of revelation as a whole. Thus, finally our only recourse is to the current revelations of the prophet since, speaking for God, he can explain, qualify, alter, or revoke any particular belief or practice at any moment, or he can institute a new one, and he can do those things with no concern for how to make his pronouncement rationally coherent with previous pronouncements or practices.

The Word of Wisdom illustrates this possibility of change that may have a historical explanation but has no systematically rational one. Its text says that it is given “not by commandment or constraint” (D&C 89:1). But in the early twentieth century, it became a commandment, and it is now expected that members of the church will abide by at least its most obvious parts. I know of no theological explanation of the Word of Wisdom that explains this shift in the status of the Word of Wisdom, from advice to commandment.

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classical God, if God is within the universe rather than outside it (as Joseph’s revelation of God’s embodiment strongly suggests—see D&C 130:22), and if he interacts with others like ourselves who have agency, then though he must know—be intimately acquainted with—all the things there are, he does not need to have the kind of omniscience that the classical God has; a knowledge of all past, present, and future facts (assuming that the phrase “future facts” has any meaning at all). As long as God knows all that there is and has the power to adjust his own behavior to the behaviors of others in such a way that he will not be overcome by them in some way, then he has both all-knowledge and all-power, without having the kind of knowledge that we attribute to a Platonic or Aristotelian god.

11. *Republic*, book 2.

12. I think the openness of the canon, and the resulting need for keeping a record of what the prophets have said, helps explain the unusual interest in history among Latter-day Saints.

Polygamy illustrates the difficulty of systematic theology even better. Instituted by Joseph Smith, the practice of polygamy was revoked by Wilford Woodruff, the fourth prophet. Church intellectuals, some of them also prominent ecclesiastical leaders, had produced any number of theologies in which polygamy figured prominently and even centrally,<sup>13</sup> but with Woodruff's manifesto,<sup>14</sup> those theologies became incoherent, as Bruce R. McConkie so pointedly illustrated, having firmly held a theological belief that the priesthood would not be extended to black men in mortality and then, almost immediately after the revelation, recanting that belief, seemingly without embarrassment.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, Latter-day Saints offer explanations for such changes in practice, and many of those explanations are quasi-theological. But there is no more reason to think that those explanations are definitive than there was to think that the explanations given before the cessation of the practice were definitive. Latter-day Saint theological explanations are provisional and, in principle, personal (even when widely shared). Thus, one reason that Latter-day Saints are generally atheological is that theology serves little purpose in the way that doctrines and practices are decided. As Latter-day Saints understand continuing revelation, it always trumps theology.

Let me end my first argument with a syllogism that will perhaps serve as a summary:

1. Theology assumes the existence of an immutable set of beliefs that, in principle, shows to be rational and coherent.
2. Continuing revelation reserves the right to radically restructure Latter-day Saint beliefs.

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13. For a representative claim, see Joseph F. Smith's statement that plural wives are necessary for a fullness of glory and joy in the celestial kingdom in *Journal of Discourses* 20:28–31, especially p. 30.

14. See Official Declaration 1 in the Doctrine and Covenants for the announcement of the prohibition of polygamy.

15. See, for example, Bruce R. McConkie, "All Are Alike unto God," CES Religious Educators Symposium, 18 August 1978.

3. So, an adequate theology and continuing revelation are at odds with one another.
4. Thus, since Latter-day Saints insist on continuing revelation, they cannot have an adequate theology.

### Practice

We can also explain the absence of a theology in the Church of Jesus Christ by arguing that practice rather than belief is central to Latter-day Saint religion. It is not uncommon to understand religion as essentially a belief content: to be a Latter-day Saint is to believe that  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  are true. If that is the case, then the content of those beliefs can be expressed in rational terms and related to each other by reason. In other words, they can be loosed from their connection to ritual, ordinance, history, etc., and then examined without losing any meaning in the process. On this assumption, a fully developed and relatively complete theology is in principle possible.

In spite of the commonness of thinking of religion as belief, particularly in Protestantism, I doubt that many would find that understanding of religion philosophically satisfactory. There are at least two problems with it. First, it doesn't accurately describe religious belief. As Paul Moyaert says, "One could not say . . . that someone is a good scientist if he does not know the basic principles of science, whereas a person who is unable to accurately explain the basic tenets of his or her religion can still be an exemplary and pious believer."<sup>16</sup> The proverbial farmer in Santaquin need not be able to give a proper theological account of his or her beliefs to be a good member of the church. Indeed, that farmer need not even have a coherent set of beliefs nor must all of his or her beliefs be coherent with the beliefs of most other Latter-day Saints. A person can be a good Mormon, whether a stake president or a Primary teacher, without having a good theology or much of a theology at all.

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16. Paul Moyaert, "The Sense of Symbols as the Core of Religion: A Philosophical Approach to a Theological Debate," in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, ed. James E. Faulconer (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 54–55.

The gospel is a divine activity, the saving activity of God. It is not the belief content associated with that activity, even though the activity of the gospel necessarily has belief content. To be a believer is to accept the gospel: it is to believe that God can save, but not merely to believe (since mere belief would not be religious belief). To be a believer is to respond to God's saving activity with repentance and in rebirth and with tokens that testify of God's saving power. One can do that and, at the same time, have some, perhaps many, false beliefs. But if the exemplary pious person can have false beliefs about his or her religion,<sup>17</sup> then belief cannot define what it means to be religious. The locus of religion is practice rather than belief, though particular beliefs are often inseparable from practices. The practice of baptism cannot be the practice that it is without the beliefs that accompany it.

Further, Latter-day Saints understand much religious practice in terms of covenant and priesthood, as in Exodus 19:5–6: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.” Perhaps referring to that passage, Latter-day Saint revelation says:

In the ordinances [of the priesthood], the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; for without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live. Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness. (D&C 84:19–24)

To be a Latter-day Saint is not merely to be a member of a particular community, sometimes identifiable by common beliefs or by particular habits or speech patterns or ways of organizing socially.

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17. Defending an older man who had been accused of preaching false doctrine, Joseph Smith said, “It dont prove that a man is not a good man, because he errs in doctrine,” *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin, 1994), 184, original spelling retained.

Fundamentally to be a Latter-day Saint is to be one of the children of God and to serve him in formal practices, including ordinances.<sup>18</sup>

It is arguable that even if there were a rational account of Latter-day Saint beliefs in their relation to each other, it would not be—and could not be, not even in principle—an adequate account of Latter-day Saint formal practices, and thus it neither would nor could be an adequate account of Latter-day Saint religion.<sup>19</sup> This is because arguably there is no adequate account of practices in general, and thus, no adequate account of Latter-day Saint formal practices. To show that there can be no adequate account of practices one would have to show that practices exceed the possibility of giving a fully adequate account of them. One could do that by showing that it is impossible to apply a successive synthesis<sup>20</sup> to the phenomenon of practice in general, that it is impossible to take up and link its parts into a conceptual whole—even though a synthesis (an instantaneous rather than successive synthesis, and so knowledge though not conceptual knowledge) is possible. I take Jean-Luc Marion's arguments in "The Saturated Phenomenon" and in "The Event, the Phenomenon, and the Revealed,"<sup>21</sup> among other works, to straightforwardly imply<sup>22</sup> that there can be no successive synthesis of

18. Scholars speak of these as "cultic practices." However, given the abuse that the word *cult* has taken and the misunderstandings it may engender among some readers, I prefer to speak of the formal practices of a religion. I do not think that all formal practices are ordinances. The Word of Wisdom is a formal practice that is not an ordinance. I mention ordinances particularly because they are unambiguously formal practices.

19. It is important to remember that "adequate account" means "an account that can be submitted to the critical demands of reason without remainder."

20. Kant uses the term *synthesis* to mean what, following Jean-Luc Marion ("The Saturated Phenomenon," in Dominique Janicaud and others, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2000], 199), I am calling a "successive synthesis": "But if this manifold [of space and time] is to be known, the spontaneity of our thought requires that it be gone through in a certain way, taken up, and connected. This act I name synthesis," Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman K. Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), A77.

21. Marion, "The Event, the Phenomenon, and the Revealed," in Faulconer, *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, 87–105. For an overview of Marion's thinking, see the earlier discussion in chapter 4 in this volume.

22. In the first of these, Marion argues that there are phenomena, which he refers to as "saturated," for which there can be no successive synthesis. In the second, he argues,

practice. If so, then practice is excessive of conceptual understanding because no successive synthesis is possible, though such a synthesis is requisite for conceptual understanding.<sup>23</sup> Religious knowledge and understanding are possible, but to the degree that religious knowledge is the knowledge inherent in practices, it need not be able to give a conceptual account of itself. It need be neither conceptual nor propositional. Marion's argument excludes the possibility of an adequate, rational account of practice in general, though it leaves open the possibility of provisional accounts that are not harbingers of some as-yet-to-come adequate account.

However, rational theologies are not just unneeded, they are dangerous. I have no quarrel with someone who seeks a rational understanding of his or her Mormon faith—if that seeking doesn't involve the false assumption that such an understanding is necessary to genuine, meaningful participation in Latter-day Saint religion. Nevertheless, I wonder about those, like myself, who have the need for such seeking. My wonder is Nietzschean: "What motivates that search?" My suspicion is that we implicitly make the professor's assumption that understanding requires reasoning, concepts, and propositions. The atheological character of Latter-day Saint religion questions that implicit assumption, putting revelation, ordinance, scripture, history, and practice at the heart of religious understanding rather than reason and conception. That is not to say that rational understanding has no place in religion. Humans are rational beings, so religion must also address their rationality. But rationality, particularly in its narrow sense, is not the be-all and end-all of human being.

Several twentieth-century and contemporary thinkers have explicitly questioned the assumption that all understanding requires concepts.<sup>24</sup> The contemporary French philosopher and historian,

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among other things, that events are saturated phenomena. It requires almost nothing to expand that argument so that it applies also to practices.

23. See Marion, "Saturated Phenomenon," 176–216.

24. See, for example, Michael Polanyi's *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) as well as Hubert Dreyfus, "Understanding," in *Being-in-the-World*

Rémi Brague, argues that the demand for rational explanation is a result of movements in the early stages of European history, movements that take place within the novel Greek idea that one could conceive the physical world as something in itself and present before human beings for investigation: “It was there [in Greece] and there alone, that that ‘distanced’ position would appear, that ‘Archimedean point’ from which human beings, ‘conscious of being a subject (*subjektbewußt*),’ would be able to submit nature to objective research.”<sup>25</sup> Though the idea that the world is an object apart from us, lying before us for our conceptual investigation, seems intuitively obvious to us, Brague argues that it was new, created by the Greeks, and that there are both consequences to accepting that idea and alternatives to it.<sup>26</sup> Seeing the world as something in itself, something to be investigated as an object, eventually leads to an understanding of wisdom as the exercise of a power (that of critical investigation and theorizing) over an object. The idea of an adequate model of the world by means of which one can investigate and dominate that world symbolically is necessary to every rational, in other words, conceptual, description of the world. The idea of a world-model is at the heart of all science in the widest sense of that term—as it ought to be. This means, however, that, regardless of the motives and intentions of individual theologians, by presuming that there is, in principle, an adequate rational—in other words scientific—understanding of God and his relation to the world and human beings, we presume also that he can be understood as part of

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*Commentary on Heidegger's 'Being and Time,' Division I* (Cambridge: MIT, 2001), 184–214.

25. *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Tera L. Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 14. Translation modified.

26. The assumption that there is some final and adequate divine rational theology toward which human rational theologies strive is a consequence of assuming that God has the relation of a subject to a world that lies outside and apart from him. The assumption is that the world is known by God objectively—as an object—rather than as something in which he participates. (See note 10.)

a world-model or he cannot be understood at all.<sup>27</sup> The problem is not science. It is the assumption that all true understanding is ultimately scientific understanding.

Brague argues that intellectual, conceptual description of the world-model turns out to be, in principle, inseparable from intellectual domination, and I think his argument is cogent, though there is not room here to reproduce it. But if he is right, then when the rational theologian gives an account of that model, he or she implicitly presumes that the theologian can intellectually dominate the religion of which he or she speaks. If to be religious means to be mastered by something, to be awed by it, then neither religion nor that to which religion is a response can be something over which one has mastery. The conflict between religion and rational theology is the conflict between the willingness to submit and the desire to master. Sometimes that will to mastery shows itself in attempts to master others, as in a man who thinks that his priesthood has given him some power over his wife and children. Sometimes, however, it shows itself in subtler ways, as when a person insists on his own autonomy, cloaking the will to mastery in the guise of intellectual maturity.

In scripture and prophetic teaching, the question is not “What can I know?” and, so, “What can I master?” but “How should I be?” and “What should master me?” In them, knowledge means being related to others and the world, in experience and acquaintance, in the right way. But, since we believe that our relation to God defines what it means to be related to others and to the world in the right way, it follows that knowledge is ultimately a religious matter, a matter of one’s relation with God. For the inheritors of the Hebrew tradition, knowledge is inseparable from experience and practice. To have those experiences and to engage in those practices is to know God, and to speak of that experience and to practice is to testify of one’s relation to God.

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27. One need not assume the classical understanding that God is outside of what-is in order to doubt that he can be understood as part of a world-model. It is enough that he is a person to make that assumption dubious. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all claim that he is a person.

It is not to give a list of beliefs.<sup>28</sup> The danger of theology, any theology, is the temptation to valorize the intellect and its understanding, and to allow mere belief to displace Christian practice and testimony.

Thus I think that we can understand the Latter-day Saint avoidance of theology as an insistence on practice, an effort to avoid the temptation of the intellect in its relation to God.

I offer this syllogism to summarize my second argument:

1. Religion is essentially a matter of practice rather than belief; for Latter-day Saints, among the essential practices are ordinances.
2. Theology cannot capture the practices of religion (because practices per se cannot be captured philosophically and rationally; something about them is always missed).
3. So, theology is either irrelevant, sometimes comforting, or useful in apologetics, but by focusing on belief rather than practice, it poses a danger to religion.

### Scripture

My third explanation of the atheological character of Latter-day Saint religion is related to my second. As I understand scriptural texts and therefore also revelation, they are not rational, conceptual texts and cannot be turned into that without changing them drastically.<sup>29</sup> If we read the scriptures looking for a rational justification of something, including the teachings of scripture, then we read them at cross-purposes to their intentions. We can read them for conceptual understanding, in

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28. Ricoeur reminds us that testimony is “an assurance always bound to acts” rather than beliefs. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 117.

29. Ricoeur has discussions of the issue in several places; for example, it appears in general terms in *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984, 1985, 1988); and it is more clearly religious in his essays on the Bible, written with LaCocque (André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, trans. David Pellauer [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998]), and in his essay in *Phenomenology and the “Theological” Turn*. Alain Badiou has argued that at least some scriptural texts, specifically Paul’s letters, are antiphilosophical (and, so, antitheological) as well as antirhetorical. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul, La fondation de l’universalism* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

other words, as quasi-philosophical texts, but when we do, we do not read them as scripture.

I believe that the message of scripture can be summed up in Deuteronomy 6:4–7: “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart.” The scriptures, revelations, and ordinances call us to hear, to hearken—not to understand, at least not if the word *understand* is taken to mean “understand conceptually.”<sup>30</sup> Of course, scripture does not preclude understanding. Neither do scripture, ordinance, and revelation forbid our conceptual understanding. But, for the most part conceptual understanding is irrelevant to their purposes.<sup>31</sup> Like the prophets, the scriptures call to us, asking us to listen, bearing witness of who we are and who we ought to be, bearing witness of our separation from God and his ability to overcome that separation. The scriptures seldom explain to us. Instead, they testify and ask us also to testify with our lives. To be religious is to hearken to that testimony and to respond.

The command to hearken implies that I have not yet heard, so if I take that command seriously, then I must continue to wonder whether I have heard as I should: at the heart of the religious experience of reading scripture is the experience of being questioned, of being brought up short by something rather than explaining it.<sup>32</sup> Philosophical/theological questions like “Why does God allow evil?” can be interesting and they have their place, both in apologetics and in

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30. Notice that the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, written in 1831 as a preface to the book as a whole, begins with the word “hearken”: “Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together.”

31. To point out something in scripture that we cannot make rational sense of may only be to point out that it does not serve the same purposes as do texts meant to give rational understanding.

32. Of course, scripture reading is not the only religious experience where we find ourselves brought up short. It occurs in other ordinances, in the temple, in Sunday meetings, in living with each other.

strengthening faith.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, they also may interfere with understanding scripture as divine call, in this case the call to avoid doing evil and to ameliorate its effects in the world. Philosophical and theological reflection seeks for intellectual understanding and, thus, they run the risk of turning the scriptures into resources for conceptualizing. But the scriptures do not ask for our intellectual understanding; they ask for our repentance.

As a result, I believe that, whatever the arguments for or against theology, for many religious people, including the Latter-day Saints, ultimately the only possible *logos* of the *theos* is that which occurs in response to revelation and scripture. That *logos* is produced in welcome and response, in repentance and rebirth, and in testimonies of that repentance and rebirth, rather than in sets of beliefs or intellectual distancing and questioning.

Thus, a final summarizing syllogism:

1. We encounter the essence of religious faith in scripture and prophetic revelation, but that essence is not a set of propositional beliefs, it is a testimony and a questioning that calls us to new life through repentance.
2. Theology aims to understand propositional beliefs and their ordered relations.
3. Therefore, theology does not deal with what is essential to religious faith.

### **What Will Become of Me?**

Given these points about prophets, practices, and scripture, what will become of me? If I have successfully explained why Latter-day Saint religion is essentially atheological, I have also raised questions for people like myself who have an inclination toward theology. Given the difficulties to which I have pointed, one can reasonably ask what kinds of provisional accounts are possible.

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33. For an excellent example of a religious and philosophical response to this question, see Ricoeur, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," in *Figuring the Sacred*, 249–61.

First note that reasons why the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has neither a dogmatic theology nor an informal theology—and is unlikely to—are not reasons for avoiding theology. That it is not necessary does not mean that it is something to be avoided. Nor does my argument imply that Mormons ought never to do systematic theology. Nevertheless, I believe my arguments suggest that some kinds of theology are more useful for Latter-day Saints than are others.

The parallel between religious knowledge and ethico-political knowledge suggests that Aristotle provides a clue for one way to do theology, one way that allows the door to remain open and more easily avoids the danger of theology. Presumably there are also others.<sup>34</sup> Aristotle distinguishes between the kinds of things we know epistemically and the kinds of things we know in ethics and politics and, at least in the early part of *Nicomachean Ethics*, he argues that the latter are not reducible to the former. Scripture treats religious matters as Aristotle treats ethical matters, as things known *in* experience with them and, so, as things that Aristotle argues are not knowable epistemically. In Marion's terms, scripture deals with matters known in an instantaneous synthesis, rather than as the objects of an epistemic intention requiring a successive synthesis. So when philosophy makes religion its object, it may find a model in the way that Aristotle deals with ethics and politics, rather than in his metaphysics: *phronēsis* rather than conceptual intellection would be our goal.

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34. For example, "radical orthodoxy" may offer another alternative. See John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999). The work of Marion, to which I referred earlier, may also. Both ask about transcendence, the latter by arguing that it makes itself known in phenomena, the former by arguing that it makes itself known in Platonic participation. Though there is considerable overlap between these two views, they are not the same. Of the two, I prefer Marion's approach because it does not require creation *ex nihilo* (though I am sure he accepts that orthodox Roman Catholic teaching), and I think his approach is compatible with what I will describe.

Several contemporary philosophers, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, follow up on Aristotle's insight and provide possibilities for a theology on that model. These philosophers argue that human understanding is fundamentally hermeneutic. It is fundamentally a matter of interpreting our place in the world in relation to others and to our history. Rational, conceptual knowledge is an outgrowth from and abstraction of hermeneutic understanding. But because it is interpretive rather than rational, a hermeneutic theology would necessarily be provisional, escaping one danger of rational theology.

Historical narrative shows the advantage of a hermeneutic approach. Historical narratives are essential to Christianity because Christianity is revealed in those narratives. Without Jesus in history—God incarnate in the world—Christianity itself evaporates. Latter-day Saints recognize this by insisting not only on the historicity of the Bible, but also on the historicity of Joseph Smith's first vision and the historicity of the Book of Mormon. History shows us the sense in which God's plan inextricably requires working through history, through the choosing, scattering, and gathering of his people.

This insistence on historicity goes against a common understanding of truth. We commonly assume that a narrative can be an important illustration of a truth, but not its essential revelation. That is because truth is commonly assumed to have a universality that can be illustrated by the particularity of a historical narrative but cannot be equal to that particularity. On this view, truth—as universal—necessarily remains above, beyond, or other than, the particularity of history. Thus, since theological truth, like its sister philosophical truth, requires universality, it follows that theological truth is fundamentally incompatible with scriptural truth, with truth that reveals itself in the particularity of history<sup>35</sup>—unless scriptural truth is reduced to allegory or illustration, ways that philosophers have often

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35. It is important to note that by "history" I do not mean "historiography." For an explication of this difference and my understanding of how it applies to scripture, see chapter 8 in this volume.

dealt with scripture. Particularity is a scandal to conceptual thought, but Judeo-Christian religion (at least) never gets away from the particular, whether the particularity of its narratives, the particularity of its associations and habits, the particularity of its formal practices, or the particularity of the incarnation of Jesus and his life at one moment of time rather than another, in a physical, particular body.<sup>36</sup> There is a fundamental incompatibility between the particularity of religion and the aim for universality that we find in any philosophical discipline like theology.<sup>37</sup> The incompatibility is not insurmountable, but it must be addressed.

Hermeneutics shows a way out of this problem: it does not require that we reduce the truth of religion to metaphor or example. If it thinks hermeneutically, philosophy can think the particularity of historical phenomena, like religion, religious experience, and scripture, and avoid the scandal of particularity by not being scandalized. Hermeneutics is one of perhaps several ways that we could do provisional theology more adequately.

In the end, however, any theology worth its salt, whether hermeneutic or not, must remember that testimony is central to both religious speech and religious ritual. Both testify of that which exceeds one's conceptual grasp but is nevertheless known. Theology can use the tools of philosophy to reflect on the claims and practices of religion, but if it is true to the object of its reflection, it will conduct its reflection in a way that continues to testify. To the degree that a theology does not testify, it divorces itself from that which it purports to explain, and I think that systematic theology is more likely to make this divorce than are some of the alternatives.

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36. Latter-day Saint belief puts particularity at the core of what-is by insisting that even God is embodied: *nothing* breaks free from particularity, so the conceptual is always an abstraction in the root sense of that term, "something that pulls away."

37. As Nietzsche says: "A historical phenomenon, known clearly and completely and resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for him who has perceived it, dead." *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67. Christianity in general and Mormonism in particular are living historical phenomena.

To conclude by returning to the example of the Word of Wisdom: There is no rational account of the Word of Wisdom; no systematic theology will explain it adequately, neither its origin nor its practice. I might offer a provisional, rational explanation of why and how I observe that commandment, and my explanation could serve an apologetic or heuristic purpose, but that is the most that it could do. For example, I could say that, though the Word of Wisdom is not an ordinance, it is a formal practice of Latter-day Saints, a sign and reminder of my membership in the church. Since the scriptural text that establishes the Word of Wisdom says nothing about caffeine nor has the prophet made a declaration against caffeine, I can have a Coke if I wish, though coffee is forbidden. But the prophet could declare caffeine forbidden tomorrow. Even if he does not, I have no grounds for believing that my explanation of the commandment and my observation of it does any more than give me a way, for now, of understanding my own practice, a practice whose primary function is to testify of my being in the church, of my relation to God, to the church, and to fellow Latter-day Saints.

If I wish to explain the Word of Wisdom theologically, no way of doing theology is excluded, but some may be more useful than others. In particular, historical, narrative, and other hermeneutical theologies stand out as possibilities. But whatever theology I take up, like that which it seeks to explain, my theology must testify of Christ. The testimony inhering in revelation, Latter-day Saint practices and ordinances, and scripture must be part of any explanations of those revelations, practices, or scriptures or it will be untrue to them.