A Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Challenges Cultural Mormon Neglect of the Book of Mormon: Some Reflections on the “Impact of Modernity”

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I am particularly interested in the impact of "modernity"—the challenge to religion posed by secularization.

O. Kendall White, Jr.

Previously in this venue books dealing with the Book of Mormon have received detailed attention, as have books in which the Book of Mormon has received sustained or at least modestly significant treatment. Obviously there is a large literature on Mormon things, both scholarly and unscholarly, which neglects or barely mentions the Book of Mormon. Some of what appears in this genre deserves thoughtful attention precisely because it does not take seriously the Book of Mormon. Kendall White's Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy is a fine example of such a book. Hence, with this essay I inaugurate a new type of review—the detailed, critical assessment of books that display a serious impediment to the understanding of Mormon things because they are silent about the Book of Mormon, or brush it aside, or ignore the competent literature dealing with it.

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1 O. Kendall White, Jr., Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), xxii. Hereafter references to this book will be parenthetical.
A "New" Account?

In 1987 Signature Books described *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, in some promotional hype, as an "exiting new book" (back cover). It was, however, even then not "new." It was, instead, a slightly updated rehash of a University of Utah master's thesis that was completed in 1967. So it turns out that White's book—in 1970 it was announced as "forthcoming" from the University of Utah Press—is not new, but its contents can be traced back to 1967.

In addition, core portions of White's thesis were published between 1969 and 1971. So there is little not previously accessible to interested scholars in *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*. But where the thesis and the essays drawn from it have enjoyed a decent obscurity, since Signature Books published it as a book in

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3 For the announcement "of his forthcoming book ... to be published by the University of Utah Press," see O. Kendall White, Jr., "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," *Dialogue 5/2* (Summer 1970): 9, headnote. For reasons that are not clear the University of Utah Press backed away from publishing White's master's thesis.


5 When White's 1967 master's thesis was eventually published as *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy* in 1987, some cosmetic changes were made in the text, including the substitution of alternative phrasing, the removal of some gender-specific language, the addition of a preface and a few pages to provide an introduction, to call attention to a few writers like Paul Toscano, and to conclude the book, but there is little to suggest that White revised or modified (with one exception, which I will take up later) the opinions he expressed in 1967.
1987 and promoted it as an exiting new study, it has drawn some attention in Mormon studies.

One of the more glaring deficiencies in Kendall White’s earliest work on Mormonism and also in Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy stems from his indifference to the Book of Mormon and its place in the life of Latter-day Saints. To see why White brushes aside the Book of Mormon, it is necessary to understand what he is attempting to do in his book.

Modernity and “The Challenge to Religion”

The following passages provide an outline of his argument in his own words. His underlying assumption is that religion—faith in God—is challenged by modernity. This is hardly a new idea. He also assumes that believers ought to reach an accommodation with modernity by adopting its assumptions and reflecting its values. Given these assumptions, the following passages express his understanding of what has been taking place within the Mormon academic community since World War II:

Emerging from the optimism of the nineteenth century, Mormonism . . . was likewise forced to negotiate the traumas of modernity, effecting a unique synthesis of American religious and secular culture. (p. xiv)

As a pluralistic metaphysics became the philosophical foundation of Mormon doctrine, the concepts of human nature and salvation contained in the Book of Mormon disappeared from traditional Mormon theology. (p. 140)

Suggestions of a Mormon neo-orthodoxy do not imply a return to the early theology of Joseph Smith, though I believe a case can be made for some tenets of neo-orthodoxy [being present] in both the Book of Mormon

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6 White’s book was advertised by Signature Books as “the decade’s most important new book” on what was described as “Latter-day Saint theology” (quoted from the cover of Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy).
and Smith's earliest theology, but rather a parallel with developments within Protestantism.  

Like these Protestant movements, Mormon neo-orthodoxy is a response to the experience of "modernity"—the secularization of society and culture. (p. xi)

In response to secularization, Mormon neo-orthodox theologians have embraced some fundamental doctrines of Protestant neo-orthodoxy. . . . These doctrines typically reflected the sensations experienced during neo-orthodox crisis with liberalism and modernity. (pp. 159–60)

In both the Protestant and Mormon cases, liberal theologies celebrating the "progress" entailed in the advent of modernity were jettisoned for theologies emphasizing human limitations and proclaiming greater dependence on supernatural deity.

White seems to be aware that both the Book of Mormon and the other early revelations to Joseph Smith provide the content for much of what he labels pejoratively as "Mormon neo-orthodoxy." He claims, however, that the teachings found in the Book of Mormon and those early teachings of Joseph Smith were jettisoned (his word) as "traditional Mormonism" was modified by Latter-day Saint "theologians" to craft an accommodation with the secularizing forces of modernity. It may come as a shock to Latter-day Saints to discover that the Book of Mormon has played virtually no role in their faith subsequent to an accommodation with modernity reached by Mormon "theologians," but White flatly denies that "traditional Mormonism," as he understands such things, rests on or reflects the teachings found in the Book of Mormon.

For White, in order for Mormon "theologians" to reach this accommodation with modernity, faith in man—in the essential goodness of man, whatever that might mean—had to replace the

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7 O. Kendall White, Jr., "Reflections on Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy" (paper read to the Religious Research Association, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 1989), 1.
8 Ibid., 2.
notions of sin and dependence upon deity that are found in the Book of Mormon and in the early revelations to Joseph Smith. But, according to White, a cultural or social crisis has unfortunately caused a movement, which he labels “Mormon neo-orthodoxy,” that rejects “faith in man.” White describes this retrograde movement as politically conservative, authoritarian, anti-intellectual, and out of harmony with the latest fashions found in the secular culture; it is also presumably a turning away from “traditional Mormonism.”

White and Brooke

When Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy has gotten attention, its influence has been rather noxious. For example, drawing upon White’s book, Professor John L. Brooke, a non-Mormon historian at Tufts University, argues that “in the last three decades a body of Mormon thinkers have been pressing for greater change in Mormon doctrine. Though there are variations on the theme, the central tenet of these ‘neo-orthodox’ or ‘redemptionist’ Mormons is the rejection of the traditional optimistic view of human nature.”9 Presumably these “neo-orthodox” Latter-day Saints are striving to move the Church back to the teachings found in the Book of Mormon and early revelations, and hence away from what Brooke describes, following White, as the “traditional optimistic view of human nature,”10 and at the same time away from what he considers the occult, hermetic, magical core of Mormonism.

Brooke also holds that “neo-orthodox” Mormon theologians want to reemphasize the Fall of Adam and at least a variant of the theme of original sin, sin from which only Christ’s atonement and God’s grace can save humanity, rather than mere works. In ‘making a case for grace,’ the ‘neo-orthodox’ . . . stress . . . ‘redemption’ and spiritual transformation, the new birth of sinful humanity,

10 And also away from what Brooke considers, following D. Michael Quinn’s speculation and Mark Hofmann’s forgeries, the occult, hermetic substance of the post-1832 teachings of Joseph Smith. Ibid., 300–301, 304–5.
promising salvation rather than merit-based exaltation in the celestial kingdom. Clearly, this position builds on the developments of the last century, particularly the church’s reemphasis on the atonement. In addition, the ‘neo-orthodox’ are able to press their argument by using texts from the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s earliest revelations, while ignoring the doctrine developed in the late 1830s and at Nauvoo.¹¹

Brooke supports this and other similar and related opining by citing Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy,¹² apparently unaware that a thoughtful examination of White’s book indicates that an undistinguished master’s thesis should have been allowed the obscurity it once enjoyed and thoroughly merited; certainly it should not become an important source upon which genuinely competent historians ground their conclusions.

Brooke unfortunately accepts White’s account. Like White, he also understands that the Book of Mormon is, as he puts it, unambiguously “redemptionist,”¹³ and that, by teaching that “only Christ’s atonement and God’s grace can save humanity, rather than works,” Latter-day Saints are simply following what is taught in the Book of Mormon. And Brooke also seems to recognize that what he calls the “‘neo-orthodox’ or ‘redemptionist’” stance of current Latter-day Saints “builds on the development of the last century, particularly the church’s reemphasis on the atonement.”¹⁴ And like White, only more emphatically, Brooke grants that “the ‘neo-orthodox’ are able to press their argument by using texts from the Book of Mormon and

¹¹ Ibid., 296–97.
¹² Ibid., 319 n. 28, 391 n. 81, 404 nn. 76, 80. Brooke has a tendency to rely upon outrageous sources. For example, he builds part of the conclusion to his book on the shoddy work of a journalist, James Coates. For evidence of dependence on Coates, see ibid., 298, 402 nn. 56, 57, 58. Coates, In Mormon Circles: Gentiles, Jack Mormons, and Latter-day Saints (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991) is a striking example of badly-informed, secular anti-Mormon propaganda masking itself as a new and important contribution to the literature on Mormonism.
¹³ Brooke borrows this label from White (see Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy, 148–49).
¹⁴ Brooke, 296–97.
Joseph Smith's earliest revelations, while ignoring the doctrine developed in the late 1830s and at Nauvoo."15 In all of this, Brooke has rather slavishly followed White.

Brooke acknowledges that the Book of Mormon provides authoritative grounding for Latter-day Saint commitment to the atonement of Jesus Christ. And yet both White and Brooke seem rather oblivious to the significance of the Book of Mormon for understanding Mormon things. There are, however, some passages in *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy* in which White mentions the Book of Mormon and also calls attention to what he regards as "a renewed emphasis on Christ as the center of Mormonism" (p. 175).

White also grants that this "renewed emphasis on Christ" is a manifestation of Mormon neo-orthodoxy. No mention of such an emphasis appears in White's thesis in 1967, but it turns up briefly in his book. If there is a renewal, what exactly is being renewed? Is it the traditional understanding? Not according to White, for he also complains that this "renewed emphasis" is not on the *life* of Jesus, which he imagines to have been at the center of the traditional Latter-day Saint focus, but on the *cross* of the Christ (p. 106), by which he means the atonement; he finds such a focus contrary to his own understanding of "traditional Mormonism," which he also thinks stressed an optimistic "salvation by merit" (pp. xix, xvi, xxii, xxiv) or "salvation by works" (p. 80, cf. p. 81—"through one's own meritorious efforts" and so forth) rather than what he considers a negative, pessimistic "necessity of salvation by grace" (p. 26, cf. pp. xxv, xxiv, 86).

The Relevance of the Book of Mormon to the Question of Whether There Is a Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy

From White's perspective, a "renewed emphasis on Christ" (p. 175), the Christ of faith and hence on the atonement, rather than attention to stories about the "life" of Jesus that may provide a kind of moral ideal, is a betrayal of what he understands as "traditional Mormonism," which he sees as having more or less abandoned belief in the necessity of an atonement for sin. He

15 Ibid., 297.
claims that Mormon theologians reached an accommodation with those elements of modernity\textsuperscript{16} that frame the justifiably normative elements of the larger American culture.

The product of this accommodation to modernity is "traditional Mormonism," which is a form of optimism not unlike Protestant liberalism. "Emerging from the optimism of the nineteenth century, Mormonism . . . was likewise forced to negotiate the traumas of modernity, effecting a unique synthesis of American religious and secular culture" (p. xiv). But unfortunately, according to White, we have a movement bent on achieving a "renewed emphasis on Christ." Thus, what he understands as "traditional Mormonism" is merely a product of an accommodation with modernity in much the same way as Protestant liberalism was a product of a similar coming to terms with the Enlightenment. Hence, "until the early years of the twentieth century," when it was replaced by Protestant neo-orthodoxy, according to White,

Protestant liberalism, a product of the Enlightenment, was perhaps Christianity's most promising theological development with its celebration of science and reason. Some liberal Protestants came to see God as an ideal—the embodiment of the finest human values—while others regarded him as a finite being. Virtually all liberal Protestants espoused an optimistic conception of human nature. Through moral and rational progress humanity would solve many of its problems. The Kingdom of God as a just, peaceful, and harmonious society had become a real possibility, requiring only the adequate development of reason, science, and technology. Instead of awaiting the direct intervention of Christ the Redeemer, liberalism depended on the example of Jesus the teacher. The good society would result from humans acting out the moral teachings of Christianity. (pp. xii–xiii, emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{16} The word \textit{modernity} turns up in \textit{Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy} at pp. xi, xiii, xiv, xxii, 47, 111, 118, 119, 123, 137, 160. In his eleven-page "Reflections on Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy," White referred to modernity twelve times (pp. 1, 2, 8–11).
White insists that “traditional Mormonism” was a product of exactly the same causes that produced Protestant liberalism, and that it reached an essentially similar accommodation with those forces. Hence, by “incorporating the general optimism of American culture and Protestant liberalism, the Mormon synthesis formulated during the 1840s, and elaborated during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries,” according to White, managed to reduce God and especially Jesus to something like the moral ideal of liberal Protestantism. It also taught “the fundamental goodness of human nature, and a doctrine of salvation based primarily on merit” (p. xxiv). In addition, White holds that it is from what he calls “this liberal optimism that Mormon neo-orthodox theologians typically dissent” (p. xxiv).

By 1987 White could see as evidence for this presumably retrograde tendency bent on abandoning liberal optimism about man “the recent decision by church officials to expand the title of the Book of Mormon to include the subtitle: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” (p. 175). In reaching this conclusion, he neglects to look into the teachings found in the Book of Mormon to see whether this “renewed emphasis” is warranted by the contents of the founding text. Why? He is simply not interested in the truth-claims of the Restoration. From his perspective, all religion is merely a product of culture. If it is optimistic, it has been a positive response to culture; if it is pessimistic, it is an unfortunate product of cultural crisis. White sees the Book of Mormon as having become essentially irrelevant to “traditional Mormonism,” which he pictures as a healthy appropriation of the “general optimism of American culture and Protestant liberalism” (p. xxiv). And he insists that this accommodation to modernity was happening even when Joseph Smith was alive.

Hence White imagines that either or both a social or cultural crisis (see pp. xxiii, 21 for the distinction) somehow caused the post–World War II renewed emphasis on the atonement of Christ among Latter-day Saints. He never considers the possibility that this emphasis has been generated by attention to the teachings found in the scriptures or inspired by God. Nor does he consider the possibility that such attention to the atonement of Christ is in any way warranted. For White, what causes people to hold ideas
are movements within the larger culture. These somehow cause movements in religious subcultures. Religion, for White, is necessarily a mere product of or response to culture and especially to crisis in culture. He simply ignores the possibility of divine revelations. Hence, when Latter-day Saint scholars begin to take seriously the contents of their scriptures, he discovers irrationalism and anti-intellectualism, which he pictures as unfortunate responses to cultural crisis. Such "isms" are for him produced and sustained by crisis.

And yet White grants that the "notion of saving grace provided by the death and atonement of Jesus Christ" is among the "prevalent themes in the Book of Mormon." However, from his perspective at least, it is a notion that is radically out of harmony with his understanding of "traditional Mormonism," though he also admits that they "were apparently beliefs of the earliest Mormons" (p. xix).

Quite ironically, White is at least partly correct in claiming that there is what might be called, for want of a better label, a "Mormon neo-orthodoxy." He is, however, profoundly confused about what constitutes this movement, how much and in exactly what ways it differs from earlier understandings, what has caused it, and especially whether it draws upon or even resembles developments in European Protestant circles after World War I and in the United States after World War II. And at least partly because of White's neglect of the Book of Mormon (he mentions it in passing only at pp. 139–41, 154, 169–71, 175), his description of what he constantly labels "traditional Mormonism" (pp. xxi, 81, 85, 89, 95, 101, 102, 103–4, 106, 141, 142, 145, 149, 151, 156, 157, 159, 161, 163, 174, 175, 176, 178) is an essentially false understanding of Mormonism. For the most part White ignores the Book of Mormon, entirely neglecting its truth claims, and the account of its coming forth—he seems to see it as inimical or at least irrelevant to what he imagines as the optimistic contents of "traditional Mormonism." Hence, it should not be surprising that he reacts to signs of serious attention being given to the teachings found in the Book of Mormon as an indication of the emergence of a movement bent on foisting on the Saints a pessimistic, malevolent, dark, negative, life-denying, unfortunate "theology" that he labels Mormon neo-orthodoxy.
Though White brushes aside the Book of Mormon as a source for what Latter-day Saints either believe or ought to believe, it turns out that he still senses that it contains teachings that, if taken at all seriously, get in the way of his bizarre notion of what constitutes “traditional Mormonism.” Since the prophetic message in the Book of Mormon—the gospel of Jesus Christ—is not part of White’s “traditional Mormonism,” what exactly is the source and content of the ideology that he thinks somehow swept aside belief in an atonement for sin by Jesus Christ and replaced it with faith in man, whatever that might mean? White sees secularizing forces at work, and in the larger culture they become for him the crucial element in producing or generating the content of what he calls “traditional Mormonism.” That is, he insists that Latter-day Saints at some point in their history reached an accommodation with modernity in which the teachings found in the Book of Mormon and early revelations to Joseph Smith were jettisoned.

“Cursed Be the Man That Trusteth in Man”
(Jeremiah 17:5)

Is there actually a version of Mormonism—of something called Mormon “theology”—in which the Book of Mormon and its prophetic teachings have been jettisoned? White claims that there is; it is what he “and others esteem to be traditional Mormon thought” (p. xi). In a curious way he is correct. His notion of what constituted this “traditional Mormon thought” turns out to be an invention of those on the fringes of the Church bent on transforming the Mormon community into something more or less resembling what they find attractive in the larger American culture and perhaps also in Protestant liberalism if not naturalistic humanism.

Sterling M. McMurrin, professor emeritus of history at the University of Utah, and one of White’s former teachers (p. ix), is the primary source for the notion that there is a Mormon “theology” that includes an optimistic and hence liberal doctrine of man that simply ignores what can be found in the Book of Mormon and early revelations to Joseph Smith. Following McMurrin, White understands Protestant liberalism, with its
presumed optimistic assessment of human things, to be a wholesome and desirable effort to reach a more or less satisfactory accommodation with elements of modernity—that is, the secularizing forces—at work in European and American culture. In fact, White claims that liberal Protestantism is no less than “Christianity’s most promising theological development” (p. xii). And White sees “traditional Mormonism” as incorporating something similar to the liberal Protestant assessment of man.

With an additional laying on of sociological jargon to try to explain the presumed casual links between something called either social or cultural crisis and the elaboration of what are described as optimistic or pessimistic assessments of man (pp. 1–26), White’s work turns out to be imitation McMurrin, or at least it would not be entirely false to describe it this way. Even at the level of causal explanation of what produces optimistic or pessimistic theologies, McMurrin foreshadows White. For example, McMurrin maintains that the “anti-liberal return to a form of biblical orthodoxy or near-orthodoxy” in Europe “was clearly a crisis theology produced more than anything else by the destruction and disillusionment of the First War.”17 If we substitute “caused” for “produced” we see more clearly what McMurrin had in mind. And what White does in his book is attempt to explain how very complex and subtle theological movements are mere products of culture and hence can be said to be caused by cultural crisis. White is thus heavily dependent upon McMurrin in a number of ways, though this dependence is not always fully acknowledged.18

We must ask whether White is taking sides or merely trying to tell a story that describes what has taken and is taking place in Mormon circles. Is he a partisan who is telling a story in such a way as to champion a cause? Does White hold that, by rejecting the general optimism of American culture and Protestant liberalism, Latter-day Saints involved in a “neo-orthodoxy” have taken a step backwards? In his earliest response to his critics, he insisted that he is merely a detached observer “describing” what

17 Sterling M. McMurrin, Religion, Reason, and Truth (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1982), 71, emphasis added.
18 If White had given more attention to McMurrin’s essays, he could have avoided some confusion and strengthened the coherence of his case.
he believes "to be a new theological movement" at work in Mormon circles after World War II. But he also grants that it is "obvious enough" (his words) that he holds that "some implications of the growth of [both Protestant as well as Mormon?] neo-orthodoxy to be unfortunate." Why?

White insists that at least some of those he labels "neo-orthodox theologians" manifest an "inordinate reliance upon grace as they discuss salvation." Unfortunate? Inordinate? Though he would probably deny it, White clearly mounts a pulpit to preach against what he labels "Mormon neo-orthodoxy." Nothing in his book suggests that this supposed new "movement" is anything other than retrograde and harmful to the Mormon intellectual community and the Church generally. Why? He explains that the "basic point" he was trying to make in his essay in 1970 in Dialogue (and in his master's thesis and hence later in his book) "is that traditional Mormon theology locates the primary responsibility for salvation in man, not God. Man must act to work out his own salvation." His "basic argument" is that "Mormon neo-orthodoxy's pessimistic conception of man" betrays what he considers the optimism of "traditional Mormonism."

White, again following McMurrin, sees only two possibilities: either faith in God and pessimism about man or faith in man and a wholesome optimism. And, if there is anything White still likes about Mormonism, it is the optimism he attributes to what he calls a "faith in man" that he imagines is the heart of what he calls "traditional Mormon theology." Abandoning faith in God for an optimistic faith in man seems to constitute, for White at least, a congenial way of reaching an accommodation with the secularizing forces at work in American culture that he associates with modernity. And, of course, modernity is the norm; efforts to resist its impact on faith are presumably unfortunate, though he does not explain why this is so. He merely assumes that churches ought to go with the flow of culture—as long as that flow yields

20 Ibid., 98.
21 Ibid., 99.
22 Ibid., 100.
an optimism about human things in which divine things can be more or less set aside.

Borrowed Slogans, Shoddy Scholarship

Did White invent his "basic argument"? The answer is that he did not, but seems to have borrowed it from Sterling M. McMurrin (pp. xvii–xviii, 58, 60).23 White’s master’s thesis, early essays, and book contain an account of Mormonism the basic ingredients of which were first advanced by McMurrin. What evidence is there that this is the case? What is there in White’s writings that indicates that he borrowed anything of crucial importance from McMurrin? The first sign of McMurrin’s influence is White’s habit of labeling different ways of understanding man and human affairs as either “optimistic” (pp. xii, xiii, xiv, xvi, xvii, xix, xxiv, 39, 41, 42, 57, 70, 79, 86, 100, and so forth) or “pessimistic” (pp. xiii, xvi, xvii, 38, 48, 70, 76, 96, 99, and so forth). This is pure McMurrin. It was McMurrin who started it and has popularized it on the fringes of the Mormon intellectual community.24

23 In Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy (pp. xvii–xviii), White cites and quotes from McMurrin’s The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1965). Cf. White’s master’s thesis, 5–6, 85, 106, as well as the essays drawn from this thesis. White also acknowledges some assistance from George T. Boyd (pp. xvi–xvii), a teacher in the Church Education system—first in 1941 and then from 1945 to 1973, and in some sense a rather naive McMurrin disciple and popularizer. White cites a fugitive version of Boyd’s essay entitled “The Moral Nature of Man” (a paper presented to the LDS Institute and Seminary Convention BYU, 1962). Versions of this essay are available in published form. See Boyd, “The Mormon Concept of Man,” Dialogue 3/1 (Spring 1968): 55–72; and also Views on Man and Religion: Collected Essays of George T. Boyd, comp. and ed. James B. Allen, Dale C. LeCheminant, and David J. Whittaker (Provo: Friends of George T. Boyd, 1979), 15–48, for a somewhat different published version of this essay. Granted, Boyd’s essay was not published until after White had completed his thesis, but it was published before any of the essays drawn from the thesis were published. And two versions were in print when White eventually published his thesis in 1987. By itself this is hardly something about which to complain, but it turns out that this lacuna is typical of White’s familiarity with Mormon scholarship generally.

24 McMurrin’s most articulate effort to set out his theory that the “theologies” that presumably undergird “religions” are best understood as ways
It is certainly no secret that McMurrin at least once was severely critical of anyone who suggested anything that he did not feel was sufficiently optimistic about human nature, at least in what he called the proximate sense. He is quite indifferent to any ultimate optimism about man because he sees no reason to believe that there is anything ultimate, that is, life after death or eternal life. Hence he has a reputation for frowning upon those who take the Book of Mormon seriously either as history or for what it teaches, since, because it has much to say about sin and the need for an atonement by the Christ, it does not fit his notion of what constitutes an appropriate optimism about man.

One of McMurrin’s ways of setting out his complaints about Latter-day Saint scholars who take scripture and divine revelation seriously is as follows:

Moreover, there is currently a kind of Jansenist movement in Mormon academic circles that appears to be dedicated to the celebration of whatever Augustinian elements may be discernible in the scriptures. . . . Nevertheless, such negativism in the assessment of man, whether scriptural or otherwise, is a betrayal of the spirit and dominant character not only of the Mormon theology but also of the Mormon religion. 25

We have in this passage, with a slight shift in terminology, the substance of White’s thesis and book.

25 McMurrin, The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion, 67-68. Jansenism is a name applied to a 17th- and 18th-century western European Roman Catholic reformist faction which stressed moral determinism. McMurrin clearly applies the label to the Mormon context as a slur.
As is well known, McMurrin rejects the prophetic truth claims of the Book of Mormon with the dogmatism "that you don't get books from angels and translate them by miracles, it is just that simple."26 This statement is his way of denying the prophetic truth claims upon which the Church rests. On the other hand, White simply ignores the question of whether there is anything to those claims. "The problem of the truth-claims of Mormon theology," according to White, "was well beyond the scope of my paper. I did not," he says, "assume that either traditional Mormonism or Mormon neo-orthodoxy is true or false."27

To take the Book of Mormon seriously is to be confronted with the question of whether it and Joseph Smith's prophetic claims are true. And it seems difficult if not impossible to confront Mormonism without reaching some conclusion about the truth of the Book of Mormon.28 But White affects at least a surface neutrality on the question of whether the Restoration is true or false. Hence, for the most part White simply ignores the Book of Mormon, and neglects to consider its prophetic truth claims or the account of its coming forth. Instead, he sees the Book of Mormon as inimical or at least irrelevant to what he imagines as the optimistic contents of "traditional Mormonism" as he understands such things. Hence, it should not be surprising that he, like McMurrin, reacts to signs of serious attention being given to the teachings found in the Book of Mormon as an indication of the emergence of a movement bent on foisting on

the Saints a presumably malevolent, dark, negative, pessimistic, life-denying "neo-orthodoxy." Two related developments—a concern with the historicity and also the teachings of the Book of Mormon—are logically linked from the perspective of genuine faith. Hence, if there really is a post–World War II movement among the Saints that constitutes a revival or rejuvenation of Mormon "orthodoxy," it flows from and is to be identified with the growing emphasis on the content of the Latter-day Saint scriptures, and especially the content and historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. It necessarily includes the increasing scholarly attention given to the Book of Mormon since Fawn Brodie got the attention of the Saints in 1945 with her attack on the historical foundations of the faith. Those involved in this movement, unlike those White thinks constitute a "neo-orthodox" movement among Mormons, actually know each other, communicate back and forth, debate issues, publish essays and books, hold conferences, and so forth.

White, unfortunately, seems unaware of the post-Brodie literature on the Book of Mormon, and he only mentions the Book of Mormon a few times and then only casually. In Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy, the only author he mentions who has done

29 And also as a manifestation of irrationalism, anti-intellectualism, and other naughty things.


31 Fawn McKay Brodie, No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946; 2nd ed. 1985). This attack on the Book of Mormon eventually took the form of a biography of Joseph Smith. Brodie made it clear that she began with the Book of Mormon as her target. See "Fawn McKay Brodie: An Oral Interview," Dialogue 14/2 (Summer 1981): 104-5. This is a shortened, somewhat modified, and also garbled version of Shirley E. Stephenson's oral history interview with Brodie. See Stephenson, "Biography of Fawn McKay Brodie," (California State University, Fullerton, 30 November 1975). The material that appeared in Dialogue was taken from Stephenson, 7-10, 22-23.

32 White simply ignores the vast differences between Protestant theologians and the Latter-day Saints he identifies with them.
serious work on the Book of Mormon—that is, work that has had any influence on the Mormon scholarly community—is Hugh Nibley. Although White occasionally mentions Nibley, it is always in some other context than his role as student of the Book of Mormon. In 1967 White was aware of Nibley’s *World and the Prophets* and also a letter written by Nibley.33 But he was apparently entirely unaware of or indifferent to Nibley’s work on the Book of Mormon. So instead of seeing a renewal of “orthodoxy” in the post–World War II scholarship on the Book of Mormon, White sees only a small group of authors who seem to hold little if anything in common, except that some of them seem to have shared a then-trendy political ideology. However, by 1987 White had discovered by reading some of Nibley’s essays that Nibley did not fit his notion of what constituted a “neo-orthodoxy” among Latter-day Saint intellectuals. White describes this movement as charged with a radical political conservatism, terrified of creeping socialism, and frantic about the threat of communism (pp. 166, 173). But, by 1987, White had discovered that Nibley simply did not fit this stereotype, and he had to try to recategorize Nibley.34

When White looked just a little deeper into a few of Nibley’s vast number of writings, he discovered a social criticism grounded in the Book of Mormon that did not fit his stereotype of “Mormon neo-orthodoxy” at all.

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34 Having characterized Mormon neo-orthodoxy as authoritarian, anti-intellectual, and irrational, he is in a position to complain that Nibley has had the audacity to suggest that God sometimes reveals things to prophets that are superior to what humans can figure out for themselves (p. 93). White charges that Nibley believes that “the only way to acquire meaningful knowledge is through revelation” (p. 99, where he cites *The World and the Prophets* without page numbers; emphasis added). If this is an accurate paraphrase of Nibley’s position, one wonders why Nibley ever bothered to consult the vast literature he cites and quotes in his many writings. On this issue White has clearly misunderstood the point that Nibley has frequently made. There is nothing anti-intellectual or irrational about the stance taken by Nibley or his efforts to defend that stance, though that does not mean that others may not disagree or that he may not be wrong. But that is a different issue than the one White raises.
Given his social critique, Nibley differs from other Mormon neo-orthodox theologians who seem obsessed with anti-Communism, the extension of the franchise, government regulation of business, government intervention in [for?] civil rights and social relations, and the expansion of the “welfare state.” Where other Mormon neo-orthodox theologians see governmental intrusion, Nibley has found political and social responsibility. In this sense, he has more in common with Protestant than Mormon neo-orthodox theologians. (p. 173)

Clearly this is a clumsy summary of Nibley’s stance, but it does indicate that White was, from the beginning, working with a stereotype with which he could hardly begin to make sense out of what has been going on in Latter-day Saint intellectual circles since 1945.

The core of White’s stereotype—that there is a strange and radically conservative political ideology being advanced by his so-called “Mormon neo-orthodox theologians”—he seems to have fashioned when he somehow discovered that a few faculty members at Brigham Young University were busy in the 1960s peddling a conservative political ideology dressed up in some religious language. White seems to have melded into his stereotype notions about post–World War I developments in Protestant theology, which he had learned from Sterling McMurrin, to describe what he imagined was a “movement.” Clearly White laced his argument with a vocabulary he absorbed from McMurrin and perhaps a few other cultural Mormons at the University of Utah.35

We have seen that, when White actually read some of what Hugh Nibley has written, he had to admit that Nibley did not fit

35 White gives credit for his understanding of Mormon things to Lewis Max Rogers, Ray R. Canning (p. x), who one might assume looked upon his thesis favorably, and Lowell L. Bennion, who may have been the one who he indicates demurred on unidentified parts of his thesis (White’s thesis, unpaged “Acknowledgments”), and also to Sterling M. McMurrin and Waldemer P. Read (p. ix). All of these have or had at least some links to the Church. He also thanks Thomas F. O’Dea, a non-Mormon sociologist who had interests in Mormonism.
his stereotype of a Mormon neo-orthodox “theologian.” White still had left over from his 1967 stable of so-called neo-orthodox theologians the following individuals: Hyrum Andrus, Lynn McKinlay, Glen L. Pearson, Chauncey Riddle, Rodney Turner, and David H. Yarn. His familiarity with the work of these people was often limited to a single talk, essay, or book. He had made no effort in 1967 or for his book in 1987 to read all of what they had written or even to consult a representative sample. He neglected to interview any of those he labels “neo-orthodox.” He also failed to offer a full paraphrase of the position of any of these people or provide a context for the language he lifts from their writings to support his case.

Did White even bother to look for evidence, for example, that Hugh Nibley, who has published hundreds of times, drew anything from or even knew of this stable of supposedly “neo-orthodox” writers? Or that any of them paid attention to Nibley? And since he seems to find a radical political ideology as typical of those he labels “neo-orthodox,” did he try to discover whether all of them shared the same or even a similar ideology? White simply provides no evidence that McKinlay, Turner, and Yarn ever published a word that would constitute a clue to their political thinking. And White makes no effort to demonstrate that the political ideology of Andrus and Pearson has influenced the other writers he labels “neo-orthodox.” Why then speak of a “movement”? Or, given those he lists as “neo-orthodox,” what could White possibly mean by a “movement”?

If White had paid closer attention to Protestant neo-orthodoxy he would have discovered that the leading figures in that movement—it was after all, among other things, a literary movement—knew each other, that they borrowed from and quarreled with each other, and so forth. Protestant neo-

36 Nibley would gag at being labeled a “theologian.”
37 See Midgley, “Hugh Winder Nibley: Bibliography and Register,” in By Study and also by Faith, 1:xv–lxxxvii.
38 And if a political ideology was an essential ingredient of “Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy,” why not include W. Cleon Skousen?
39 Of course, what I am calling a literary movement may have impact on the wider culture, and no doubt those who got labeled as Protestant neo-orthodox did precisely that, because pastor and layman alike read books and articles by them.
orthodoxy, to the extent that the label identifies anything, has a history and its story can be told. If there really is a Mormon neo-orthodoxy that parallels or resembles a Protestant movement, it would also have a history that can be told. In fact, White tries to tell a story of a supposed movement among certain Mormon academics. So we must ask what is the quality of the story that White tries to tell of what he thinks is a movement in Mormon intellectual circles? Not very good. A glance at his bibliography shows that White consulted only a few published and unpublished items and hence apparently knows little about what has been going on in Mormon intellectual circles since 1945.40

White does not cite a single instance of a Latter-day Saint familiar with Protestant theology. But he could have, if he knew the literature better. Let me illustrate. Has any Latter-day Saint had anything to say about Karl Barth (1886–1968), the famous Swiss-German Protestant theologian who is generally credited with removing Protestant liberalism from the theological map? The answer is yes, but White seems quite unaware of this fact.41 Or has any Latter-day Saint published on Paul Tillich (1886–1965)? Again the answer is yes.42 Did White manage to show that any of

40 In addition to those authors mentioned in his master's thesis in 1967, White has added a few new names to his list of neo-orthodox Mormon theologians, including Janice M. Allred, Donald P. Olson, Paul J. and Margaret M. Toscano, and J. Frederic Voros, Jr. Since White's book was published, some of these have become well-known as Mormon dissidents or former Mormon intellectuals. Be that as it may, these names hardly constitute the first or even second team among Mormon intellectuals. And in some cases they are downright quirky. They are known at all because Dialogue and Sunstone will currently publish virtually anything, especially if it seems idiosyncratic.


42 Midgley, “Religion and Ultimate Concern,” Dialogue 1/2 (Summer 1966): 55–71. In 1967 White was familiar with Dialogue and had consulted the first issue of this magazine, since he mentions Leonard J. Arrington's "Scholarly Studies of Mormonism in the Twentieth Century," Dialogue 1/1 (Spring 1966): 15–32 in his master's thesis (p. 181). It is more understandable that he was and perhaps still is unaware that both Truman G. Madsen and I had previously completed doctoral dissertations on the thought of Paul Tillich. And if White had wondered if any Latter-day Saints have published on Reinhold Niebuhr, he might have noticed Dennis L. Thompson's essay entitled "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," Journal of Church and State 17/2 (Spring 1975): 275–99.
those on his list of “Mormon neo-orthodox theologians” have
drawn upon or even mentioned or cited those he described as
Protestant neo-orthodox theologians? This answer is no. What
then could he mean when he claims that some Latter-day Saint
writers have “embraced” (his word) ”some fundamental
doctrines of Protestant neo-orthodoxy”? How can one embrace
ideas that one does not know exist?

Could White, if he had done his homework either in 1967 or
1987, have found Latter-day Saints who were familiar with and
also in some way indebted to some of those writers he lists as
Protestant neo-orthodox theologians? The answer is again yes.
One such example is instructive as well as ironic. According to
Sterling McMurrin, Paul Tillich’s lectures affected his own “views
on religion—not his existentialist theology, . . . but rather his
interpretations of the history of Christianity, particularly of
Calvinism and Lutheranism.”43 His own teacher admits to being
influenced by such a one as Paul Tillich. Certainly this does not
make McMurrin a “Mormon neo-orthodox theologian.” But not
one of those White thinks of as involved in a movement he labels
Mormon neo-orthodoxy has shown an interest in bringing
Protestant thought into the discussion of Mormonism.44

In a lecture now available under the title “The Primary Forms
of Religion in Judaeo-Christian Culture,” McMurrin opined that
“religion is man’s ultimate concern and commitment.”45 One at
all familiar with Tillich’s thought should recognize this definition
as having been borrowed from Paul Tillich.46 And the definition is
important since the object of an ultimate concern may not
necessarily be the God pictured in the Bible, and may, instead, be
an idol. Even or especially those who flatly reject what the
scriptures have to say about God have an “ultimate concern” and
in that sense are religious, according to Tillich. Finally, if one can

43 McMurrin, Religion, Reason, and Truth, ix. One only needs to know a
little about Tillich’s thought to see his influence in some of McMurrin’s
vocabulary and outlook. White could have located this when he was a student
at the University of Utah, if he had bothered to look beyond the one published
item by McMurrin that he seems to have consulted.
44 White cites only McMurrin’s The Theological Foundations of Mormon
Religion.
46 For the details, see Midgley, “Religion and Ultimate Concern,” 55–71.
flatly reject prophets and divine revelations and still be “religious,” since everyone will still have concerns and perhaps even a controlling or “ultimate concern” of some kind, why did not White notice among his teachers at the University of Utah an effort to indoctrinate him in a secular “religious” ideology?

We may wonder whether White means by “embraced” that Latter-day Saints actually have read and appropriated ideas from Karl Barth, Heinrich Emil Brunner (1889–1966), Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), or Paul Tillich. I doubt that he does. As we have seen, White presents no evidence that any Latter-day Saint authors actually borrowed from Protestant neo-orthodoxy. But I have already quoted White as saying that “Mormon neo-orthodox theologians have embraced some fundamental doctrines of Protestant neo-orthodoxy” (p. 159); but presumably they did this without knowing that they were doing it, because they were merely responding in some entirely thoughtless way to a cultural crisis that impelled them to produce something very much like what some Protestants produced when confronted with the same or a similar crisis. How, we might ask, does a crisis, social or cultural, produce an ideology? To discover White’s answer to this question, we must look into his use of certain sociological literature to provide a cause for the effects he thinks he sees in Mormon culture.

An Argument—By Analogy or What?

How does White advance his argument that a “Mormon neo-orthodoxy” has surfaced that is in radical opposition to what he understands as “traditional Mormonism”? At least part of his 1967 master’s thesis and his Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy is an analogy between developments, as he sees them, in European Protestant theology after World War I and what he wants to see taking place in Mormon academic circles after World War II. To ground this analogy, White provides an account of Protestant intellectual history following the collapse of Protestant liberalism.

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47 If White wanted to find evidence of people who have a hankering to devour Protestant theology, he should have had a look at the RLDS, some of whose “appointees” (professional clergy) and leaders and theologians have had specialized training in Protestant seminaries.
that is not entirely unlike that offered by McMurrin, who in the early 1950s when I studied with him was wont to trace a progress from an original invidious, pessimistic Protestant orthodoxy to an enlightened, optimistic liberalism, and then a subsequent regress to a terrible pessimistic neo-orthodoxy. But, in 1967 and at least up to 1971, White did not feel that he could apply all of this kind of account of theological developments in the Protestant world directly to the Mormon situation. Why?

In 1967 White did not see an original set of Mormon beliefs that paralleled, corresponded to, or were analogous with Protestant orthodoxy. Instead, he declared that “Mormon neo-orthodoxy” was merely a rejection of what he imagined was an original optimistic, liberal Mormonism or what he constantly refers to as “traditional Mormonism.” And White still believes that what he considers “traditional Mormonism” simply had no place for any such thing as an atonement for sin made by Jesus of Nazareth; White’s “traditional Mormonism” rests on a presumably “optimistic,” positive, life-affirming, liberal assessment of human nature in which sins are overcome merely by “works” and not through anything resembling a gift from God through Jesus Christ.\(^{48}\)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s White insisted that what he then called “Mormon new-orthodoxy” was not “a return to the theology of Joseph Smith nor early Mormonism,” but a “theology” similar to what he understood as Protestant neo-orthodoxy, which had its beginnings primarily with Karl Barth. After World War I, Barth began vigorously challenging \textit{Kulturprotestantismus} (that is, the efforts of post-enlightenment European liberals to harmonize Christianity with some of the fashions of the increasingly secularized culture).\(^{49}\) Because Barth


\(^{49}\) For the use of the term \textit{Kulturprotestantismus}, see The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1968), 14. 21, 22. When I first read this book, and noticed the term \textit{Kulturprotestantismus}, I immediately started referring to a Cultural Mormonism to describe the drift among so-called Mormon “liberals” toward something like the denatured Protestant stances found in pre-World War I European and then later American sectarian theology. See Midgley, “The Secular Relevance of the
spurned Cultural Protestantism (or what might also be called “modernism,” or “liberal” theology), he was seen as returning to something like the earlier teachings of the Reformation. Hence Barth’s views, as well as those of certain of his associates, acquired the label “neo-orthodoxy.” White thus offers an analogy between very complex, subtle, and even competing strands and developments in post–World War I Protestant theology and at least in part the political ideology being advanced by the likes of Pearson and Andrus.

On both the Protestant and Mormon sides of his analogy White works with simple binary polarities such as “optimism” and “pessimism” about man, expressions which clearly describe moods rather than concepts, and which are clearly judgmental, whatever his expressed intentions of merely describing from a neutral position, or he works with polarities such as “salvation by grace” or “self-salvation,” and the “sovereignty of God” contrasted to the notion that God is an ideal—the embodiment of the finest in human values, and so forth. In virtually every case he neglects to explain or justify the use of such categories or labels. And he neglects to explain why the rather simplistic polarities he adopts exhaust the possibilities or why the notions he favors are preferable even if his analysis were accepted.

In several ways, as we have seen, Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy is imitation McMurrin. But it lacks the literary grace and intellectual

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Gospel,” Dialogue 4/4 (Winter 1969): 76–85. I am, of course, gratified that the expressions “cultural Mormonism” and “cultural Mormon” have become fashionable. Earlier I claimed that I invented the label. See Midgley, “The Current Battle over the Book of Mormon,” 208 n. 24. But it turns out that I was wrong, for unbeknown to me John L. Sorenson used the expression in his dissertation and elsewhere prior to my efforts to popularize it. I very much appreciate Sorenson pointing out my mistake.

50 Neo-orthodoxy was not Karl Barth’s label. His views were variously known by other descriptive titles such as “theology of the Word of God,” or “dialectical theology.”

51 White neglects to explain why he labels as “pessimistic” the belief that through the atonement of Jesus Christ the sins of man may be forgiven, or why it is “optimistic” to think that man can somehow save himself, whatever that means, especially since he seems to dispense with notions of immortality and resurrection, both central to the understanding of Latter-day Saints.
The subtlety of McMurrin’s writings, which accounts for much of the fervor and also some of the weaknesses found in his book. And White’s description of the views of Protestant theologians like Barth, Brunner, Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr is sometimes muddled and always cursory precisely because it seems to depend on a casual proof-texting done in 1967 to make those authors fit simplistic labels identifying moods more than the actual concepts and arguments found in the writings he cites and quotes.52

White also seems to have been led to believe that “traditional Mormonism” is a form of or at least analogous to Protestant liberalism, if not, following McMurrin, naturalistic humanism.53 It seems that McMurrin might be somewhat less critical of the Church if it would only move toward a variety of “liberal” theology, if not “naturalistic humanism.”54 In other contexts,

52 I have no interest in describing these mistakes, since to do so would not be profitable for an LDS audience. But I must point out that, from 1967 to 1987, it does not appear that White consulted a single source, either primary or secondary, to see whether his earlier assessments of the developments in the Protestant world were accurate or defensible. His treatment of Latter-day Saint writers is also flawed for the same or similar reasons.

53 McMurrin holds that it is not entirely inaccurate to describe Mormonism as a kind of naturalistic humanism within a general theistic context.” McMurrin, The Theological Foundations of Mormon Theology, 21. Or “it is perhaps not entirely inaccurate to describe Mormonism as a kind of naturalistic, humanistic theism.” McMurrin, The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion, 3. In order for such a description to work, one must play fast and loose with the definitions of naturalism, humanism, and theism, while ignoring the scriptures and putting a high premium on “isms” and something traditionally called “theology.”

54 McMurrin once confessed that his “personal views incline toward naturalistic humanism with some flavor of positivism. Mormon liberalism, which showed some life in the thirties, never quite made the grade.” McMurrin, “On Mormon Theology,” Dialogue 1/2 (Summer 1966): 136. In an autobiographical splurge, he once confessed that he “is less a liberal in religion than a renegade, fascinated by theology, but distrustful of all theology and theologians, an advocate of rationality who is convinced that reason both purifies and destroys the religious.” And he sees himself as one “possessed of an uneasy union of skepticism and what seems . . . to be a genuine religious disposition and quite profound religious feeling. In the philosophy of religion I must settle,” he acknowledges, “for some kind of naturalistic humanism despite the precious promises and the consolations of the soul that are the gifts of a proper theism.” McMurrin, Religion, Reason, and Truth, xii, cf. 279–80.
however, McMurrin makes it abundantly clear that what he calls “naturalistic humanism” is entirely devoid of God in any genuine sense. Be that as it may, what White actually discovered in 1967 was not a new movement (or heresy) attempting to move Mormon beliefs toward something like a Protestant neo-orthodoxy. Instead, what he noticed, more than anything else, was a few political ideologues whose views seem to have had no influence on Mormon intellectual life. And he managed to turn them into a movement, while failing entirely to notice that a different group of Latter-day Saint scholars was beginning to take seriously the Book of Mormon and the early revelations to Joseph Smith. The small group of political ideologues apparently seemed to him to be a turning away from his illusory original “liberal” theology towards something negative and dark that he imagines is somehow analogous to Protestant neo-orthodoxy.55

In addition, instead of really figuring out what Latter-day Saints have believed since 1830, White invents a “traditional Mormonism” that has little similarity to what the Saints have believed. However, it may well be that White’s understanding of “traditional Mormonism” is the ideology entertained by a few on the fringes of the Church who are unhappy with the increasingly sophisticated understanding of the restored gospel and also especially with the increasing attention given to the Book of Mormon in Latter-day Saint academic circles.56

If there is a revival of an orthodoxy within the community of Saints, it is a result of more careful attention to the actual contents of the scriptures and especially the Book of Mormon that has been growing since World War II,57 rather than a continuation of

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55 But White also notices that the political ideology advanced by some of his stable of “Mormon neo-orthodox theologians” was entirely unlike the political stance typically taken by Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich, each of whom at least started out as a socialist of some variety.

56 A recent manifestation of this irritation can be found in McMurrin’s remarks on the Encyclopedia of Mormonism. He complains that “the Encyclopedia is saturated with references to the Book of Mormon, reflecting the recent church movement to give the Book of Mormon greater attention.” McMurrin, “Toward Intellectual Anarchy,” Dialogue 26/2 (Summer 1993): 212.

57 In addition, some rather good work has produced a more subtle and rich understanding of the unfolding of teachings through the revelations to Joseph Smith contained in the Doctrine and Covenants, as well as in his later teachings
an earlier tendency to capitulate to the latest fads and fashions of enlightenment and post-enlightenment modernity. And this emphasis on the authentic teachings found in the Latter-day Saint scriptures has nothing much in common with developments in continental Protestantism, nor has it borrowed anything from more recent developments in either European or American Protestant theology.

A “Crisis Theology”?

White describes what he labels Mormon neo-orthodoxy as “a crisis theology.” Where did that idea originate? It turns out that the very first of Emil Brunner’s books in English carried the title *The Theology of Crisis.* A crisis is, as Brunner points out, a climax of an illness or a turning point in an enterprise. And Brunner felt that Christian faith “is in a state of complete decomposition,” for there has been a turning away from Christian understandings. Hence there is a crisis in both of its generally accepted meanings. Is this really an admission on the part of Brunner that modernity has caused a theological movement to which he belongs? Hardly. But that is the way it has been understood by White.

McMurrin has also set out the argument that a “crisis” has caused a retrograde, neo-orthodox reaction in the following way:

The anti-liberal return to a form of biblical orthodoxy or near-orthodoxy within the context of sophisticated thought and scholarship was already well established in Europe when it took root in America. In Europe it was clearly a crisis theology produced more than anything else by the destruction and disillusionment of the First War. Best expressed by Karl Barth, who was dominated by the Calvinistic dogma of the divine sovereignty and who

in the Nauvoo period. On these issues a number of historians have done a yeoman’s service of sorting out these matters and making them accessible to the Saints.

59 Ibid., 2.
60 Ibid., 3.
undertook to reestablish religion on the indisputable word of God, it was an anti-philosophical, anti-scientific, anti-cultural movement that reveled in paradox, dogmatics, and subjectively interpreted revelation.61

McMurrin cites Barth’s massive *Church Dogmatics*, presumably in support of or as an illustration of his views. But that book consists of five volumes (with multiple parts) and comes to some 8,432 pages in its English translation, with an additional 552-page index. And this is only a portion of Barth’s published works. McMurrin brushes all this aside by claiming that “it now seems justifiable” to label Barth’s theology as a case of “just plain irrationalism.”62 Apparently, if one does not like the views of an author, even if his or her work must be described as “sophisticated thought and scholarship,” and it is massive, one can simply brush it aside as “just plain irrationalism”—no argument is necessary. But one must recall that this comes from one justly famous for the dogmatism “that you don’t get books from angels and translate them by miracles, it is just that simple.”

McMurrin clearly wants to claim that events somehow directly produce shifts in theology—it is just that simple. Hence he claims that

under the impact of the depression of the thirties, Barthianism became influential in the English-speaking world, but whatever its appeal in a world that was anxious to retreat from reason, common sense, and faith in itself, it lost heavily when Barth refused to lead continental Protestantism in a commitment against the threatening specter of Communist power. It was a repetition of the neutral stand he had taken in the early days of Nazism.63

The fact is that Barth was fired from his position in a German university for his refusal to take a loyalty oath to Hitler. And he was the guiding figure behind the so-called and much celebrated

62 Ibid., 13. He also refers to “the irrationalism of Karl Barth—who argued not only against rational theology but even against religious philosophy.” Ibid., 9. This is simply name-calling.
63 Ibid.
Barmen Declaration (May 1934) that attempted to rally Christians in Germany against the so-called "German Christians" who had sided with Hitler and the Nazi movement.64

White is also deeply involved in the same kind of inaccurate description and loose causal explanation of theological movements. After arguing that Protestant neo-orthodoxy was produced by a "crisis," White shifts to explaining what he considers a parallel development among Latter-day Saints:

The encounter with secularization produced a similar cultural crisis for Mormon neo-orthodox theologians. Experienced as a "limit situation," where ordinary intellectual and psychological means of coping breakdown, the individual becomes profoundly aware of his limitations. He feels inadequate and helpless. The only way out appears to be to grasp a power beyond himself. These reactions combine with sensations of contingency and helplessness to become the social and psychological foundation of the doctrines of divine sovereignty, human depravity, and salvation by grace. Indeed, this theology crystallizes the basic elements of the neo-orthodox religious experience. As the crisis is a revelation of the human predicament and the divine/human relationship, neo-orthodox theology is a generalization of those sensations encountered during the crisis. (p. 160)

This reductionist explanation would presumably account for Hugh Nibley's writings and anyone else labeled by White as "neo-orthodox." Should White not at least tell us exactly what assumptions are at work in this explanation and how one would

64 For an introduction to "Barth's encounter with National Socialism," see Will Herberg, "The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth," in Community, State and Church: Three Essays by Karl Barth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Anchor, 1960), 38-55. There is really no question about Barth's passionate hostility to Hitler. For example, according to one author, "Barth's detestation of and opposition to the Nazi regime was absolute and total." This same author notes that even "liberals are inclined to forgive much to the man who took such a strong stand against Adolf Hitler and who was the moving spirit behind the Declaration of Barmen." See Rene de Visme Williamson, Politics and Protestant Theology: An Interpretation of Tillich, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Brunner (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 53.
test them and their specific application? This he neglects to do. White, it should be noted, complains about the irrationalism of others. I must go on record as one more than just a little skeptical of such explanations.

The subtitle of Kendall White’s book—*A Crisis Theology*—thus indicates something of his mode of explanation for what he sees taking place among Latter-day Saints. He argues that Mormons are experiencing a terrible “crisis” of some kind.\(^6\)

The end result of this supposed “crisis” is a return to Joseph Smith’s earliest revelations and especially to the Book of Mormon. White sees these texts as inconsistent with Joseph Smith’s post-1835 teachings and hence with the “traditional Mormonism” that he feels eventually emerged. For White, “traditional Mormonism” became, instead of a dark “pessimism” in which it was thought that Jesus needed to atone for the sins of mankind, a positive, liberal “optimism” in which human beings “save themselves,” if there is any “saving” to be done. But by “save” White has in mind merely temporarily cleaning up some of the mess in the world, and not attaining eternal life in the presence of God. He would seem to have us believe that Mormonism after 1835 became merely a kind of social welfare movement.

As we have seen, White seems to recognize that no real causal links can be found between developments in the Protestant world and what he describes as Mormon neo-orthodoxy, including especially the growing attention being given to the contents of the Book of Mormon (and the other scriptures) among the Saints by an increasingly sophisticated Mormon academic community. He has found no indication that Latter-day Saints have actually borrowed anything from Protestant theology. He merely offers an analogy between what presumably caused Protestants after World War I to begin to turn back to older beliefs found in the Reformation, and what has caused Latter-day Saints to begin to take seriously the teachings found in the Book of Mormon. And

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\(^6\) Robert L. Millet, in responding to Kendall White’s *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, has offered a somewhat different account of what White has in mind by “social crisis.” See Millet, “Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism,” 49–51. On this issue, I accept Millet’s analysis and merely strive to go beyond what he does.
the "cause" in both instances is "crisis." That is about as far as White’s analogy can take him.

White fleshes out his analogy by drawing upon reductionist sociological speculation\(^6\) that assumes that ideas about divine and human things are in some ways merely products of or responses to what is ambiguously called "crisis." That portion of his argument is at least problematic. It is grounded in assumptions that, if accepted, make both faith and its contents merely products of culture and also pathological—an aberrant product of a culture undergoing crisis. These theories also reduce faith and its contents to a pathology that enlightenment (or therapy) should be able to cure or at least ameliorate. Armed with such background assumptions about what "causes" social movements, White argues that "social crisis" or "cultural crisis," however these are understood, somehow generates or yields "pessimism," especially among those given to believing in divine things. And "pessimism" is bad, since "optimism" is optimistic and hence good. Hence, insistence on the presence of sin in human affairs and a need for redemption from that sin through an atonement by Jesus Christ is profoundly "pessimistic" about human things and therefore wrong, according to White. Presumably an "optimistic" or "liberal" assessment of the human condition would not see the need for an atonement from sin.

Since Protestant liberalism, and White is fond of this "ism," was presumably also a response to or was produced by an encounter with the acids of modernity, he has not explained why that particular encounter yielded such an optimistic, decent, rational accommodation to modernity, while the encounter with modernity by others later yielded a pessimism in which God and redemption are stressed. Perhaps events—war, depression, whatever—caused the giddy mood of optimism to dissipate. Then comes the true crisis. But that would be a genuine crisis generated by the inability of modernity to produce on the illusions it had generated. To begin to talk this way eventually gets us back to McMurrin's grim pessimism in the face of what he considers the

\(^6\) White begins by describing the Marxist criticism of religion and the debate it has engendered (pp. 1–3, 7, 9). He then adds bits and pieces from other authors who share the notion that religion understood as faith in God is an illusion or delusion.
failure of the shallow optimism associated with Protestant liberalism and liberalism generally. That is another story, which White neglects to tell.

Since White holds that Latter-day Saints have traditionally held a liberal, "optimistic" assessment of human nature, they must also not see a genuine need for an atonement from sin. Therefore, Mormon theology is "optimistic" and hence also "liberal." One hardly needs to state the argument to begin to see just how silly the whole thing is and how little it has to do with the actual faith of Latter-day Saints and with the contents of the scriptures, which provide the ground and content of that faith.

In addition, what initially linked White's dabbling in Mormon intellectual history with sociological speculations—he teaches sociology at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia—was the ideology he appropriated as a young graduate student at the University of Utah in the 1960s. At that time he came to hold that belief systems, including especially those concerned with divine things, are necessarily causally linked to changes in a controlling material substructure, to use the Marxist formulation that he cites (pp. 1–3). White, unfortunately, seems not to have outgrown this indoctrination, for there is little indication of a significant improvement in either his thinking or his command of the sociological or psychological literature between 1967 and 1987. He seems to accept a version of what is popularly known as the "economic determinism" found more or less in certain key writings of Karl Marx and elaborated and modified by his disciples. Be that as it may, by 1967, as a young graduate student, White had been indoctrinated in a sociological and psychological literature that treats belief in divine things as an aberrant, pernicious by-product of an as yet imperfectly socialized or enlightened psyche or society.

White elaborated his position in both 1967 and 1985. He begins with Karl Marx (pp. 1–3) and then quotes or paraphrases the position of several other writers, all in an effort to establish some necessary causal link between beliefs and social conditions. White thus explicitly embraces a vague Marxist understanding of

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67 White cites the Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy (the Bottomore edition), Capital, and The Poverty of Philosophy by Karl Marx in both Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy (p. 8) and in his thesis (pp. 5–6, 85, 106).
religion. His premise is that the content of what is believed about divine things, which he views as constituting the ideological superstructure, is necessarily dependent in some way upon underlying social conditions, which form the real substructure for those beliefs. And changes in the substructure yield shifts in the ideological superstructure. Though his language in 1987 is not necessarily clearer than the language he employed in 1967, he seems even more determined to assert a "causal" relationship between social or cultural crisis (or what Marx called "material" conditions) and belief systems (or what Marx described as the "ideological" superstructure, which especially embraces religion).68

White fails to show how one might go about testing such a theory in general or in its specific application to the study of Mormonism. But such theories are not seen as hypotheses that need testing, rather as insights that can be applied to get a desired result. That is, they seem to function as background assumptions upon which the actual explanation being advanced can be made to rest. Be that as it may, there is little that could be called empirical in White's book. The closest thing to empirical testing is some proof-texting, often from secondary sources (like quoting from McMurrin and others), but nothing approaching an exegesis of the Book of Mormon. Nor has White attempted to explain why a "crisis" should have touched only a few Mormon academics and perhaps some Church leaders and not the Saints as a whole, who he seems to assume have been relatively untouched by "Mormon neo-orthodoxy." At least that appears to be the case, since he has made no effort to discover whether his description of "traditional Mormonism," which he sees as analogous to Protestant liberalism, is or is not now consonant with the beliefs of the Saints generally or even with its leaders, or whether the Saints actually see and have always seen mankind as corruptible and hence in need of an atonement through Jesus Christ.

68 If, as White claims, both Protestant neo-orthodoxy and Mormon neo-orthodoxy are merely a response to crisis, that is, are caused by or are the products of crisis, what can he hope to accomplish by preaching to the Saints? On his theory, what the Saints believe is in large measure beyond their control. And given his own background assumptions, what he believes may also be beyond his own control.
White’s Modified Account of the Mormon Past

The one significant thematic shift made by White between his thesis in 1967 and *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy* in 1987 was the adoption of Thomas G. Alexander’s opinion, first announced in 1980, but reprinted subsequently,⁶⁹ that the Book of Mormon and pre-1835 Mormon teachings of Joseph Smith were “similar” or “close” and in at least one instance “drawn from” the flux of Protestantism found in his immediate environment.⁷⁰ After 1835, according to Alexander, Joseph Smith abandoned the “pessimistic” assessment of human nature and related notions of God.⁷¹ And White also holds that Joseph Smith then replaced this early “pessimistic” understanding of human nature, in which an atonement for sin is thought to be necessary, with what Alexander labels an “optimistic” or “progressive” theology.

But now, according to Alexander, we are confronted with a Mormon neo-orthodoxy that is bent on turning away from the earlier “optimistic,” “progressive theology” by returning to the teachings concerning human nature found in the early revelations to Joseph Smith and in the Book of Mormon. Hence we have,

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⁷⁰ Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” 24–33. For example, Alexander has it that “the system of interpretation [of their sacred texts] which Mormons adopted in 1830 was essentially drawn from contemporary Protestantism.” But it was later changed as more and different elements were added to the “theological” amalgam. Ibid., 33 n. 23. Hence, “theology” determines what one “finds” in a text and not the other way around. This assumption seems to justify Alexander’s notion that what was in the Book of Mormon concerning God, for example, was merely nineteenth-century sectarian Protestantism. And those teachings are, Alexander claims, discontinuous with and also inconsistent with what was later taught by Joseph Smith and believed by the Saints.

⁷¹ According to Alexander, “the doctrines of God and man revealed in these sources [that is, the Book of Mormon and so forth] were not greatly different from those of some of the religious denominations of the time. Marvin Hill has argued that the Mormon doctrine of man in New York contained elements of both Calvinism and Arminianism, though tending toward the latter.” Ibid., 25.
according to Alexander, an emerging "Mormon neo-orthodoxy."

To get to this point in his argument, Alexander begins with the following:

Perhaps the main barrier to understanding the development of Mormon theology is an underlying assumption by most Church members that there is a cumulative unity of doctrine. Mormons seem to believe that particular doctrines develop consistently, that ideas build on each other in a hierarchical fashion.\footnote{Ibid., 24.}

Alexander flatly denies that this is so. And he claims that, "while this type of exegesis or interpretation may produce systematic theology and while it may satisfy those trying to understand and internalize current doctrine, it is bad history since it leaves an unwarranted impression of continuity and consistency."\footnote{Ibid., emphasis added.} In other words, what is found in the Book of Mormon and the early revelations to Joseph Smith is, according to Alexander, both discontinuous with and also inconsistent with what “developed” in the Prophet’s thinking after 1835, especially during the Nauvoo period. And it is also inconsistent and discontinuous with what those whom Alexander sees as “progressive theologians” churned out between 1893 and 1925. Hence, a good rather than bad history will tell us how “certain doctrines have in fact developed.”\footnote{Ibid.} A good historical account, such as the one he presumably provides, will necessarily stress discontinuity and inconsistency between the early teachings and what came later, when “these progressive theologians provided a framework for understanding man which went relatively unchallenged until the recent development of Mormon neo-orthodoxy.”\footnote{Ibid., 30.}

Alexander focuses his attention on what Joseph Smith taught about “God and man” before and after 1835, arguing that “placing development of these doctrines into historical context will also illuminate the appearance of so-called neo-orthodoxy (a
term borrowed from twentieth century Protestantism), which emphasizes particular ideas about the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man.” 76 At this point in his argument Alexander relies upon Kendall White’s views. 77

In the final section of his essay entitled “Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine,” which is devoted to the consideration of “Some Consequences for Our Time,” Alexander states the following opinion concerning his and Kendall White’s speculation about a Mormon neo-orthodoxy:

During the period following World War I, a movement developed in Protestantism which challenged the prevailing modernism and proposed the reestablishment of a more sophisticated form of a theology which returned to the basic teachings of Luther and Calvin emphasizing the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man. Since World War II, a similar movement has taken place in Mormonism which is as notable for its differences from the Protestant movement as for its similarities. 78

He then concludes his essay as follows:

As O. Kendall White has pointed out, Mormon neo-orthodoxy has not gone as far as the Protestant movement in defining a sovereign God and a depraved man entirely dependent upon grace for salvation. As should be apparent, statements by Joseph Smith, the progressive theologians [James E. Talmage, John A. Widstoe, B. H. Roberts], and the First Presidency have specifically rejected doctrines such as the absolute sovereignty of God and irresistible grace. In the absence of an authoritative statement by the First Presidency, however, it is still possible to return to the early 1830s and find a basically sensual and devilish man. Because of the reconstruction of the Mormon doctrine of God, however, what we get today

76 Ibid., 24.
77 Ibid. Alexander’s supporting citation is to a portion of Kendall White’s 1967 thesis that was published in Dialogue under the title “The Transformation of Mormon Theology,” 24 n. 2 (citation found at 32).
78 Ibid., 32, n. 55 (citation found at 33), citing Kendall White again.
is a rather unsteady neo-orthodoxy lacking the vigor and certitude of its Protestant counterpart, since the progressives amputated two of its legs and seriously weakened the third.  

Certainly one can be excused for wondering what Alexander's views are on the question of whether Joseph Smith (and those who followed him) turned away from the earlier belief in the absolute necessity of an atonement for sin by Jesus Christ. He seems to claim that even the understanding of "the atonement and salvation," which he concludes was originally "similar" or "close" to the teachings "that might have been found in many contemporary Protestant denominations," underwent over time a "transformation" or "reconstruction" in the "doctrinal development" of the Nauvoo period.  

How? Well, he is not clear on this matter. Joseph Smith's King Follett funeral sermon is, for Alexander, the culmination of a radical transformation in what he calls "Joseph Smith's theology." But on the crucial issue of the atonement his views remain unclear, especially given his earlier insistence that it is bad history to see consistency in what he calls the "Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine."

We must ask: did Joseph Smith's teachings in Nauvoo constitute an abandonment of the atonement? If not, then what we have in the King Follett sermon must be seen as somehow consistent with what is found in the Book of Mormon and the early revelations, that is, as a line-by-line addition to the earlier revelations. It is clear where Kendall White stands on this issue, but it is not clear where Alexander stands.

In 1987, and unlike his earlier understanding, White argued that there really is a Mormon neo-orthodoxy that "is primarily a post–World-War II phenomenon," which

79 Ibid., 32.  
has been reinforced by historian Thomas G. Alexander in his seminal analysis of "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine" published in 1980. However, Alexander convincingly argued that during the initial period of the formulation of Mormon doctrine, 1830 to 1835, Mormon beliefs differed little from those of American Protestants. Tempered by the perfectionism of the Methodists, the Mormon doctrine of human nature tended toward depravity, while its absolutist and trinitarian concept of God reinforced a notion of the saving grace provided by the death and atonement of Jesus Christ. . . . As prevalent themes in the Book of Mormon, these were apparently beliefs of the earliest Mormons. (pp. xviii–xix)

White adds the following remark: "From 1835 until his martyrdom in 1844, Joseph Smith increasingly emphasized the finite nature of God, a more optimistic view of humanity and a doctrine of salvation by merit" (p. xix, citing Thomas G. Alexander for support for his opinion).

Using the Wrong Lens, Fashioning the Wrong Picture

Ironically, in 1980, as we have seen, Alexander borrowed from White the notion that the supposedly "optimistic" or "progressive" theology, which White imagines is "traditional Mormonism," is under attack from those who want to set in place a "Mormon neo-orthodoxy." This new movement, to which White objects, involves, among other things, the attempt to stress the teachings found in the Book of Mormon at the expense of "the reconstruction of Mormon doctrine" presumably brought about by those who helped the Church move "from Joseph Smith to progressive theology."82 What we have in all of this is an idea first articulated by McMurrin, and then picked up by White and then later by Alexander from White (though not directly from McMurrin),83 and then, with embellishments, returned from

83 McMurrin holds that "there is a lot of nonsense in the King Follett discourse . . . , but I don't think that Mormon theology is in any sense dependent
Alexander to White. But nothing in this melange about the “development” of theologies in the Mormon past makes much sense if the Book of Mormon remains the keystone of our faith and is taken seriously.

Unlike McMurrin and White, Alexander really believes that there was a Lehi colony and so forth.84 But he also seems to

on the King Follett discourse.” And then he adds that he feels that the “way of discussing the idea of the potential divinity in man and the ultimate mystery of the reality of God,” as that is found in the King Follett sermon, “is not only destructive to sane religion, it is intellectually debasing. There are others who know far more than I about the history of Mormon theology and such things as the place in it of the King Follett sermon. Thomas Alexander, for instance, of the BYU history faculty is an extremely competent person in this field.” Quoted from “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” 39.

84 Alexander’s affirmation concerning the Book of Mormon is as follows: “In fact, I believe the Book of Mormon is an ancient text and that the doctrines explicated in the book are doctrines believed by the Nephites and other ancient peoples whose record the book contains.” Then he adds that “instead of assuming that the Book of Mormon reflects Joseph Smith’s early thought,” he assumes that “Joseph Smith’s early thought reflected the things he had learned from the Book of Mormon.” Then he notes, by way of clarification, that he merely finds it interesting “that those teachings [in the Book of Mormon] were similar to those of some nineteenth-century Arminian-based Protestant groups such as the Methodists and Disciples. . . . However, that does not mean that the Book of Mormon doctrines were drawn from contemporary Protestantism, only that they were similar.” See Alexander’s “Afterwords,” BYU Studies 29/4 (Fall 1989): 143-44—which was a passionate response to Millet’s essay cited earlier. Alexander leaves unexplained why God would reveal to ancient Nephites (and then through their records to Joseph Smith) teachings that he would later contradict after 1835 as a radical “Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine” took place. If the teaching on the Godhead in the Book of Mormon is essentially trinitarian, as Alexander maintains, then one may wonder whether God somehow changed his mind after 1830 about that matter or whether Joseph Smith just did not get it right in the first place. And if the ancient Nephites were taught something similar to trinitarian theology, why was that necessary? Was it because they were primitives and could simply not understand the much less complex and convoluted teaching that God revealed to Joseph Smith after 1835? And why would it be necessary to teach primitive Nephites and then later Joseph Smith before 1835 some version of trinitarian doctrine prior to setting forth after 1835 what is a much less convoluted teaching on the Godhead? Alexander obviously does not like such questions being raised because he sees them as questioning his convictions. I am not calling into question even obliquely his “belief in such basic matters as the historical validity of the Book of Mormon or
believe that the truth about God and man is to be found in a later theological "development" of an "optimistic" or "progressive" theology. McMurrin and White label this "development" the authentic Mormon view; they also label it a "liberal" theology manifesting what McMurrin describes as "the authentic spirit of Mormon religion," and White thereafter refers to it as "traditional Mormonism" (passim), "traditional Mormon thought" (pp. xi, 86, 87, 100), and "traditional Mormon theology" (p. 177).

In all of this it does not seem to have occurred to White that, from the perspective of those who accept Joseph Smith's prophetic claims, it is a mistake to appropriate the secular or religious fads and fashions found in the exterior world and especially to reach an accommodation with anti-religious ideologies found in secular modernity. White seems enthralled by the secularizing trends of modernity and therefore insists that the Church should yield or reach an accommodation even on the most basic issues. But why must the Saints yield to the latest fashions? Well, not to yield is understood as being moved by "crises" to hold dangerous, "pessimistic" positions. Why are they dangerous? Presumably because they are defined by McMurrin as "pessimistic" assessments of human nature. Such a bias introduces an element of fantasy into White's book. He has used the label "Mormon neo-orthodoxy" to describe those who have not had the kind of response he desires "to the experience of 'modernity'—the secularization of society and culture" (p. xi).

White's strategy is to focus on the writings of a few Latter-day Saint academics who take seriously the restored gospel. Some of those he has selected seem worthy of serious attention (for
example, David H. Yarn and Hugh Nibley), and others clearly are not. Aside from his attitude toward a few really quirky examples, such as former Mormon intellectual Paul Toscano, he charges people like Nibley with advancing a new heresy merely because they seem to him to reject his idiosyncratic notion of what constitutes “traditional Mormonism,” which pictures the restored gospel as essentially a variety of Protestant liberalism.

White thinks that “traditional Mormonism” is “liberal” and “optimistic” precisely because it is not concerned with the need for a redemption from sin by Jesus Christ. He is, of course, wrong on this issue; nothing more can be said. Nor does he bother to try to explain why it is “pessimistic” to sense the power of redemption from death and sin through the atonement of Jesus Christ. There is nothing to suggest that Latter-day Saints have ever seriously entertained the notion that the atonement of Jesus Christ is unnecessary, which is not to say that individuals with links to the Mormon culture have not neglected the atonement. The most that can be said is that at times the Saints have not stressed the atonement as vigorously as is warranted. Be that as it may, White describes “traditional Mormonism” as “optimistic” about man. And by “optimistic” he means that they have not thought the atonement was necessary. He also assumes, and again wrongly, that “Mormon neo-orthodoxy” holds a “pessimistic” view of man merely because it takes seriously both the necessity and the reality of a redemption from sin by Jesus Christ. What exactly is pessimistic about that? Perhaps for White it is not the redemption from sin that is “pessimistic” but the very thought that a redemption is necessary—a naughty, low opinion about man.

And White wrongly assumes that a belief in a “finite” God, rather than God understood as something like a “ground of Being,” entails a rejection of the idea of the sovereignty of God.

86 Others that White in 1987 claimed were involved in advancing in one way or another “Mormon neo-orthodoxy” include Elders Neal A. Maxwell, Bruce R. McConkie, Russell M. Nelson, and Dallin H. Oaks.

87 On this matter, see Millet, “Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism,” 61–62.

88 I am not happy with this term. Millet uses the term “infinite” instead. Millet, “Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism,” 54. But that term troubles me even more. Nevertheless, I believe that we agree on what we are trying to say, even though our terminology differs.
Hence all that talk by both White and Alexander (already quoted) about the sovereignty of God seems confused. Certainly God need not be an Absolute, like the ground of Being or whatever the fashionable description of God is in philosophical theology, to be sovereign, unless one has in mind a notion of "God" that is dependent upon categories and arguments borrowed from Greek philosophy. And Latter-day Saints have fortunately to this point refused to do that sort of thing. White's rather simplistic opining about matters such as the sovereignty of God seems part of his effort to punish the Church for not reaching an accommodation with certain fads that may be described as Secular Fundamentalism.

Talking the Saints into Something Strange

As we have seen, White is not the first to attempt to thrust upon the Saints a kind of Protestant liberal theology. But until or unless the Saints can be persuaded that such a thing is "the authentic spirit of Mormon religion" (p. xviii, where he is quoting McMurrin) or what White likes to label "traditional Mormonism," such efforts seem futile. In order to accomplish this task, whatever elements in Mormon culture that can be linked with a secularized, naturalistic humanism or with vague and highly sentimentalized Protestant liberal nostrums are celebrated, and everything else ignored or ridiculed. The strategy behind this form of Kulturmormonismus has been to charge the Restoration with promoting irrationalism, biblicism, anti-intellectualism, authoritarianism, and political or moral conservatism, and thereby to denigrate as deviant whatever seems inconsistent with the secular, liberal heresy being promoted.89

Even most of those few on the fringes of Mormon community in the 1960s who then had a longing for a fashionably "liberal" Mormonism seem to have forsaken their agenda. Back then they

89 Or linked with those elements of modernity that form the creed for the Secular Fundamentalism upon which the liberal heresy rests. Some of the authors under consideration hold that the Book of Mormon is inconsistent with Joseph Smith's King Follett address; they also assume that those who take seriously the teachings of the Book of Mormon must reject the teachings found in the King Follett address.
were a melancholy lot. McMurrin, for example, has complained about the movement away from naturalistic humanism and positivism among increasingly competent Latter-day Saint intellectuals who now take the Restoration seriously. And he sometimes complains about the lack of courage among those who fancied themselves "liberals."  

White’s campaign for a presumably fashionably “liberal” Mormon theology—that is what his book is really about—does not rest on carefully worked-out arguments. Instead, he employs what amounts to a rather crude semi-Marxist sociology with some psychological jargon thrown in to explain why a “liberal” heresy has failed to take hold in the Mormon community. He goes about that indirectly by asserting that orthodox Mormon teachings and beliefs are being reemphasized by Latter-day Saint scholars. White’s struggle to reduce the teachings of the restored gospel to so-called “liberal” slogans also involves an attempt to revise the history of the Church for the purpose of making it appear that there once was a Mormon theology that was similar to liberal Protestantism. That is simply bunk.

When McMurrin talks about the “liberal” elements in “Mormon theology” or its “humanistic temper” or the “naturalistic and pragmatic propensities of the Mormon people” and then adds language identifying a “naturalistic quality of Mormon philosophy” so that he ends up claiming that “it is not entirely inaccurate to describe Mormonism as a kind of naturalistic, humanistic theism,” we are clearly being subjected to some wanton labeling—to slogans that form a kind of battle cry. Such rhetorical excess might make the thoughtful just a little cautious when he begins to describe what he labels “the authentic spirit of Mormon religion.” Whatever else one might say about his bold opining, he is obviously not talking about the teachings found in the Book of Mormon or the revelations associated with Joseph Smith, but primarily about his own efforts to recast certain elements of the Mormon past into something close to Protestant

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90 See, for example, McMurrin’s “Toward Intellectual Anarchy,” 209–13.
91 See, for example, “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” 18–43.
92 The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion, quoted from the first unnumbered page of the “foreword.”
93 Ibid., 3.
liberalism, if not a form of naturalistic humanism. McMurrin has sensed that the Book of Mormon and the bulk of that which is associated with Joseph Smith would have to be jettisoned in order to persuade the Saints to adopt a genuinely "liberal" theology. Since McMurrin rejects the possibility of prophetic charisms,94 he has no reason to attempt to attend to or preserve in the life of the Saints the teachings in the founding revelations, including the Book of Mormon.95

White seems not to have realized that McMurrin believes that there are potentially two competing ideologies with roots in Joseph Smith—the older one being somewhat closer to Protestant orthodoxy because it takes seriously the redemption from sin through Jesus Christ and hence rests on what McMurrin oddly labels a "pessimistic" view of man, and the newer one, for which he is the articulate spokesman, having much in common with the so-called "optimism" about man that he attributes to Protestant liberalism if not secular humanism. If White, in 1967, had understood McMurrin better, he would have been able to complete the analogy between an original pessimistic orthodoxy, followed by a progressive optimism or benign liberalism, only to be followed by a currently controlling pessimistic neo-orthodoxy.

**Dismantling the Christ and Doing Without Divine Mercy**

White understands Protestant liberal theology in the following way:

From the doctrines of an immanent God and the perfectibility of humanity, liberalism did not need a savior in the orthodox Christian sense. Indeed, people were not in a predicament from which they needed salvation. Furthermore, they possessed the power within themselves to change conditions—the power, if you will, to save themselves. Yet this does not imply that liberal theology left no place for Jesus. On the contrary, the importance of

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94 Ibid., 111.
95 See McMurrin's remarks about those who take revelation seriously in his "Toward Intellectual Anarchy," 210–11.
Jesus is found in his exemplary moral life. Through Jesus we learn the good life and the way back to God. It is not through an atonement that humankind is reconciled with God, nor through divine grace where some are elected to salvation, but rather through the moral and natural perfection of the individual personality. (p. 43)

To which White adds the following: “Liberalism helped to dismantle the Christ—Christianity’s ultimate object of worship. Christ became Jesus the teacher and exemplar” (p. 46). This description is, incidentally, not an entirely inaccurate account of exactly what has taken place among some Protestants in America, and it may help explain why the mainline churches have fallen on hard times when forced to compete with Protestant evangelicals who actually believe something. Sentiments about a nice teacher of ethics, or a wonderful, “gentle Galilean” are hardly what Christianity is all about. The enlightened liberals, according to White, “abandoned much of the biblical account of Jesus,” and accordingly, the liberals either rejected or radically reinterpreted Jesus’ significance for humanity. The transformation of Christian theology into secular morality—Christ on the cross into Jesus the moral teacher—confirmed the worst suspicions of neo-orthodox theologians (p. 47).

“The Kingdom of God,” for such liberals, was understood “as a just, peaceful, and harmonious society [that] had become a real possibility, requiring only the adequate development of reason, science, and technology. Instead of awaiting the direct intervention of Christ the Redeemer, liberalism depended on the example of Jesus the teacher” (p. xiii). For White, “this avowedly optimistic view was a casualty of World War I” (p. xiii).

The next step in White’s argument is to attempt to show how what he labels “traditional Mormonism” closely matches his description of Protestant liberalism. He succeeds only by ignoring

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the early revelations to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon and most of what follows, and by stressing only a few items wrenched out of context—and above all by simply insisting that McMurrin's account is the final word on "traditional Mormonism."

According to White, the key to "traditional Mormonism," a so-called Mormon "liberal" ideology, is faith in "the fundamental goodness of human nature, and a doctrine of salvation based primarily on merit" (p. xxiv). He insists that Mormonism once proclaimed "a doctrine of salvation by merit" (p. xvi), or the "goodness of humanity, and salvation by merit" (p. xxii). He also refers to a liberal Mormon "optimistic evaluation of human nature, and its doctrine of salvation by works" (p. xii). "Because of this optimistic assessment of human nature, traditional Mormonism does not emphasize the grace of God" (p. 101), for "Mormonism espouses a doctrine of salvation by human works" (p. 80). But those White labels Mormon Neo-Orthodox theologians, under the impress of social crisis after World War II, now stress "the necessity of grace," and such a "preoccupation with 'grace' and denial of human possibilities for the amelioration of adverse conditions suggest an underlying authoritarianism. Humanity is incapable of saving itself in time or in eternity" (p. 55).

White is thus annoyed to find Latter-day Saints employing "such traditional Christian terms as 'carnal man,' 'sensual man,' 'devilish man,' 'original guilt,' 'evils of the flesh,' and 'seeds of corruption.' Such language points to a pessimistic view of humanity" (p. 96), or to a dreadful "pessimistic concept of human nature" (p. 99), or to a "pessimistic assessment of human nature, and a doctrine of salvation by grace" (p. xvi), and therefore also to an emphasis on "the atonement of Christ in contrast to the life of Jesus" (p. 106). He apparently does not notice that such language is either directly borrowed from the Book of Mormon and other Latter-day Saint scriptures or easily inferred from their language and teachings.

White assumes that his Mormon liberals proclaim "an optimistic concept of human potential and the notion of progress" (p. xiv) which rests on a belief in the "goodness of humankind" (p. 79), or an "optimistic concept of human
nature” (p. 86), or what he also calls a belief in the “basic goodness of human nature” (pp. 77, 100), or simply the “goodness of human nature” (p. 95), or that “human nature is good rather than evil” (p. 86), which presumably entails a “doctrine of salvation stressing merit rather than grace” (p. 86). White holds that “traditional Mormonism” long ago dispensed with the silly idea that humans are fallible, sinful, corruptible, or depraved in any degree, and hence in need of divine forgiveness made possible by the atonement of Jesus Christ. His understanding of Mormon beliefs at times matches the offensive and ridiculous caricature offered by fulminating Protestants bent on demonstrating that Mormons are not Christian.

On Never Revising or Testing an Account

In twenty years White seems to have found nothing that has impelled him to question, revise, or even elaborate his background theories, even though they have increasingly fallen on hard times among sociologists. One would never know from reading Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy that in twenty years, in addition to a surprising growth of interest in religion among sociologists in particular and academics in general, much has changed in the way in which a growing number of them approach religion. Some of this work is done by believers of one stripe or another, or at least by those sympathetic with belief, and it is therefore not now always grounded in the older hostility or suspicion that is typically found among those whose theories are drawn from elements found in the writings of Freud and Marx, both of whom began with the assumption that all of what they labeled “religion”—all “God-talk”—is necessarily either a delusion or an illusion of some kind.

Some and perhaps even much of the sociological study of religion, of course, is still done by those who see it as it is portrayed by White, that is, as an aberration much like juvenile delinquency or narcotic addiction that further therapy or enlightenment will perhaps cause to disappear. Or it is done by those who grade it higher if it accommodates as much as possible the most antireligious elements of secular modernity. White seems to approach the study of Mormon things with the assumption that religion comes in higher and lower forms, is either “pessimistic”
or "optimistic," evil or perhaps benign, and so forth. He mounts a pulpit for the purposes of preaching his fashionable form of secular enlightenment, if not from all forms of religion, at least from the particularly unpleasant manifestation of superstition he finds among Latter-day Saints. In his preachments he distorts both the Mormon past and the present in an effort to make his opinions seem plausible. *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy* is a bad book precisely because it promises much and delivers slogans, confusion, and secular dogmatism couched in fuzzy jargon.°7

And when White's background theory is applied to an actual instance of a sophisticated and widely read account of Mormon beliefs, it turns out to be simply false. For example, see his subdued assessment of Hugh Nibley's social criticism, which is linked as much as any social criticism could be to an understanding of the scriptures—especially the Book of Mormon—and hence to the teachings of the prophets, both ancient and modern. White apparently does not sense that his theory fails to account for the complexities of Mormon beliefs, either in general or in cases like that of Nibley or virtually anyone else one could name.

**A Brief Postscript**

The thoughtful consideration of Mormonism, which must begin with or at least assume some stance on the Book of Mormon, does not occur in *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*. Those who encouraged its publication must share some ignominy for having published such a book. The restored gospel is abused when it is reduced to a parade of facile slogans, and especially when it is cast in the terms White employs. Such language interdicts thought. If

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97 McMurrin boasts of rejecting "the divinity of Christ." He grants he is guilty of "committing the basic Christian heresy and that the stock-in-trade reply . . . would be that" he thinks "that Jesus was nothing but a great teacher or something of the sort." He denies that this does "justice to his views on Jesus," and suggests that "there is a middle ground between being simply a great teacher and being God." McMurrin is willing to grant that "Jesus had a transcendent, charismatic personality and a remarkable insight into moral and spiritual matters." But he also affirms that he finds "neither wisdom nor love" in the idea that Jesus suffered, bled, and died for mankind. See "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin," 31–32.
White had taken seriously the Book of Mormon and its teachings and the role of that text in the life of the Saints, he could not have advanced the account of Mormon things found in his book.

White could have at least endeavored to explain how Latter-day Saints, from the moment they started following Joseph Smith, could believe that the Book of Mormon is both true and that it contains truths for them, and yet not have genuinely found sustenance in the atonement of Jesus Christ. The Saints have quoted from the Book of Mormon in their sermons; read it as part of their devotion to God; consulted it for consolation, instruction, and moral guidance; found in it a message that allowed them to face the terrors of life—including death—with equanimity; and offered it to the gentile world as evidence that the heavens have been opened. Cultural Mormons may have jettisoned the Book of Mormon, but it has been and still is the keystone of the faith of genuine Latter-day Saints.

If there is currently a renewed interest in the Book of Mormon, and in that sense a Mormon neo-orthodoxy, and I believe that there is, then we must look at whatever came after

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that initial theophany, translation, and offering of the Book of Mormon to the world as the elaboration by God, through additional revelations, of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And those who take the Book of Mormon seriously begin with the assumption that what was added to the understanding of the Saints by further revelation was not essentially discontinuous or inconsistent with what was taught at the very beginning of the Restoration, but came line upon line, as part of the restoration of all things.99

Now, of course, Latter-day Saints, including the Brethren, have been given to speculations, some of which has not necessarily been consistent with what went before. The Saints, though, are not bound by such speculation. Hence, the way to achieve a sound understanding of Mormonism is to look for continuities and not just assume inconsistency between what is found in the Book of Mormon and what came later through divine special revelations and inspired teachings. After all, the Book of Mormon is the canon—the primary measuring rod. And, if an angel actually had something to do with it, it is then not a mere human invention or an instance of "theological" speculation by Joseph Smith.

If, as some have recently proposed, there is a radical discontinuity and even inconsistency between what Joseph Smith taught after 1835 and what is found in the Book of Mormon, then they must explain, if they are genuine believers, exactly why God would have misled Joseph Smith with the Book of Mormon only to have given him something fundamentally different later on. And they must explain exactly why God misled the ancient Nephites, if what they were taught through divine revelation through their prophets is not really true, that is, can be brushed aside by a subsequent development or later reconstruction in something called Mormon "theology." And their explanation

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99 But this movement has, as I have shown, nothing to do with what is sometimes described as Protestant neo-orthodoxy. See also Millet, “Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism,” 66, on the issue of whether there is a Mormon neo-orthodoxy.
must be coherent and not simply a statement indicating that they believe in the historicity of the Book of Mormon and are outraged by those who wonder exactly how that can be, given what they have written.

And writers like Professor Brooke, who stand outside the circle of faith, should not be surprised to find resistance to their speculation from faithful Latter-day Saint scholars, especially when they draw upon books like *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy.*

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100 It is discouraging to find Jan Shipps, who one would expect to know better, promoting Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire* with a testimonial for the book's dust cover, as well as advertisements for the book. Though she must certainly know better, she claims the *The Refiner's Fire* "is not just a revealing history of the background of the first Mormons and early Mormonism but a larger history of early American culture that will do almost as much for readers who are interested in the cultural context in which this new American religion developed as it will do for those who simply want to learn more about Mormon beginnings." See *The New Republic* (3 October 1994): 35. Such as statement raises a question about where she really stands on certain crucial issues.