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Knocking Over Straw Gods

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The Same Old Stuff

In one sense this is a review that does not need to be written because Blake Ostler, in 1996, already reviewed the basic materials on Mormonism that were included in See the Gods Fall. But in another sense this review needs to be written and read by Mormons because See the Gods Fall is about other religious groups besides Latter-day Saints and is an excellent example of how not to write about someone else's beliefs. The authors admit that the chapter on Mormonism is really just a condensed version of the same arguments already set out in their 1991 book, The Mormon Concept of God. I would recommend that those interested in a head-to-head analytic confrontation with Beckwith and Parrish read Blake's review (it does not appear that Beckwith and Parrish ever seriously did). They mention it twice in their chapter on Mormonism but never confront, or even come close to confronting, any of the issues Ostler raises (see pp. 104, 112).


This is unfortunate because the authors claim they sought to create a dialogue between Mormons and evangelicals; however, nothing in *See the Gods Fall* indicates that such a dialogue has taken place. Instead, the chapter on Mormonism merely condenses the material in the first book.

In 1991 we published a book on the Mormon concept of God. Much of the following is an abbreviated version of what appears in that book. In response, Mormons have written a number of replies. We welcome this, for one of our purposes of publishing the book was to create dialogue. One problem with the book was that we concerned ourselves only with what we now call the polytheistic view of God, which we defended as the dominant Mormon belief on the matter, though admitting that not all Mormons agree with this dominant view. Nonetheless, we find inadequate the Mormon responses to our basic objections to Mormon theology. (p. 109)

There is some disingenuousness here. Even if they did find the Mormon responses inadequate, the authors might have shown an interest in dialogue by mentioning how they found them inadequate. In fact, the only response to reviews of the first book is in the appendixes. And one of these, "Why the Classical Concept of God Is Biblical," amounts to no more than some proof texting with English translations that shows the authors have no awareness of historical and textual arguments about any of the texts or doctrines they discuss. For example, in his review Ostler challenges the authors’ citation of several Old Testament passages in *The Mormon Concept of God* (i.e., Psalm 90:2; Isaiah 40:28; 43:12–13; 57:15) that "use the word "êtâm and assume that it refers to timelessness"; however, Ostler points out that

it merely means an indefinite period of time. It does not mean a timeless eternity. None of the scriptures cited by the authors support any conclusion stronger than that: (1) God's character and commitment are stable and unchanging; (2) God
is everlasting or has always existed; and (3) God is immune from the ravages of time. They do not support the stronger claim made by the authors that God transcends all temporal succession and changes in no intrinsic properties.

Almost all biblical scholars agree that God’s time is different from the time-metric of our world, but that God is involved in a temporal relation to the world.\(^2\)

What is amazing is that, without mentioning Ostler’s objections and without referring to any of the associated literature, Beckwith trots out the same passages in appendix D and uses them in exactly the same way as in the first book, seemingly oblivious to any problems that the literature on the subject might have with his interpretation of Ḫūm. The authors apparently did not think this was a significant objection to their arguments against Mormon theology. This type of unresponsiveness occurs again and again in the sections of See the Gods Fall that deal with Mormonism. Particularly conspicuous for its absence is a response to Ostler’s discussion of free will and foreknowledge. The authors make no attempt at dialogue and only attack a straw man.

See the Gods Fall, however, is not just about Mormons. Here the authors are after other game as well—Secular Humanists, Baha'is, and New Age followers. Any pretense at sympathetic but critical dialogue with others from the traditions they caricature is nonexistent. The authors set up straw gods and proceed to knock them over.

This is a shame because the authors should have something to say. Both have doctorates in philosophy, and both are trained in the Anglo-American analytic tradition. Besides, this book is a cut above “anti-cult” tracts.\(^3\) In fact, in the first chapter the authors criticize other evangelical writers who commit informal fallacies in their work. (Alas, the authors commit more than a few themselves.) The book contains some defenses of traditional theism by William Lane

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2. Ibid., 123.

3. Mormons should not be too upset by being called a “cult.” I was once in a “Christian” bookstore in Bloomington, Indiana, that included Buddhism and Hinduism as cults, along with Mormons and others.
Craig; if it were left at that I might recommend it to some of my evangelical students here at Western Carolina University who are beginning to think philosophically about their own faith. But the key problem with the book is its underlying aim to perform a hatchet job on other faiths—a bit more sophisticated than the usual attack but, nevertheless, a hatchet job. In fact, what bothers me most about the book is that it is not for someone who seeks to learn about Mormonism, Baha’ism, Humanism, or the New Age movement—it is merely a book to confirm someone's already formed opinion so that person doesn't really need to learn anything significant about these movements or why people believe fervently in them. I confront these attitudes each day in courses I teach on world religions—signaling an inability to admit there might be something of eternal value in another's faith. The authors continually choose the weakest interpretation of essential doctrines of these traditions, claim these interpretations are the essential ones, and then proceed to demolish the straw man they have created. Concepts like karma and reincarnation that figure importantly in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism are misrepresented in such a way that the reader will leave with the impression that he has no need to try to understand these significant doctrines of major world religious traditions that have spawned elaborate and subtle philosophical commentary.

The most outrageous example of inexcusable ignorance, and I would almost have to say willful misreading, of another tradition takes place in the chapter on New Age. The subject is not specifically New Age but the Hindu concept of karma, to which I will return later. After interpreting karma in the most unsympathetic way possible by saying that it only serves to justify the caste system, the authors assert that Gandhi was a great humanitarian only because of his association with Christian missionaries.

Some may object to this critique by pointing out that Mahatma Gandhi, a believing Hindu, was a fine humanitarian. Although this may very well be true, the objector should realize that "Gandhi acknowledged that it was the Christian missionaries and not his co-religionists who awakened in
him a revulsion for the caste system and for the maltreatment of outcastes.” That is to say, Gandhi had to act inconsistently with his Hindu presuppositions and incorporate Christian ethics in order for him to be a humanitarian in the real world. (p. 226)

I think this statement borders on criminal ignorance. The incredible hubris of some Western Christians is not dead. We Christians have much to be proud of in Christ’s teachings of the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity as children of God, and Gandhi acknowledges this, but Indian traditions opposed the caste systems long before Christianity came to India. Siddhartha Gautama and Vardahama Mahavira, the founders of Buddhism and Jainism, both opposed the caste system though they believed in the law of karma. Gandhi’s principle of ahimsa, or not doing harm to others, came primarily from Mahavira, not from Christ. Gandhi acknowledged the high moral principles of the Buddha as well. I doubt that one can read the Hindu sutras or the Bhagavadgita and not get a strong sense of a great tradition of moral duty or dharma.

The equivalent ridiculous statement by a Hindu might be that Martin Luther King was only a humanitarian because he had read Gandhi. Otherwise he would have believed, as Sepulvulda and many Southern slaveholders thought, that Paul justifies slavery and that the Christian doctrines of the great chain of being and predestination justify the belief that “inferior races” are natural slaves! So King could not, as a Christian, have crusaded for equal rights. He could, however, do so through the Hindu influence on his Christian faith. Of course, though King read Gandhi and borrowed much from his attitude of nonviolence, his Christian tradition undoubtedly had more to do with his moral formation than the influence of Hinduism. The explanations are equally absurd.

4. The assertions about Gandhi are actually worse than I have presented in the text. The phrase “Although this may very well be true…” about Gandhi’s humanitarianism is significant for the authors, who cite Richard Grenier’s The Gandhi Nobody Knows (Nashville: Nelson, 1983) as a scathing critique of Gandhi’s personal ethics.” I suppose the implication is that no Hindu could really be a moral human being.
The book consists of an introduction, six chapters, and five appendixes. The first two chapters are the best: "The Importance of Critical Thinking and Philosophy" introduces elementary logical fallacies and even shows examples in evangelical apologetics, and "The Classical Christian Concept of God" spells out the basics of the classical doctrine. The presentation almost demands a serious consideration of objections such as the problem of evil, but the authors only wish to show how theism is superior to naturalism or pantheism. The next four chapters attack, with little sympathy, the beliefs of Mormons, Humanists, Baha'is, and New Age adherents. Although I am a Mormon and not a Secular Humanist, Baha'i, or New Age believer, I found none of the presentations of these positions to be much more than caricatures that were easily defeated. It would be impossible in a short essay to point to all of the problems, so I will restrict myself to the analysis of the Hindu concepts of nondualism and karma in the chapter on New Age thought and to the discussion of Mormonism. But first I want to comment on what I think is a serious problem running throughout the book—the reduction of religious traditions to a single set of philosophical concepts.

How Not to Understand Someone Else's Religion

See the Gods Fall is an example of how not to write a text on comparative religion; it certainly does not represent an effort on the part of its two authors to understand the beliefs of their targets. But in all fairness, it is not a book on comparative religion; rather, as its title indicates, it is an effort to knock its targets over. Straw men are much easier to knock over than real ones.

One of the book's key problems is its reduction of religions to philosophical systems. In their review of The Concept of God for the International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, David Paulsen and Blake Ostler made a similar criticism of The Mormon Concept of God. Paulsen and Ostler recommended that the authors engage in

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dialogue with particular Mormon thinkers and not try to synthesize Mormonism, but the authors did not listen. In some respects, however, it is not all their fault. With the exception of a few articles and a couple of books, we Mormons have done very little to explain our religion to philosophically minded readers. Theological and philosophical interpretations of Mormonism do not abound. Latter-day Saint scholars trained in philosophy and religion need to engage in more discussion with philosophers and theologians of other traditions.6 Years ago Sterling McMurrin performed both a service and a disservice to Mormons everywhere who were interested in seeing their tradition set against the backdrop of the great philosophical and theological traditions of Christianity. He gave it the unfortunate title Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion. McMurrin asserted that Mormonism was inherently committed to metaphysical pluralism and the finitude of God. While I am sympathetic to much of what McMurrin says here, there are Mormons committed to the absoluteness of God. Not all Mormons have been pluralists, and some, such as William H. Chamberlin, the first Mormon to do formal studies in philosophy, were idealists.7

For almost a generation, many Mormons and non-Mormons with philosophical and theological interests have gone to McMurrin's little book for the standard interpretation of Mormon theology. It is ironic that McMurrin's book, misleading as it is, seemed to provide a quick reference to what Mormons believe about any philosophical or theological issue for many people in and out of the LDS Church. But religions—as historical entities—and religious doctrines are much more complicated. Joseph Smith said:

I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want

6. David Paulsen of the BYU Philosophy Department is currently editing a book on Mormon reactions to twentieth-century theology; this is a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done in this respect.

to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further;" which I cannot subscribe to.8

Joseph Smith is talking about the immediate experience of the presence of God. On the most basic level, a fundamental difference between any religion (e.g., Christianity or Hinduism) and any theology is that the former is a religion while the latter is a type of rational reflection on religion. This distinction is also fundamental between the LDS faith (based on revelation) and LDS theology. So the recommendation that Mormons interested in theological reflection can find a tool for that reflection in philosophy and theology must include the stipulation that philosophy and theology are rational reflections by which we attempt to understand revelation and are not necessarily revelation itself. For Mormons, revelation and theology are compatible, but revelation is more fundamental. One of the essential claims of Mormonism is that God’s revelation is ongoing. Theology is our effort to explain revelation in contemporary, rational terms. Theology not only historically follows the development of religion, but, Mormons would also claim, is logically subsequent, is dependent on revelation, and will never exhaust revelation in explanation. Understood in this way, any LDS theological reflection would have to be “a” Mormon theology, and never “the” Mormon theology.

This, I believe, is the point of continual reception of revelation and rereading of the scriptures. We can never reduce the gospel to a handy manual of philosophical doctrines. This is the basis for Joseph Smith’s disagreement with the formal formulation of creeds. Rabbinic understanding of the Torah as a living tradition is similar to continual revelation, as are the Hindu doctrines of Sruti and Smriti. Sruti (what is heard) is the tradition of ancient Vedic literature, and the Smriti (what is remembered) are sacred texts beyond the Vedic literature (Vedas and Upanishads). Some Hindus regard the writings of the philosopher Sankara as sacred; others do not, but for them the canon is open. Zen Buddhists are perhaps even closer to

8. History of the Church, 6:57.
Joseph Smith’s teachings when they say that even the scriptures do not take one into the presence of ultimate reality—this can only happen through experience. The point here is that living traditions are open to revelation. This can be one of many possible points of dialogue between Latter-day Saints and those faithful to other religions.

Beckwith and Parrish seem to believe that Christianity is reducible to one static doctrine discovered through a philosophical analysis of scripture and metaphysics. For them Christianity is classical theism. Mormonism, as they view it, is not classical theism, so Mormons are not Christians. One might wonder how they would classify other Christians who weren’t classical theists—for example, the mystics Angelus Silesius, Meister Eckhart, and Jacob Boehme; or nontraditional theists like G. W. F. Hegel, Gabriel Marcel, or F. W. J. von Schelling, who all claim to be Christian. How would they categorize the process theologians in this century who see God as processive (i.e., that God is capable of change and is changed through his relation to the world; this fundamentally opposes traditional theistic views that God’s perfection means that God cannot change), William James, the Methodist Edgar S. Brightman (Martin Luther King’s teacher at Boston University), or the Russian Orthodox theologian Nicolas Berdyaev, all of whom believed in a finite God (though in radically different ways)?

What about theists who certainly did not think that classical theism was correct because it reduced God to an object of philosophical reflection? Kierkegaard and Pascal would become pseudo-Christians. But then Pascal could evoke his invective about the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not the god of the philosophers against Beckwith and Parrish. One also wonders about Karl Rahner’s anonymous Christians—are they possible in Beckwith and Parrish’s view? Is right belief more important than right practice? Are classical theists like the Muslim al-Ash‘ari and the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides better Christians than Charles Hartshorne or Peter Bertocci—both finitists who saw themselves as Christians? What about Madva, the Hindu theist? In Madva’s thought Ishvara, or the Lord, is much the same as in classical Western theism. In fact, for some of his followers the Lord is so all-powerful that we are predestined to
salvation or damnation and grace is irresistible. In the Buddhist tradition, Shinran (in the pure-land tradition of Mahayana) takes a position on grace similar to the traditional Western theist. Does this mean that Madva and Shinran are more “Christian” than Charles Hartshorne, David Paulsen of the BYU Philosophy Department, or Blake Ostler? But Madva’s revelatory tradition is the *Sruti* (“that which was heard,” the most ancient revelation of truth) of the Vedic tradition and the *Bhagavadgita*, not the Bible. So if Beckwith and Parrish want to exclude Mormons from the elite club of Christians—“In the end, Mormonism can be made Christian only by ceasing to be Mormon”—would they have to include people from non-Christian traditions as Christians (see p. 128)? Is belief in the correct philosophical view so much more important than the practice or intentions of the individual believers? Were I a believing Hindu Dvaita Vedantist (Hindu theist), I might like the idea that Beckwith and Parrish do not think I am going to hell, but I would still consider myself a Hindu and not a Christian. As a Mormon believer in Jesus Christ, I would like to consider myself a Christian.

This reduction of the rich traditions of philosophical interpretations of various religious doctrines to one system is apparent in Beckwith and Parrish’s interpretation of the doctrines of nondualism and karma as they appear in the chapter on New Age. Unfortunately, they never choose a strong philosophical interpretation of the tradition they attack.

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9. Dvaita means “dual” or that God and the world are different. Philosophically, this is very close to traditional theism. The founder of the Dvaita Vedanta school was Madva (A.D. 1197–1276). Advaita means “nondual” or that God and creation are one reality. This is closer to the Western idea of pantheism, which most (but not all) Christians have held to be heretical. The Advaita Vedanta school was founded by Sankara (A.D. 788–820). A third Vedantist school, Visistadvaita or qualified nondualism, was founded by Ramanuja (A.D. 1017–1137). These are three alternatives in just the Vedantist tradition of Hindu philosophy, but among six other major traditional schools of Hindu philosophy, some are atheistic and others pluralistic. Beckwith and Parrish’s contention that Hinduism is monistic shows how naïve is their attempt to reduce religions to philosophical systems.
Karma Cola

I cannot speak with any authority about New Age metaphysics, but the authors discuss several Hindu concepts in their chapters on the Baha’is and the New Age that are mistaken or oversimplified. For example, the authors refer to Hinduism as ultimately pantheistic (see p. 179). They admit to polytheistic elements in the Bhagavadgita but indicate that even so it is ultimately pantheistic. This is an example of selective interpretation. The anomaly here is that many Hindus regard the Bhagavadgita as theistic. It is certainly a devotional text in which the highest form of religious activity is held to be worship of a God, in this case Vishnu, of whom Krsna is an avatar or earthly incarnation. Hindu writers seldom use the term pantheism, but the term has been applied by Western scholars to the idea of the divine as it appears first in the Upanishads as Nirguna Brahman, which is Brahman (ultimate reality) without manifestations. But the Upanishads are not univocal about this. Brahman is also referred to as Saguna Brahman, Brahman with characteristics, or Ishvara (Lord). Brahman as Lord (Ishvara) is hardly pantheistic and is much closer to the varieties of Christian theism. One is not clearly favored over the other in all of the Upanishads, and the latter interpretation is clearly closer to Western theism than to pantheism or polytheism. These religious interpretations of ultimate reality in the Vedic writings of Hinduism are perpetuated in the six major philosophical schools, and hence no single philosophical interpretation of Hinduism exists. In the past, some Westerners have seen Advaita Vedanta as “the” Hindu philosophical system. But it is only one division in the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy, and the Vedanta makes up only one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy. These include widely differing views of ultimate reality. Samkya/Yoga is atheistic and dualistic; it posits the reality of both spirit and matter, Purusha and Prakriti. Vaisheshika is pluralistic and primarily attempts to examine the nature of the universe. It argues that physical reality consists of invisible, indestructible atoms. This way of explaining the physical world is used to support the Upanishadic thesis that Atman is Brahman. In all these schools, the authority of the sacred texts of the Vedic tradition
is upheld. Within the Vedantist school, Madva, founder of Dvaita Vedanta, is an out-and-out theist in the Western sense of the term. Important divisions among disciples of this school even debate about whether the Lord’s grace is resistible or irresistible. Ramanuja is a qualified nondualist who contends that the soul is the same substance as Ishvara but always different in manifestation. Sankara’s famous Advaita Vedanta system, though popular, is the only thoroughgoing monism among Hindu philosophical systems, yet in the West the popular conception is that all of Hinduism, not just philosophical Hinduism, is monistic. Advaita Vedanta is the only system that could really be considered pantheistic, though they refer to themselves as nondualists.

But even if we consider pantheism as a philosophical position, the authors make serious mistakes of interpretation. For example, in their discussion of the Baha’is the authors attack the doctrine of emanationism, a type of pantheism, with an argument from William Lane Craig that appears several times in See the Gods Fall. Craig argues against everlasting time and for the impossibility of an infinite series. I am not concerned with whether or not Craig’s arguments work in general. But they simply do not work against an emanationist system. Emanationists, like classical theists, do not argue for infinite time. For emanationists, like the neo-Platonist Plotinus (who had a profound influence on early Christian philosophers), time comes into existence with the world. Most emanationists simply do not hold that time is eternal.

Continuing their arguments against pantheism, Beckwith and Parrish wonder how, if we are all part of God, any of us can possibly make a mistake. They quote the great twentieth-century Hindu philosopher Sarvepali Radahkrishan, who says: “How do we manage to deceive ourselves into seeing a transformation and a plurality, where in reality Brahman [God] is alone?” On this “no information is possible” (p. 211). Beckwith and Parrish think that this is an appeal to mystery in the worst sense of the term, merely to hide logical inco-

I agree with the authors that pantheistic philosophy or nondualist interpretations of reality have particular difficulties explaining why plurality came about in the first place. But I find monists' appeals to mystery no more baffling than claims by traditional classical theists that a God who has no need of the world because it adds nothing to his eternal perfection decides, nevertheless, to create a world in which a significant portion of his creation will be eternally damned. According to them, God knows that it will be so from eternity. Yet this eternally good and perfect being goes ahead and creates the world anyway. In both cases, the emergence of plurality from the initial monism seems quite arbitrary.

The next argument against pantheism is that, in it, moral judgment is ultimately illusory. According to this argument, since for God all plurality is ultimately unreal, no basis for making distinctions between good and evil remains. Here Beckwith and Parrish cite a story from Francis Schaeffer.

One day I was talking to a group of people in the digs of a young South African in Cambridge. Among others, there was present a young Indian who was of Sikh background but a Hindu by religion. He started to speak strongly against Christianity, but did not really understand the problems of his own beliefs. So I said, “Am I not correct in saying that on the basis of your system, cruelty and non-cruelty are ultimately equal, that there is no intrinsic difference between them?” He agreed. They who listened knew him as a delightful person, an “English gentleman” of the very best kind, [and] looked up in amazement. But the student, in whose room we met, who had clearly understood the implications of what the Sikh had admitted, picked up his kettle of boiling water with which he was about to make tea, and stood with it steaming over the Indian’s head. The man looked up and asked him what he was doing and he said, with a cold but gentle finality, “There is no difference between cruelty and non-cruelty.” Thereupon the Hindu walked out into the night. (p. 212)
The authors quote this story with delight and clearly agree that this shows that a nondualist Hindu cannot argue consistently against immoral acts like cruelty. It is too bad that the young Hindu did not know his tradition well enough to respond. Asserting, as nondualists do, that good and evil are not ultimately real does not mean that a Hindu nondualist condones evil activity in this world of appearances, only that such acts are not eternally real. In fact nondualist Hindus argue that immoral acts usually arise from our egoism, through which we have a distorted idea of our own position in being. An evil person sees himself as ultimately more important than others, so he thinks he can use them as he wishes. What the evil egoist fails to realize is that he will pass from existence; he is not ultimately real. No Hindu would argue that cruelty in the realm of appearances is justified. Morality, like good and evil, is a part of this realm. As individuals, it is real enough for us. Schaeffer, in his delight at scoring a point in debate, clearly lost an opportunity to understand why the young man believed as he did. I do agree that there is a difficulty for monists who see ultimate reality as beyond good and evil, but the great irony of the story is that traditional theists find themselves in the same situation on this question as pantheists. Consider the following long passage from Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which the author addresses God:

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I was told that we do evil because we choose to do so of our own free will, and suffer it because your justice rightly demands that we should. I did my best to understand this, but I could not see it clearly. ... But then I would ask myself once more: “Who made me? Surely it was my God, who is not only good but Goodness itself. How, then, do I come to possess a will that can choose to do wrong and refuse to do good, thereby providing a just reason why I should be punished? Who put this will into me? Who sowed this seed of bitterness in me, when all that I am was made by my God, who is Sweetness itself? If it was the devil who put it there, who made the devil? If he was a good
angel who became a devil because of his own wicked will, how did he come to possess the wicked will which made him a devil, when the Creator, who is entirely good, made him a good angel and nothing else”?...

Also I considered all the other things that are of a lower order than yourself, and I saw that they have not absolute being in themselves, nor are they entirely without being. They are real in so far as they have their being from you, but unreal in the sense that they are not what you are. For it is only that which remains in being without change that truly is. As for me, I know no other content but clinging to God, because unless my being remains in him, it cannot remain in me. But himself ever unchanged, he makes all things new. I own him as my God; he has no need of aught that is mine. ...

For you evil does not exist, ... because there is nothing outside it which could invade it and break down the order which you have imposed on it. Yet in separate parts of your creation there are some things which we think of as evil because they are at variance with other things. But there are other things again with which they are in accord, and then they are good. In themselves, too, they are good. And all these things which are at variance with one another are in accord with the lower part of creation which we call the earth. The sky, which is cloudy and windy, suits the earth to which it belongs. So it would be wrong for me to wish that these earthly things did not exist, for even if I saw nothing but them, I might wish for something better, but still I ought to praise you for them alone. ... O God, for you are the God of us all.11

In this remarkable passage, Augustine attempts to deal with one of the most difficult problems facing classical theists, the problem of evil. Why did a good God create a world in which there is so much suffering and evil? The first response is that human free will brought about evil, but Augustine realizes that ultimately this does not work. For God, in eternity, knew perfectly that humanity would rebel when it was created. It does not help the classical theist’s cause to bring in Satan and the fallen angels, for they too were created by a God who knew from eternity that they would rebel. It does not help to say that God created them free and could not prevent them from rebellion because this would be a limit on God’s omnipotence. Further, it does not help to say that God limited his omnipotence so we could act because God knew from eternity that certain ones of us would be damned, and since God is perfect from eternity it cannot be argued that God created the world out of some irresistible need. We add nothing to the classical God, who is perfect without us. So beyond the free will defense, Augustine had to come up with something else. The something else is the aesthetic defense that appears in paragraphs 11 and 13. God’s creation is of a lower order of being than God. It is less real than God and it is in this order of being that we can talk about good and evil. But from God’s point of view the whole is good. Even hell is a part of God’s creation and part of the aesthetic balance of the whole. This justifies doctrines of predestination because for God the whole is good, and, if I am predestined to hell, that is good from God’s ultimate point of view as well, though not from mine. So just as Brahman is beyond good and evil for the nondualist Hindu and the pantheist, God is beyond good and evil for the classical theist. The Russian orthodox theologian Nicolas Berdyaev would call this “the profound moral source of atheism,” and, throughout the modern period, philosophers and literary figures like Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, Mark Twain, G. W. F. Hegel, F. W. J. von Schelling, F. M. Dostoevsky, Edgar S. Brightman, Albert Camus, and many others, believers and atheists alike, have attacked it.12

I will complete this long divergence into Hinduism with a consideration of the way the authors handle the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist doctrine(s) of karma. Basically, these traditions believe that people are continually born again to lives of varied fortune according to the moral quality of their accumulated deeds. We can make four basic points about karma:

1. In the most rudimentary sense, karma means action.
2. In ethical discussions, karma is an action that is morally important because it is either prohibited or required by dharma (the moral and social order of things).
3. It is an unseen force generated by dutiful or undutiful action.
4. The law operates like a law of nature and is completely impersonal.

Beckwith and Parrish offer seven objections to the doctrine of karma and reincarnation. In the interest of space, I wish to discuss only three. The first is that it does not help with a solution to the problem of evil because it only gives us an infinite regress (see pp. 217-20). Basically, the authors assert that saying past lives determine the present one does not explain why evil arises in the first place. The second is that the doctrine impedes moral progress because any intervention in the life of another would interfere with cosmic judgment and impede the progress of that person toward moksha (liberation) (see pp. 225--26). Roughly, the authors are saying that since one deserves his place in the world, we should not interfere. The final claim is that karma conflicts with free will (see pp. 227--28). The authors think that the doctrine is fatalistic in that one's position in the world might be determined by previous lives.

1. *Karma and reincarnation do not explain the origin of good and evil.* Consider the following from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* IV.4.5:

   According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action.
But people say: “A person is made [not of acts, but] of desires only.” [In reply to this I say:] As is his desire, such is his resolve; as is his resolve, such the action he performs; what action (karma) he performs, that he procures for himself.13

If the doctrine of karma is an attempt to explain the origin of good and evil, it does so by placing the origin in free will. Good and evil arise from actions that are either dutiful or undutiful. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thinkers, who are as diverse as Western philosophers on this point, do not generally seem to try to explain freedom causally, for, as Christian theist Søren Kierkegaard points out in The Concept of Anxiety, such a complete causal explanation of freedom would eliminate freedom by making it merely mechanical or a part of a causal chain.14 For example, if I reduce my choice to remain a Mormon Christian—in a world where there is much temptation to leave religion—to my social conditioning and my genes, there never was a choice in the first place. Any complete explanation of free choice explains free choice away. The ultimate origin of evil, for those who believe in karma (and for theists of all kinds), lies in rebellion, and the possibility of rebellion and evil lies in freedom.

2 and 3. The doctrines of karma and reincarnation impede moral progress and are incompatible with free will. I believe that these two claims belong together because Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains have all argued that karma is bound up with an idea of moral progress and free will. Beckwith and Parrish believe that if one believes in karma and reincarnation, he or she will look at the other as deserving his position in society. Karma and reincarnation have been used to justify the caste system, differences between rich and poor, the sick and healthy, even the good looking and the ugly. But Hindus generally believe that we are the masters of our destiny and even if we are born into a particular caste we can use our freedom to affect our future. Of

course, this can be seen as a type of social control. I am a Sudra (worker) in this life. I may be a Brahmin (priest) later, so I will be good and follow my duties as a worker in hopes of a better rebirth. But then Marxists have said the same of the Christian belief in heaven, that it is otherworldly. Remember the IWW poet Joe Hill’s lines: “Work and pray and eat hay and you’ll have pie in the sky when you die.” Marxists and socially active atheists have always complained that the Christian ideal of heaven and the afterlife impedes social action, since people accept the condition of the world in which they live in hopes of a shining place in the world to come. Though it is certainly true that some Christians have viewed the world this way, one can also see belief in the heavenly ideal as a call to personal action and moral perfection because we can believe that the ideal is possible. The same is true for Eastern notions of karma and reincarnation. Beckwith and Parrish arbitrarily see only the positive interpretation for Christians and only the negative view for Hindus. This inconsistency is just not fair.

While it is true that the concepts of karma and caste appear in India at approximately the same time (about the sixth century B.C.), it would be committing the genetic fallacy to view the two as absolutely connected. At about the same time Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, and Vardamana Mahavira, the great Jain leader, also appear on the scene. Both accept the doctrine of karma and rebirth, but both vehemently reject the caste system. Both also reject monistic metaphysics (as do many Hindus). Jains are metaphysical pluralists. The Buddha seems almost a pragmatist who is concerned not with metaphysical speculation but only with the origin of and end to suffering. For both, freedom for moral choice was important. Mahavira rejected the fatalism of his companion Goshala. The Buddha thought that karma could be overcome in this life by a complete change of heart.

Karma is not determinism; it can be interpreted existentially as situational. I am free because I am in a situation that offers me choices. In fact, in Hinduism generally it is only as a human being that I can bring about karma. If I were to be reincarnated on another plane or as an animal, karma would be spent but not created. The
very essence of the doctrine relates to moral and ethical decisions. Only human beings possess the reason and free will that makes for moral and immoral behavior. Only humans experience *moksha*, the liberation from the cycle of *samsara*, which is the realization of total freedom. In the great Hindu epic the *Rāmāyana*, the poet Tulasidas writes:

> It is a great and good fortune that you have secured a human body, which—as all the scriptures declare—is difficult even for heavenly beings to attain. It is a tabernacle suitable for spiritual discipline and the gateway to liberation.

The problem is that so few of us seek liberation. Rather, we indulge ourselves in sensual pleasure. Hinduism envisages the world as a vast moral stage. Karma is generated by voluntary action and so is quite compatible with free will. In fact, it assumes free will. The equivalent would be to say that the LDS doctrine of premortal existence is deterministic when actually most Mormons would argue that it is necessary for our understanding of human freedom. I was not just handed freedom from a God who created me *ex nihilo*. (It is not clear to me that such a conception of freedom makes sense, because freedom seems to have to relate to some minimal sense of self-causation.) I am rooted in my freedom, which is based in a situation that was created in part by my own actions in the premortal life.

Does the doctrine explain freedom? No. But then, to explain freedom is to explain it away. Hindus know better than to do this and so do Mormons.

17. Bernard Bosanquet, the great nineteenth-century British idealist, had a profound respect for religion but rejected classical theism and the doctrine of creation from nothing because he found contradictory the conception of a Creator of creators. He saw that classical theism is simply incompatible with any strong doctrine of human freedom. He argued that “to will a will is to will its detail.” Bernard Bosanquet, *The Value and Destiny of the Individual* (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1968), 136.
For LDS readers this long divergence into Eastern doctrines of karma may have seemed unnecessary. I have claimed that part of the problem with Beckwith and Parrish's interpretation of Mormonism lies in the sparseness of Mormon philosophical literature. But this is not the case with Eastern doctrines of karma, reincarnation, and nondualism or with Hindu conceptions of the divine. What it indicates is the repeated tendency in *See the Gods Fall* to set up straw men by taking the weakest possible interpretation of a particular doctrine and then arguing against it.

The Mormon "System"

Blake Ostler notes a flagrant case of the above tendency in his excellent review essay of the authors' *The Mormon Concept of God*; here he critiques their discussion of free will and God's foreknowledge. First, the authors show the all-pervasive tendency of asserting that Mormonism, as a religion, can be reduced to a single philosophical system by asserting that Mormons all believe that God's foreknowledge is limited (see p. 27). This despite the fact that in one of the most readily available sources on Mormonism, *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, James Faulconer notes that most Mormons have taken the position that God's foreknowledge is not limited. "Historically, most Latter-day Saints have taken the first general position: everything is foreseen and freedom remains. Some have taken the second, that God's foreknowledge is not absolute."¹⁸

Instead of arguing with particular Mormon thinkers, the authors reduce Mormonism to a single philosophical system, not admitting the possibility that many Mormons understand these doctrines quite differently.¹⁹

¹⁹. Ostler moves on to identify another characteristic found in both books, the tendency to create and then attack straw men. Ostler himself favors the position that God's foreknowledge is not absolute. He notes that the authors put forth an incredibly weak argument in favor of limited foreknowledge and then proceed to knock it down. The problem is, as Ostler notes, that no one has ever put forward the argument that they attribute to "some Mormon thinkers" and, what is worse, they attribute it to *him!* Ostler then proceeds to offer the following argument about the incompatibility of freedom and
According to Beckwith and Parrish, Mormonism is a single philosophical system and Mormons are thoroughgoing materialists (see p. 100). Again, conflating religions with philosophical systems that are related to religions creates difficulties. Religions spawn different philosophical systems that attempt to rationally unfold the meaning of the revelations and founding statements of the various traditions. This is especially true for Latter-day Saints. Mormon philosophers do not generally think that their philosophical systems are more foundational to LDS belief than revelation. On the question of whether Mormons are materialists, the scriptures indicate that "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see foreknowledge, which, he notes, is one of the most discussed issues in the philosophy of religion over the last thirty years:

1. It has always been true that I will sin tomorrow. (Assumption: Omnitemporality of Truth)
2. It is impossible that God should hold a false belief or fail to know any truth. (Assumption: Infallible Foreknowledge)
3. God has always believed that I will sin tomorrow. (From 1 and 2)
4. If God has always believed a certain thing, then it is not in anyone's power to do anything which entails that God has not always believed that thing. (Assumption: Fixed Past)
5. It is not in my power to do anything that entails that God has not always believed that I will sin tomorrow. (From 3 and 4)
6. That I refrain from sinning tomorrow entails that God has not always believed that I will sin tomorrow. (Necessary truth and from 2; Principle of Transfer of Powerlessness)
7. Therefore, it is not in my power to refrain from sinning tomorrow. (From 5 and 6)
8. If I act freely when I sin tomorrow, then I also have it within my power to refrain from sinning. (Assumption of Libertarian Free Will)
9. Therefore, I do not act freely when I sin tomorrow. (From 7 and 8)(see Ostler, review of The Mormon Concept of God, 109 n. 15)

it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter" (D&C 131:7–8). What this means philosophically is open to interpretation, though it certainly eliminates the idea of immaterial substance. Many Mormon thinkers like B. H. Roberts and Orson Pratt have considered themselves materialists, but it is clear that they were not materialists in the same sense that Voltaire or Karl Marx were. Additionally, not all Mormons who have thought philosophically about Mormonism are or have been philosophical materialists. Mormons maintain that there is a priority of moral over material values in the universe. The first professionally trained LDS philosopher, W. H. Chamberlin, was an idealist in the German and American tradition. A case can be made for idealism in Mormonism. This is of course not the berkeleyean idealism that Orson Pratt argued against.

Ostler goes on to discuss examples of God’s limited foreknowledge in the scriptures and puts forward the following five points:

1. God is omniscient in the sense that he knows all that can be known, but it is logically impossible to know future acts that are free.
2. God knows all possibilities, including the present probability of any future event.
3. God knows now what his purposes are and that he will achieve them.
4. God does not know now, in every case, precisely which contingent possibility will be chosen or become actual.
5. God knows now how he will respond to whichever contingent possibility occurs to ensure the realization of his purposes. (ibid., 111)

He continues to point out the different senses of God’s foreknowledge in scripture.

1. Predictions which God will bring about through his own power regardless of human decisions. (This does not mean that God needs to know each human action beforehand.) In fact these will be accomplished regardless of human rebellion. An example would be that God will get someone else if Joseph Smith should fail.

2. Conditional prophecies. Jonah is an example; see also Jeremiah 18:7–10: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from evil, I will repent of the evil which I intended to do it" (see also 2 Nephi 1:7).

3. Prophecies of inevitable consequences of factors already present.

4. Absolute election of nations and conditional election of individuals. (ibid., 111–13, not all verbatim)

I apologize for the lengthy quotations, but I think that Ostler’s arguments are so devastating to Beckwith and Parrish’s claims in The Mormon Concept of God that I find it astounding that they could dismiss them with the single sentence, “Nonetheless, we find inadequate the Mormon responses to our basic objections to Mormon theology” (p. 109). And yet they still assert that the purpose of the first book was to create dialogue.
but the German tradition that included Kant, Schelling, and Hegel and, in America, Chamberlin's teachers, Josiah Royce at Harvard and George Holmes Howison at California.

Chamberlin's idealism was based on the assumption that a Mormon view of the universe should be an ethical view in which matter is subject to moral and religious concerns. Chamberlin was an idealist if by idealism one means that mind is fundamental in the world and there is no reality that is not supplemented or connected with mental activity. But if idealism is taken to be the denial of the objective world, then Chamberlin was not an idealist. He explained his position between idealism and realism in the following terms:

On this view Realism and traditional Idealism are half truths. Realism is right in asserting that the being of sense-data is not entirely dependent on their being perceived, but wrong in so far as it asserts that they are a type of objects whose being is quite independent of perception. Idealism, on the other hand is right in maintaining that if sense-data are to be at all, they must be perceived, but wrong in maintaining their being perceived is the only condition of their being. The reconciliation is effected by regarding both the existence of percipient subject and also the existence of some other entity or entities as necessary conditions of the being of sense-data. The latter are the appearance of something to something else.20

Chamberlin's position is similar to Hegel's; it is a dialectical philosophy that refers to a process of becoming, of developing more and more adequate understandings of the world around us. If idealism is understood as the reduction of concretes to ideas, it is one-sided and incorrect, but a materialism/realism that claims that material entities are completely independent of mind, or that mind is completely dependent on materiality, is also inadequate. A dialectical philosophy proceeds from the premise that reality is a "unity of opposites."

“Matter” is, after all, an idea, but ideas are also related to minds and bodies. Chamberlin’s dialectical understanding of reality also shows the strength of LDS conceptions of God.

Dialectical Theism vs. Classical Theism

In appendix B to *See the Gods Fall*, Francis Beckwith discusses the rejection of a paper he wrote on the Mormon idea of God, which he wished to present at the intermountain regional meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers. The title of this appendix, “What Does Jerusalem Have to Do with Provo?” is a play on Tertullian’s famous question: “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?” Tertullian’s response was “nothing.” Considering that this statement is by a philosopher who believed God had a body and that the soul was material and who came to be judged by traditional Christians as a heretic, it is probably not the best choice of title for Beckwith’s point.21 He begins the appendix by discussing the ecumenical character of the Society of Christian Philosophers and quotes the SCP’s statement of purpose. “The society is broadly ecumenical in composition with respect to Christian denominations, theological perspective, and philosophical orientation. Membership is open to any person who classifies himself/herself as both a philosopher and a Christian.” Then he goes on to lament that such a vague pronouncement will admit all sorts of undesirable elements.

As a member of the SCP—as well as someone who has studied the major cults in America—I have long feared that

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21. Beckwith’s use of the title is unintentionally ironic in several ways. Tertullian (A.D. 160–220) was opposed to the interpretation of Christian revelation through the use of Greek philosophical categories. He was an irrationalist who saw the rationalization of Christianity as a matter of faith. Tertullian was also a materialist who held the material conception of the soul and believed that God had a body—much more subtle than our own, but a body. Tertullian eventually became a “heretic,” joining the Montanist movement (which flourished from A.D. 150–70). Montanus claimed to receive revelation. In short, by Beckwith’s standards, Tertullian was a dangerous pseudo-Christian cultist who would not be admissible to the Society of Christian Philosophers; see Étienne Gilson, *La philosophie au moyen age* (Paris: Payot, 1976), 97–99.
the society's vague statement of faith would allow pseudo-Christian religious bodies to join and use its prestige to gain mainstream legitimacy. (p. 247)

Beckwith then writes that his fears were realized when his paper submitted for the meetings at Brigham Young University was rejected. In Beckwith's view, Mormons are, of course, a pseudo-Christian group seeking legitimacy, and he wanted to attend the meeting and point this out to them and the rest of the Society of Christian Philosophers. The last line of the section of See the Gods Fall that deals with Mormonism reads, "In the end, Mormonism can be made Christian only by ceasing to be Mormon" (p. 128).22

The authors base the exclusion of Mormons as Christian and their exile to the status of pseudo-Christian largely on the claim that to be a Christian one must be a classical theist. But you can exclude a good many more Christians besides Tertullian and the Mormons if you choose to follow Beckwith and Parrish. John Macquarrie notes that classical theists have long monopolized the term theism to the exclusion of other, and perhaps better, understandings of it.

There may be other and better ways of conceiving God, which is also to say that there may be other and better forms of theism than the classical one. I say this deliberately, because classical theists are often inclined to monopolize the term "theism", and to deny that those who have departed from the classic formulations are really theist at all. For instance, not only Tillich but even Whitehead have been branded as "atheists". This seems to be quite ridiculous. These men, let us

22. Of course, as FARMS readers are aware, it is far from clear historically that early Christians were classical theists. It has often been argued that classical theism has much more to do with Athens's notion of static impersonal perfection than Jerusalem's passionate God. There are many books on this problem. Among the recent entries are Gerhard May, Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation Out of Nothing," trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: Clark, 1994); and Bart D. Ehrman, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
agree, were not classical theists, and possibly their ideas of God are theoretically defective at various points. But it was certainly their intention to expound a doctrine of God, and their formulations were backed in each case by genuine religious sentiment. An interpreter has a duty to be as sympathetic as possible in his interpretation, and no one with a shred of sympathy would call either Tillich or Whitehead an atheist.\(^2\)

Like Latter-day Saints, process theists like Whitehead, existentialists like Tillich and Berdiaev, finitists like James and Brightman, and idealists like Howison have been branded as “atheists,” “non-Christians,” and “polytheists” because they disagree—largely on the problem of evil—with classical theism.

Macquarie argues that no matter how carefully it is crafted, classical theism tends to present a “monarchial” view of God. God is one-sidedly transcendent, separate, over and above the world. God stands apart from the world, unaffected in his stony perfection by either the suffering or successes of his creatures. From a Mormon point of view I would add that these creatures are only metaphorically and analogically his children. Macquarrie continues that our conception of God needs to be more dialectical, which means that our idea of God needs to include immanence as well as transcendence, dependence as well as independence.\(^3\)

The doctrine of creatio ex nihilo is intended to protect God’s omnipotence, but it also places God outside the world. The world exists only as long as God wills it, and there is no need for God to will the world; the only necessity is that God will himself. The world’s existence is completely contingent while God is completely independent. In classical theism God acts on the world, but the world does not act on God. God affects the world but is not affected by it. Nothing is added to God in the creation of the world, and if the world were to

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24. Ibid., 31.
disappear nothing would be lost from God. This is a one-sided and nondialectical view of God. The world minus God = 0; God minus the world = God. The problem here is that if there is no need for God to have willed the world then we are back to Augustine’s God who creates a world filled with suffering and evil in which some of his creations will be eternally damned, and because he is omniscient he knows they will be damned for eternity but goes ahead anyway and freely creates the world. He did not need to create but freely wills to create a world filled with suffering and eternal damnation for a significant number of his “children.” In Augustine’s aesthetic defense, he must say that evil is not real for God, for if he doesn’t say that then God is also the author of evil. Classical theism is in a worse position than nondualistic or pantheist conceptions of reality because at least in them creation is not the act of a personal being who has moral goodness as one attribute.

Another significant problem with the classical view is that God is held to be a person. But to be a person as normally understood is to have a relationship with others. Classical Christian theism attempts to circumvent this problem with the doctrine of the Trinity. Members of the Godhead relate to each other. But being a person is also a moral relationship, and it is difficult to imagine a moral relationship in which one or some of the persons have no obligation to the others. But if God had a moral obligation to creatures, they would also be necessary beings. God would cease to be the only necessary being. God would not be completely independent, not completely transcendent. Part of the tragedy of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is that Dr. Frankenstein refuses to recognize his responsibility to the monster that is his creation. Morally, God would have to be affected by the creatures. Does the world make no difference to God? If God would be unaffected by the world’s ceasing to exist, what was the point of creating the world in the first place? Even if one were to claim, as did Sankara, the Hindu philosopher, that the world is divine sport, even then God is amused by the world and thus affected by it. But as Ramanuja pointed out in his critique of Sankara, a lover must

25. Ibid., 40.
have a beloved. The relation implies the necessity of the other. If the creation of the world is only an arbitrary act of God, Macquarrie asks, what is the difference between this and atheism?26

In dialectical theism, God and the world presuppose each other. Creativity is not reserved exclusively for God. God does not create unilaterally but calls others to create themselves, and in turn God is created in relation to them. It seems to me that on this point Mormonism differs from traditional theologies and resembles the more nontraditional, dialectical theism of idealists, some existentialists, and the process theologians. In process theology and in the writings of dialectical theologians, God is the great artist creating beauty out of the chaotic world. The eternal cosmic ideal entails God's reciprocal relation to creatures, which means that God is capable of change and growth. God is the ultimate example of a relational being drawing persons toward self-creation. This creativity is the imago dei. God and creatures are mutually dependent. God is a part of the universe and not ontologically different from creatures. God's glory is increased through his relation with man. This is a way to understand what God tells Moses: "And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works, neither to my words. For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:38–39). God's very purpose in existence can only be fulfilled in relation to others. The Russian existentialist theologian Nicolas Berdyaev describes the necessity of relation in terms of love and friendship:

This is the real tragedy of the world and of God. God longs for His "other," His friend; He wants him to answer the call to enter the fullness of the divine life and participate in God's creative work of conquering non-being.27

The tragedy to which Berdyaev refers is the fact that love requires a free response. The ultimate purpose of creation is the creation of real

26. Ibid.
relationships. God, as a person, presupposes his other, his friend, his beloved. This “other” must in some sense be God’s equal. But the other can choose not to respond or to rebel. Love is a free response; it cannot be forced. As the seventeenth-century German mystic and dialectical theist Jacob Boehme was fond of saying, “God wanted children, not serfs.”

Beckwith and Parrish repeatedly argue that, since the Mormon God creates from previously existing chaos, God will eventually run out of material. But this is to assert that there is no notion of creativity possible for Mormons (see pp. 114–15). For Berdyaev, like the process theologians, God’s creativity and dialectical nature necessarily mean that God is not the metaphysical ultimate.28 In Science and the Modern World, Whitehead argues that if God were the metaphysical ultimate, the ground of all being, God would also be the source of evil: “If this conception be adhered to, there can be no alternative except to discern in Him the origin of all evil as well as of all good. He is then the supreme author of the play, and to Him therefore must be ascribed its shortcomings as well as its success.”29 Whitehead contends instead that creativity is the metaphysical ultimate and is a characteristic of the universe.30 This is why process theology rejects creation ex nihilo. God engages in mutual creative action with creatures, thereby bringing creation from chaos to cosmos. But to assert that creativity is the metaphysical ultimate is not to say that something greater than God exists. Nicolas Berdyaev explains

30. Cobb, A Christian Natural Theology, 206, points out that Whitehead never argues that creativity “exists” but that it is a characteristic of actual entities.

Creativity is specifically described as one of the ultimate notions that along with “many” and “one” are “involved in the meaning of the synonymous terms ‘thing,’ ‘being,’ and ‘entity.’” We cannot think of an entity except as a unit of self-creativity in which the many factors of the universe become one individual thing which then becomes a part of the many for creative synthesis into a new one.

In the same sense, no Mormon would think that agency “exists” but would insist that we cannot think of intelligences except as agents.
that creativity (Berdyaev uses the term meonic freedom) is creation from nothing in the sense of no-thing. It is undetermined freedom, the open future from which we create meaning in our lives. This "no-thing" is a property of God and of all beings. Being is therefore not static but dynamic and growing. What we have in philosophers like Berdyaev and Whitehead is a conception of matter that is dynamic. This is far from the nineteenth-century materialism of dead atoms that Beckwith and Parrish call materialism. Similarly, in the King Follet Discourse Joseph Smith explicitly rejects creation ex nihilo. God cannot be omnipotent in the traditional sense because God cannot create or destroy the "pure principles of element" (emphasis added).

Now, the word create came from the word baurau which does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship. Hence, we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos—chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time he had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed; they may be organized and re-organized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning, and can have no end.31

For Whitehead and Berdyaev the history of Christianity constitutes a tragic failure precisely because it has tried to make God the sole ground of all being. Christian theology apostatized from its Galilean origins. The failure consisted in seeing God as the divine despot imposing laws on the world. Christian theology, as valuable as it is and has been for the growth of Western civilization, has conceived God as a coercive power in the form of a Roman emperor or Byzantine basileus. In Adventures of Ideas, Whitehead calls for a return to the original intuitions of Christianity, which are much nearer to persuasion and the aims of civilization.32 Christianity failed when

31. Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 350.
32. Alfred North Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas (New York: Free Press, 1967), 169, writes: "The nature of God was exempted from all the metaphysical categories which
it cut the finite off from God and created an infinite gulf between God and the world. God became Caesar. God became eminently real, but the world was derivative. God was necessary to the world, but the world was not necessary to God. Mysticism became the only way to bridge the gulf: the only way to experience God existed on the fringe of theology.  

Personalist and finitist theologian Brightman attributes this to the worship of power—classical theology was formulated in relation to the classical notion of perfection that was ready to sacrifice God’s perfection in goodness to perfection in power.

There is nothing worthy of worship in power as such; only the power of the good is adorable, and it is adorable because it is good rather than because it is power. God is the goodness of the universe. If there is power for evil, it cannot be the will of God.

Like Macquarrie, process philosopher Charles Hartshorne claims that the failure of traditional Christian theology is based, in part, on a monopolar idea of deity that views God only in terms of attributes like eternity, simplicity, impassivity, and omnipotence. This led theologians like St. Anselm to reject compassion as an inherent part of God’s nature because if God is moved by our suffering and thus changes in some respects, God would have to change in all respects. If God’s perfection is defined as changelessness, then God cannot be compassionate, for to be compassionate is to be moved, or changed, by another’s misery. Hartshorne argues that the tradition has only emphasized one pole of reality (changeless, self-sufficient, etc.), ascribing such attributes to deity while granting only derivative reality to the other pole (temporality, relation, etc.). He contends that God

apply to the individual things in this temporal world. The concept of him was a sublimation from its barbaric origin. He stood in the same relation to the whole World as early Egyptian or Mesopotamian kings stood to their subject populations. Also the moral characters were very analogous.”

33. Ibid., 173.

must be seen as the preeminent example of both poles. Hartshorne’s division of the poles looks something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classical Divinity</th>
<th>Creatures or Created Beings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(perfect being)</td>
<td>(deficient being)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being itself, infinite</td>
<td>finite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necessary</td>
<td>contingent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>independent</td>
<td>dependent</td>
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<tr>
<td>absolute</td>
<td>relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pure act</td>
<td>potentiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impassible</td>
<td>passive</td>
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<td>changeless</td>
<td>changing</td>
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<tr>
<td>eternal (nunc stans)</td>
<td>temporal (nunc fluens)</td>
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Process theology is concerned with the religious sense of perfection. Hartshorne accepts from Anselm the idea that God (perfection) is that which is supremely worshipful, estimable, unsurpassably great: that being than whom none is greater and who can be surpassed by none. However, Anselm’s traditional notion of perfection eliminates the second column of attributes from the divine nature. But, the process theologian asks, are dependence, relatedness, potentiality, change, temporality, and so forth always deficient attributes? For the traditional theologian, change cannot be allowed in the conception of the perfect being. He reasons as follows: If God changes, he changes either for the worse or for the better. If for the worse, we cannot admire God without exception, for God is no longer what God was. If God changes for the better, we must say God lacked something. Therefore, change cannot be allowed in God. But Hartshorne argues that there is really no reason to suppose this. Is not divinity supremely worthy of worship and admiration if it undergoes increasing change for the better? Consider, do we admire someone less because we know that he or she would be happier tomorrow because his or her daughter would be cured of a present affliction? If God rejoices less today than he or she would tomorrow if the world were better, would we admire God less? Or, is all independence admirable? If God is dependent in any way, do we admire him or her less? Hartshorne’s point is that in almost every way that we conceive
of perfection in relation to creatures, dependence and relatedness are valued as perfections. In the world as we know it, the higher the being, the greater the dependence, indebtedness, sensitivity, and perturbability.

Imagine someone to read aloud an eloquent poem in the presence of: (a) a glass of water, (b) an ant, (c) a dog, (d) a human being unacquainted with the language of the poem, (e) a human being knowing the language but insensitive to poetry, (f) a person sensitive to poetry and familiar with the language.35

We normally regard those beings that are the most open to influence as the most perfect. Process theology notes that the greater the power we ascribe to creatures, the greater our concept of God as the author of creatures.

Can we worship a God who does not have profound sympathy for our misery? Can we worship a God who does not rejoice in our joys and is not moved by the tragedies of the world? The ontological presupposition of nonrelativity and impassivity (pure act, etc.) in God precludes a personal relationship between God and the world. Process theology therefore assigns to divinity a dipolar nature; that is, necessary and contingent aspects comprise divinity, and through the latter God is necessarily related to the world.

I believe Joseph Smith clearly rejected the classical conception of God. But like Berdyaev, Brightman, Hartshorne, and Whitehead, he rejected it for moral reasons that are far more Christian than cultist. The LDS doctrine of the relation of God and persons concerns the literal humanity of God and the potential divinity of human beings. Joseph Smith set out this doctrine most clearly in his 1844 funeral sermon for King Follet:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who

holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man.  

And

I am dwelling on the immortality of the spirit of man. Is it logical to say that the intelligence of spirits is immortal, and yet that it had a beginning? The intelligence of spirits had no beginning, neither will it have an end. That is good logic. That which has a beginning may have an end. There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-equal [co-eternal] with our Father in heaven. . . .

Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it. All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement. . . .

The first principles of man are self-existent with God. God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.  

Joseph Smith claimed to base this conception of God on divine revelation. What is envisaged is a divine community, with God leading others to a fulness of life.

Beckwith and Parrish say repeatedly that Mormons are polytheists and cite B. H. Roberts in support of that notion (see pp. 98–99). But Muslims and Jews have said the same about the Christian doctrine


37. Ibid., 353–54. Here God is conceived to be a literal father of spirits; the logical corollary, attributed to Joseph Smith and espoused by the Mormon poet/prophetess Eliza R. Snow, was that there is also a literal mother in heaven. As early as 1839 the Prophet Joseph Smith taught the concept of an eternal mother, as reported in several accounts from that period. See Jill M. Derr, "The Significance of 'O My Father' in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow," *BYU Studies* 36/1 (1996–97): 98–99.
of the Trinity, and Christians have always rejected the label. Similarly, Roberts asserted that Joseph Smith’s doctrine of the coeternality of God and persons is not polytheism. Roberts developed an idea of the oneness of God through what he calls the “generic idea of God,” in which humanity participates in the Divine Nature. In this sense God is defined as human beings who have arrived at an identification with basic reality, beings who have become morally perfect. The Divine Nature is One.

Man being by the very nature of him a son of God, and a participant in the Divine Nature—he is properly a part of God; that is, when God is conceived of in the generic sense, as made up of the whole assemblage of divine Intelligences that exist in all heavens and all earths.

Elsewhere Roberts notes the interrelationship between God, the supreme intelligence, and other intelligences, or God’s children. This relation is mutually dependent; God cannot be perfect without them nor they without God. For Mormons, the process theologians, and Berdyaev, the freedom or creativity of beings is the metaphysical ultimate. Creativity/freedom does not “exist” but is the essential characteristic of persons (intelligences). This is the significance of Roberts’s generic idea of God.

To this Supreme Intelligence are the other intelligences necessary. He without them cannot be perfect, nor they without him. There is community of interest between them; also of love and brotherhood; and hence community of effort for mutual good, for progress, for attainment of the highest possible. Therefore are these eternal, Divine Intelligences drawn together in oneness of mind and purpose—in moral and spiritual unity.

38. B. H. Roberts, The Mormon Doctrine of Deity (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1903), 163. Quoting Mormon scripture, Roberts affirms that “Man was also . . . in the beginning with God. Intelligence . . . was not created or made, neither indeed can be. . . . (Doc. and Cov., sec. 93: 29–35).”

39. Ibid., 166.

40. Comprehensive History of the Church, 2:399.
Thus, thought Roberts, Mormon doctrine asserts the importance of community for God to be God.

Process theologian David Griffin claims that Christians can share a generic idea of God. “God is (1) the Supreme Power, (2) the personal, purposive creator of our world, who is (3) perfectly good, (4) the source of moral norms, (5) the ultimate guarantee for the meaningfulness of human life, (6) ground for the hope in the ultimate victory over evil, (7) alone worthy of worship.”41 Mormons could agree with Professor Griffin on this conception of God that does not require creation ex nihilo or coercive divine omnipotence. This also places God with us, within the universe. This is quite different from the classical idea of the relation of God and the world in which the only reason that anything and everything (including evil) exists is solely the omnipotent will of God.42

Griffin argues that many contemporary problems of nuclearism and imperialism are related to this worship and imitation of raw power, because human beings try to imitate what they regard as ultimately real—power. Mormons should find this analysis appealing because it is so strikingly similar to the reason for the rejection of Satan, the father of lies, given in Mormon scripture. The power of evil is coercive. In section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants, coercion is ruled out as a possible righteous activity of either human beings or God. In the Pearl of Great Price, Satan advocates the assertion of raw power to coerce moral sanctity from humanity (see Abraham 3). God and Christ reject this proposal in favor of persuasion and agency for all. There is a strong sense in LDS doctrine that Satan’s coercive plan is a lie from the beginning because it is a rejection of reality itself, which is based on the agency, creativity, and coeternity of intelligences. This idea of God as noncoercive is such an important part of LDS doctrine that in the Book of Mormon the prophet Alma reminds us that, were God to coerce our repentance, even though acting out of his mercy, mercy would rob justice and God would “cease to be God” (Alma 42:13, 22, 25).

42. Ibid., 132.
Eternal life is the life of a community whose love for each other is at the basis of reality itself. In the Doctrine and Covenants this eternal community is clearly given:

When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves. And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy. (D&C 130:1–2)

In Mormon doctrine God is a “fellow sufferer who understands.” God cares, in part, because God, while a finite, human, person, developed compassion through the experience of temptation and suffering in human existence. God thus fully realizes how significant temptation and suffering are for human beings because he experienced mortality. The prophet Alma explains that it is only through the experience of the temptations and suffering of human existence that Christ could become fully compassionate, fully loving, fully moral:

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. (Alma 7:12)

For Alma, Christ cannot fully understand the suffering of this world until he becomes embodied and thus fully human. Joseph Smith and B. H. Roberts describe God as a person, morally perfected in love, who is fully related to other persons. A part of this perfection has been the experience of life as a finite individual with all the temptations and imperfections. God suffers with us. If love that includes shouldering the burden of others is Christian, then Mormonism is not only a Christian religion but, by the most important standards, is profoundly Christian.

I do not pretend that the brief sketch of a dialectical theism that I have presented in the last section of this paper is “The Mormon Theology.” I only offer it as a possible response to the critique of LDS
beliefs by classical theists. As I said at the beginning of this review, the LDS faith is a religion and as a religion has many possible theological and philosophical interpretations. This awareness of the possibilities of interpretation is a sense of philosophical humility that philosophers who deem themselves Christian should have before a God whom we see “as through a glass darkly” as we await the fulness of revelation.

Finally, See the Gods Fall suffers from one great problem, a lack of faith in the viability of Christianity. This is illustrated by the fact that the first two chapters, where the authors limit themselves to an attempt to explain and defend traditional theism, are the strongest and the most interesting in the book. I don’t agree with them, but a dialogue could take place between Latter-day Saints, New Age believers, Baha’is, and evangelical Christians on the basis of what Beckwith and Parrish have written in these chapters. This is so because at this point Beckwith and Parrish are trying to explain as clearly as possible just what it is that they believe. It is after this that they enter waters that they seem to have little idea how to navigate. It is ironic that Christians should think that the best way to defend Christianity is to give such prejudiced versions of the beliefs of others of God’s children. If Christianity is true, and I believe with all my being that it is, it should be able to withstand the best of all other traditions, admitting all that is true and of eternal value in each of them.