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Beyond Agency as Idolatry

Ralph C. Hancock

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BEYOND AGENCY AS IDOLATRY

Ralph C. Hancock

Review of Adam S. Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016)

Adam Miller has already established himself as the most venturesome and original of LDS thinkers exploring our complex inheritance of Mormon beliefs with the tools of contemporary academic philosophy. Richard Bushman, certainly the most highly honored living scholar of Mormonism, in a foreword to an earlier collection of Miller's essays, *Rube Goldberg Theology*, praised the author as today's "most original and provocative Latter-day Saint theologian." This originality and provocation are all the more impressive given Miller's institutional prominence in the LDS academic establishment as, practically, the leading philosopher/theologian of BYU's Maxwell Institute, where he is a series co-editor as well as co-founder of the book publisher Salt Press, which was absorbed by the Institute in 2013.

Bushman also noted in that foreword that Miller was "utterly ambivalent about the theological enterprise." If this was accurate in 2012, then to judge by the claims of the present work, it is no longer true. Miller has overcome his ambivalence and now proposes a distinctive and coherent (and, yes, certainly provocative) Mormon theology — and even one not for the mere present but for the future.

Adam Miller's most important work has so far proceeded on two distinct but intersecting paths, one more religious and the other more philosophical. On the one hand he has explored scripture and drawn consequences for the religious life and for living Mormonism in particular; on the other he has produced rigorous commentaries on the work of challenging contemporary thinkers Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Marion, and Bruno Latour as well as on the fiction of Cormac McCarthy and of

David Foster Wallace. The intersections between the philosophical (and Pauline) reflections and the exploration of the meaning of Mormonism were by no means incidental or neglected in his earlier work. He developed the philosophical significance of LDS belief and scripture most notably in *Rube Goldberg Theology*. This and the present work are both collections of essays affording all the advantages (variety, liveliness) and disadvantages (incompletion, unevenness, internal tension if not contradiction) inherent in that genre. But the present collection marks a significant step towards Miller's goal: an integrated and coherent (if not exactly "systematic") presentation of a distinctive way of being Mormon, a way informed by a thorough appropriation of what he regards as the best of contemporary philosophy (Badiou, Latour).

Adam Miller is convinced that Mormons of the future, including his three children, "will have to rethink the whole tradition [of Mormonism], from top to bottom, right from the beginning, and make it their own in order to embody Christ anew in this passing world" (xi).¹ Rather than defending Mormonism as most Mormons, including Church authorities, now understand it against the known challenges — historical, theological and ideological — it now faces, he offers this book, "a future tense apologetics meant for future Mormons" and "a modest contribution" (xii) to strengthening a radically different Mormonism of the future. Such a contribution of course presupposes that the author can already discern at least the contours of this emergent new Mormonism sufficiently to provide the coming generation "the tools, the raw materials and the room" (xii) for them to undertake this top to bottom re-appropriation.

The philosophical and theological tools he offers to his children and ours are impressive and set forth here, with Miller's characteristically arresting formulations, in a style that is both engaging and highly evocative. The author defines the space to be inhabited by future Mormonism by a rigorously Pauline conception of grace married with a radical conception of Mormon materialism. And the terms of this marriage of materialism with grace are provided by a philosophical ontology of radical pluralism, or "network theory," derived from the author's close and appreciative studies of the thought of (especially) Alain Badiou and Bruno Latour.

Drawing persuasively on the Book of Moses, Miller argues that the revelation of grace "comes paired with the revelation of our own nothingness" (4). He then proceeds to define grace in opposition to a

1 Parenthetical citations refer to page numbers.

“law” by which we would presume to earn and thus to control what we will and will not receive. From this point of view of the radical gratuity of the given, obedience to law is a distraction, even a dead-end compulsion that prevents our openness to the gracious gift of love. Love is the end of the law; love accomplishes the law but without confirming the erroneous assertion of “the law’s inviolable priority” (9). “Our love must be practiced with a kind of disregard for the law” (12). Miller of course does not counsel disobedience — he concedes that “obedience is generally better than disobedience” (6) — but he is much more concerned that we will attach too much importance to obedience rather than too little. He sees that “strict obedience” is too often a “strategy for suppressing the truth and avoiding God’s grace” by attempting “to put God in *your* debt” (5). By forsaking this compulsive and futile effort to win over God by obedience, to “set ourselves up ... as lords of the earth and judges of what graces we will and won’t receive” (4), we open ourselves to a world given by grace in which a love beyond law is revealed:

Dying to the law and living in Christ, we begin to carry ourselves with a characteristic grace, we begin to receive whatever is given with graciousness, and the whole of creation, regardless of its troubles, limitations, transience, acquires a kind of perfection. The world becomes perfect in the same way that God is perfect. It becomes perfect in love. (11)

Miller’s strongest and clearest insight, I think, lies in his insistence that grace is not mainly or first of all a response to sin — not “God’s backup plan” (to cite another of his titles) — but rather the defining characteristic of God’s relation to the world overall and from the outset. The grace of Creation precedes and encompasses the grace of Redemption. This seems to me to indicate a profound truth. Grace is not a fix for a particular problem (sin) but rather an effect of the love that sustains all things. Participation in this grace or sustaining love, I would suggest, is indeed the key to life’s meaning, both here and hereafter. But Miller, keen to produce a “general theory” of grace” (65) takes this further, folding redemption into the grace of Creation in such a way that grace, “a fundamental and constitutive feature of reality itself,” becomes wholly identified with reality such as we now know it, grace “as an essential and ongoing feature of everything real” (67). “The world is graced not by a flawlessness but by a halo of perfection that shines from the world’s no longer being a means to some other end, to someplace else. It has, instead, become something to be loved *as it is*, for its own sake” (43; my emphasis). In his zeal to suppress any germ of idolatry, that

is, the natural tendency of human desire to project itself on the world in the form of some supposed intelligible divine purpose, Miller is led to embrace the utter collapse of grace into nature or rather into the sheer givenness of reality as it overwhelms our nothingness.

From this point of view, “sin” is neither more nor less than our refusal to accept reality as it now presents itself; it is “our rejection of this original and ongoing grace” (67). Traditional Christianity (including conventional or “mainstream” Mormonism, even Mormonism as set forth recently by Terryl and Fiona Givens, for example), is in fact complicit in this sin because it consists essentially in Platonism or idealism, namely the refusal of what God is giving in the world as it really is in a vain attempt to shape or master the world according to some idealized assertion of human desire.

It must be said that Adam Miller is very hard on human desire, indeed on any conception of a good — even or especially a “higher” good — distinct from the “reality” of giving and taking away that defines the actual, ever-passing world in which he thinks God’s grace is fully present. His provocative radicalism stems most fundamentally, I think, from his insistence on a radical, even an absolute distinction between “what God, in all his goodness and wisdom and mercy, is actually trying to give” and “what we think we want” (24). He has nothing to say, certainly, on behalf of a plan of salvation or “great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8) by which human beings would deliberately seek, through obedience and repentance, some good superior to what is given in the ordinary, everyday world. For Miller our desires have no end beyond themselves, and to look for any higher end, to hope for a better world, is to sin against grace, to resist the love that has no purpose but the graceful sharing of suffering in the world that is actually, already being given (and taken away) here and now.

There is certainly some insight in this immanent view of grace. Miller is always at his best in describing the mysterious compatibility, even a certain essential communion, between suffering and the graceful acceptance of the meaning of existence as it is somehow immediately given, beneath the grasp of any theory or any intelligible story. Thus, in *Letters to a Young Mormon*, he wisely counsels his children and our children to resist the temptation to “try to ‘solve’ the problem of your hunger by (1) satisfying it or (2) purging it. Neither will work,” he argues, “and both amount to a rejection of life.”² But he seems, to me, to go too

2 Adam S. Miller, *Letters to a Young Mormon* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2013), 59.

far by reducing salvation to the patient “care for” or “attention” to our mortal hunger, thus reducing sin to attachment to stories (the story of salvation, for example) that disconnect us from “life’s hunger.”³ For Miller the desire to understand ourselves as part of some larger story or plan is always sinful, and agency and love reside wholly in the acceptance of affliction, which he regards as “the heart of the gospel” that “makes forgiveness and redemption possible” (23).

There is surely an elusive and exquisite insight here and one that our upbeat, goal-oriented approach to the gospel often misses. But it seems clear that Miller, in his ambition to produce a pure theory of grace in the framework of the philosophies of radical materialism (his “area of professional expertise” (60n3)), is led to make this insight a template for overturning elements of Christian and especially Mormon teaching that appear to be essential. His campaign of graceful love against works righteousness in some sense goes too far and excludes too much. For Miller there can be no better world where all our tears are wiped away; to hope for such a world is to worship an idol rather than receiving the graceful world God is always already offering. Thus he candidly endorses “Nietzsche’s sharp critique of our Christian tendency to devalue the present world by anchoring its true meaning and substance in another” (47).

I have no alternative “general theory” of the gospel to offer; I would only suggest that a true and truly Mormon understanding of grace would have to be compatible with the deliberate pursuit of eternal happiness or “exaltation” (albeit a pursuit ready progressively to sacrifice imperfect conceptions along the way) or the fulfillment of the highest and best human desires (and yes, I know that I am committing “Platonism”), and with an understanding of agency as a partner of grace and not merely as the passive acceptance of the world as God gives it and allows it. Put another way, whereas, in Miller’s materialist and Pauline conception of Mormonism, hope tends to collapse in the fusion of faith and love, I would hold to hope as the Christian virtue that holds faith and love together.

This short review must pass over the subtle insights and provocative hyperbole that characterize every chapter of this rich collection of essays. There is much of value, for example, in Miller’s “thoughtful disagreement” (45) with Terryl and Fiona Givens on the character of the self and its agency and on the meaning of pre-existence, all points on which I think Miller succeeds at least in showing the need for significant qualifications

3 Ibid.

of or corrections to the Givens' insistence on the self-subsistent eternity of the individual subject. But Miller's uncompromising rejection of the "Platonism" implicit in any hope for a better world leads him to a number of positions that I cannot examine here but that point up the significant stakes of his position. Thus, while he reasonably criticizes an understanding of agency as a "simple and internal" "freedom from outside influence" (53–54), his radical rejection of a stable distinction between beings that act and beings that are acted upon leads him to argue that agency "isn't a freedom from the conditioned world but a freedom for that world" (54–55) — that is, for that world *simply as it is* and not a freedom to act upon the world or to participate in any divine work of improving the world or building a better world. What's left of agency in this view is swallowed up in grace understood precisely as "this massive, ongoing act of divinely organized creation that involves an uncountable host of agents, human and nonhuman, embedded in irreducible webs of stewardship, consecration, sacrifice, and interdependence" (67). It is not easy to see just what shape "stewardship" or responsible agency (67) can have when embedded so deeply in a massive material creation from which intelligible higher purposes have been excluded a priori.

We cannot here trace all the implications of this dilution of agency in a fusion of grace and materialism. We can only note for now that among the consequences of Miller's reduction of agency to an effectively blind participation in the welter of material causes are his steadfast refusal "to grant the premise that religion and secularism are enemies" (74) and his celebration of "democracy," in which "power is not delivered from the top-down, but produced from the bottom up" "as inherently sacred" (84). Following a logic inherent in the democratic and materialist denial of all intelligible higher purposes, Miller links the "democratic" or "flat" character of truth to stale progressive idea that "truth" is "not a static product" but "a process" (84). The essential question is suppressed, as is always the case in this progressive rhetorical mode: how are we to distinguish a good process from a bad process and thus to contribute to or even direct the process? And the suppression of this question leads here, as always, to the implicit imperative to trust the experts who, emancipated from Platonic idolatry, offer themselves as guides to an unprecedented future existence that it would be wrong to try to judge from the perspective of our present, "static" prejudices. A future Mormon must not be bound by the categories of a present Mormonism.

To question Miller's democratic-materialist Mormon future is not to deny the high theoretical and poetic qualities of the author's project

or the value to Mormons and to other Christians of his unflinching and systematically coherent case for a radical understanding of Grace and thus for a view of the gospel that keeps in focus the teaching that “man is nothing.” At one point Miller, much to his credit, recognizes that “the costs” of his “radical and thoroughgoing materialism [may] start to seem too high,” which he acknowledges would be “an indication that Mormonism is *not* actually committed to a radically monistic materialism” (60n4). In fact I believe that Miller’s hyperbolic case for radical grace as radical materialism brings to light the impossibility of building a whole “general theory” of Mormonism on those foundations. But this is far from saying that this work is fruitless. Those of us inclined to defend or to seek a conception of redeemed agency that retains significant continuities with the Christian “Platonist” tradition and with conventional Mormon common sense now, thanks to Adam, have a clearer picture of the work that is cut out for us. We owe it to future Mormons as well as to Adam Miller and his present readers to take up this work.⁴

Ralph C. Hancock holds degrees from BYU and Harvard and has taught political philosophy at Brigham Young University since 1987; he is also president of the John Adams Center for the Study of Faith, Philosophy and Public Affairs, an independent educational foundation (johnadamscenter.org). His most recent book is *The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age* (Rowman & Littlefield), and a new edition of his *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* has recently been published by Saint Augustine’s Press; he has also translated numerous works from French. Dr. Hancock is also a contributing editor of the quarterly *Perspectives on Political Science* and an editor at the online scholarly journal *SquareTwo.org*, which addresses public affairs for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Ralph and his wife Julie are parents of five children and grandparents of ten.

4 Whether our argument is with Paul himself and not only with Adam Miller is a question that cannot be decided in advance, although a powerful reading of Paul’s teaching by such an eminent Christian scholar as N.T. Wright (*After you Believe*) suggests a much greater continuity with Aristotelian virtue than would be possible on Miller’s account.

