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Seeing Ourselves Through the Eyes of a Friendly and Thoughtful Evangelical

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SEEING OURSELVES THROUGH THE EYES OF A FRIENDLY AND THOUGHTFUL EVANGELICAL

Daniel C. Peterson

A review of Richard J. Mouw, Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012, 99 pages.

Some Latter-day Saints will recall Richard Mouw from the introductory remarks that he offered in November 2004 when the Evangelical Protestant apologist Ravi Zacharias was the featured speaker at a special interfaith meeting in the Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah. In the course of his remarks, Professor Mouw apologized to Latter-day Saints for the way in which Evangelicals have often treated the Mormon faith. Carrie Moore, of the *Deseret News*, reported about Zacharias's speech on 15 November 2004:

But what many Utahns may remember most distinctly is the sermon that came before it.

Taking the pulpit to speak of the event's historic nature, Fuller Theological Seminary President Richard Mouw addressed a capacity crowd of several thousand, offering a stunningly candid apology to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and noting that "friendship has not come easily between our communities." He dubbed the evening "historic" and apologized that Evangelicals "have often misrepresented the faith and beliefs of the Latter-day Saints."

"Let me state it clearly. We evangelicals have sinned against you," he said, adding both camps have tended to marginalize and simplify the others' beliefs.¹

I was there in the Tabernacle that evening, and to me his apology was, by far, the highlight of the evening. (His own comments on that "Tabernacle Apology" occur on pages 1-4 of *Talking with Mormons*.) A

1 Carrie A. Moore, "Evangelical Preaches at Salt Lake Tabernacle," *Deseret News*, November 14, 2004, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/595105580/Evangelical-preaches-at-Salt-Lake-Tabernacle.html>

number of evangelicals disagreed, though. Which is putting it mildly. Why were they so upset? Because the man offering the apology was not only one of them, but an unusually prominent and credible one of them.

Richard J. Mouw served for twenty years, from 1993 to 2013, as president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He joined the faculty at Fuller, a highly respected evangelical school, as Professor of Christian Philosophy in 1985, prior to which time he had taught for seventeen years at Calvin College in Michigan. He is still on the faculty of Fuller as Professor of Faith and Public Life.

In my limited personal experience with Professor Mouw, I've found him to be a pleasant and fair-minded gentleman who treats even contentious doctrinal differences with insight, good humor, and respect. I hold him in high esteem. Quite a number of years ago, for example, I was one of five Latter-day Saint scholars who formally debated five well-known Evangelical scholars during a meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society in Denver, Colorado. Professor Mouw was an admirably even-handed moderator, and the debate was an enjoyable experience for us (particularly, when, toward the end, a messenger broke in to announce that the BYU football team had just beaten the University of Utah). Only once did one of the Evangelical participants — an internationally esteemed Christian philosopher whose work I admire very much — make a rather disparaging and uncivil remark about Mormon beliefs. I happened to glance at Professor Mouw right then, and he looked back at me and rolled his eyes with quiet exasperation. Coincidentally running into me the next day, he apologized for the lapse of his friend and fellow Evangelical from the politeness and even friendliness that had otherwise characterized the debate.

Mouw describes himself as “a longtime subscriber to *Sunstone*” (59), which is another way of saying that his interest in Mormonism is long-standing and more than merely casual.² His connection with Mormonism began during a cross country trip with his parents when he was just entering adolescence. Pausing with them for a visit to Temple Square in Salt Lake City, he picked up a copy of the pamphlet “Joseph

2 *Sunstone* was born at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, founded by some LDS students there, and has long seemed to enjoy a special status — rather misleadingly so, in my judgment — among non-Mormon scholars of religion who take an interest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I spent a summer at Princeton University in 1994, for example, and was surprised to see back copies of *Sunstone* on the table in the waiting room of the Department of Religion there, along with only three or four other, more mainstream Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish publications.

Smith Tells His Own Story” and began to read it in the back seat of the family car. He reports that he felt an immediate kinship with that other fourteen year-old’s religious confusion, as his own family was somewhat divided by religion. He states, “It’s no exaggeration to say that I felt like I had discovered a friend” (6). Nonetheless, he hastens to assure his readers, “I was not tempted to believe Joseph Smith’s account of being visited by the divine Persons and angels” (7).

Later, he encountered Mormonism again through the teaching of the late counter-cult writer Walter Martin, for whom he plainly has a lingering respect that I find myself utterly unable to share or even, really, to grasp. He recalls a meeting in New Jersey at which Martin spoke and remembers a frustrated Latter-day Saint in attendance — with whom I strongly identify — who told Martin, “in an anguished tone, ‘You’re not even *trying* to understand!’” Quite surprising to me, he sees his experiences with Joseph Smith’s story and with Mr. Martin as pivotal to his own intellectual autobiography: “I’ve often thought of those two teenage encounters — my reading Joseph Smith’s First Vision account and witnessing the exchange between Walter Martin and the young Mormon — as what really pushed me toward the study of philosophy” (9).

Mouw wrote and published the book that I’m considering here, *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals*, while he was still serving as president of Fuller Theological Seminary. From his vantage point at an important center of Evangelical Protestant thinking, he was well aware that writing such a book would be a potentially divisive undertaking within his community: “Promoting the idea of friendly dialogue with Mormons isn’t a popular thing to do in the evangelical world,” he observes. “And you really get into trouble if you suggest that we evangelicals haven’t always been fair in our portrayals of what Mormons believe” (41).

Thus, he starts his book off with a disclaimer, and he issues such disclaimers at several points throughout: “Given the somewhat controversial character of the subject matter of this book, I don’t want to implicate friends who might suffer from guilt by association” (vi). “I approach my engagement with Mormonism as a Calvinist,” he explains (x). (His seventeen years at Calvin College, mentioned above, weren’t entirely the product of coincidence.) “I don’t believe that Joseph Smith was a specially anointed prophet of God. I don’t believe that the Book of Mormon is a new divine revelation. And so on” (32).

Still, he felt obliged to write it. “After giving out dozens of sound bites about Mormonism during the buildup to the 2012 presidential election, I decided it was time to write a book on the subject. Mitt Romney has been much in the news” — the book had been completed and long since sent to the press by the time of Governor Romney’s defeat in November — “and journalists have been eager to find someone who was willing to offer some thoughts about how evangelicals might end up voting if their only choice was between President Obama and a Mormon” (viii). Wanting to expand upon the sorts of things he was often being expected to say during quick and inevitably shallow media interviews, he saw his book as a way of “explaining the sound bites” (viii).

“I’m not conscious,” he writes,

of having approached the writing of this short book in a defensive mood. It’s simply that as a teacher I haven’t felt that I’ve been given the opportunity to engage in adequate teaching on the subject. So this book is my effort to take a little more space than I’ve been given elsewhere, to elaborate on a few sentences here and there that have been given public exposure. (ix)

However, if his resolute Calvinism should assure his Evangelical readers that he’s not going soft on the Mormons, that very Calvinism, Mouw says, also motivates him to consider Mormons and Mormonism in a friendly, kind, and irenic way:

I get a lot of help on this from the great Reformation theologian John Calvin. At one point in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin talks about what a political leader — he used the term “civil magistrate” — should be careful of when thinking about going to war against an enemy. Calvin was no pacifist. He believed that leaders, including Christian leaders, sometimes had to resort to warfare in dealing with an obvious evil. But he also knew that this is a very dangerous area spiritually. So he said that when leaders are considering initiating a military attack, they ought first of all to engage in some serious reflection. One thing leaders should do is to check out their own motives: “let them not be carried away with headlong anger, or be seized with hatred, or burn with implacable severity.” And then, Calvin added, they must try as much as possible to “have pity on the common nature in the one whose special fault they are punishing.”

Here's what Calvin was getting at. He was aware of a sinful pattern that keeps getting stirred up in our hearts and that we have to be constantly on guard against: the tendency to put the best possible interpretation on our own motives and the worst possible interpretation on the motives of the people we want to attack. Recognizing the tendency, Calvin is saying that as an important spiritual exercise we should be sure to be very honest about what is going on in our own hearts, and we should be sure we're not missing something good — or at least not as bad as we're inclined to think — in the lives of the people we want to attack. (18–19)³

It's difficult, in this context, not to be reminded of a marvelous passage in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*: "If only," that heroic Russian novelist, anti-Soviet dissident, and thinker (d. 2008) wrote,

it were all so simple! there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish.⁴

Mouw also draws on the nineteenth-century Dutch Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck, and what he and Bavinck have to say is so helpful and relevant — useful even, as will quickly be apparent, beyond the Mormon/Evangelical dialogue — that I think I'll treat it at some length here.

Mouw begins (on page 78) with a quotation from the first volume (*Prolegomena*) of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, where Bavinck has been arguing, with specific reference to Muslim thought, that his fellow Calvinists should approach the claims of non-Christian religions with an open mind:

3 On pages 19–29, Mouw makes a similar point by means of a brief exegesis of Psalm 139.

4 Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, translated by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 168 (1:4).

In the past the study of religions was pursued exclusively in the interest of dogmatics and apologetics. The founders of [non-Christian] religions, like Mohammed, were simply considered imposters, enemies of God, and accomplices of the devil. But ever since those religions have become more precisely known, this interpretation has proved to be untenable; it clashed both with history and psychology.

Mouw then observes that Bavinck's comment is manifestly relevant to Mormonism as well. Mohammed, like Joseph Smith, had produced a post-biblical scripture on the basis of alleged inspiration and angelic delivery, and, just as in Joseph's case, mainstream Christianity long contended that Mohammed was either a deliberately deceptive liar or a raving lunatic far out of touch with reality.

In his comments on the subject, Bavinck refused to carry on in that vein. Indeed, he insisted that it's no longer feasible to dismiss Mohammed simply as one of many "imposters, enemies of God, accomplices of the devil" — characterizations that have also been regularly applied by evangelicals to Joseph Smith. Instead, Bavinck was encouraging his readers to attend carefully to the *content* of Mohammed's teachings. And even more important, he suggested that we can expect to find God-given truths in those teachings. (78–79)

I'm reminded here of the great historian of Islam Marshall G. S. Hodgson, who, in his magisterial three-volume work *The Venture of Islam*, argued that any religious movement that has earned the allegiance of large numbers of people over lengthy periods of time must contain soul-satisfying truths. Otherwise, it would not have survived, let alone flourished. Hodgson had Islam foremost in mind, of course, but the principle holds more broadly than that. And surely, by this stage in our history⁵ it should be obvious that Mormonism is no merely ephemeral faith briefly entertained by a few marginal and monochromatic cranks.

Mouw's reflections on Herman Bavinck continue very much in that vein, for, he says,

5 I'm writing this paragraph on the 185th anniversary of the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has a current membership of more than fifteen million people in virtually every nation of the earth and which, earlier this week, announced the construction of new temples in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; Bangkok, Thailand; and Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

if ... we're given an opportunity to study and dialogue with the other group's actual teachings in a leisurely manner, we must wrestle with the question of how those teachings have actually inspired deep commitments in the lives of sane people who sincerely accept the teachings.

The shift here is from an agenda shaped by the question "How do we keep them from taking over our world?" to one that emerges when we ask "What is it about their teachings that speaks to what they understand to be their deepest human needs and yearnings?" When we seriously engage the ideas embodied in another religious perspective, participating in give-and-take dialogue with proponents of that perspective, we must also take seriously their own assessment of the founder(s) of their religious community. By carefully examining Islam as a system of thought, for example, we're also forced to consider carefully the way intelligent Muslims view the character of Mohammed. I want to commend the same sort of approach to the present-day assessment of Joseph Smith's teachings. (80)

And, in fact, Mouw treats Latter-day Saints with considerably more respect than we've been accustomed to receive from many Evangelical Protestant writers. "A dozen years of sustained dialogues with Mormon scholars and church leaders," he says, "have convinced me that the 'cult' label does not apply accurately to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (viii). "It has never felt to me as though I was talking to members of a 'cult'" (x).

"Not," he hastens to add, "that I'm ready to give them a free pass as simply another Christian denomination. I have too many serious theological disagreements with Mormonism to offer that verdict" (viii). "I'm not suggesting that by forming more positive relations all of our differences will magically melt away. That certainly isn't what has happened to me" (43).

Of course, our disagreements with Professor Mouw's theology are precisely as serious as his with ours, and we Latter-day Saints, I think I can truthfully say, harbor absolutely no desire to be seen as "simply another Christian denomination." Our claims are dramatic, and we know it. Indeed, we glory in that fact.

"My main concern in what I've been saying," writes Professor Mouw, "is to invite us to nurture friendlier relations with the Mormon community. I want us to listen carefully to our Mormon neighbors,

without deciding ahead of time what they ‘really’ believe” (43). It’s scarcely coincidental that the subtitle of *Talking with Mormons* is *An Invitation to Evangelicals*.

There are, he says, three big questions about Mormon thought with which he continues to struggle:

- (1) “Are Mormons talking about the same Jesus in which we traditional Christians are putting our trust?” (43)
- (2) Do Mormons adequately respect the authority of the Bible? (43–44)
- (3) And what about Mormonism’s founder, Joseph Smith? (44)

On the first, he reports, “I still have some serious misgivings, but the misgivings do not run quite as deep as they did earlier” (46). He has at least three reasons, he says, for hope or encouragement with regard to whether or not we Latter-day Saints are talking about the same Jesus as traditional, mainstream Christians.

For one thing, he cites Stephen Robinson’s “important observation” that “LDS terminology often seems naïve, imprecise and even sometimes sloppy by Evangelical standards,” partly at least because Mormons “have no professional clergy to keep our theological language finely tuned,” whereas traditional Christians “have had centuries in which to polish and refine their terminology.”⁶ “Given that situation,” Mouw remarks, “we should at least work to be sure we’re understanding each other better. And that has been happening” (47).

Secondly, he says, the disagreements that he has with Latter-day Saints are often not altogether unlike those that he has with theologians who plainly fall within the traditional Christian mainstream. Thus, for instance, “the Mormon insistence [on] the ‘good work’ that we must perform in connection with placing our faith in Christ — well, this is not unlike a claim that I regularly argue about with my friends in the Arminian tradition” (48).

And, finally, he senses that Mormon thinkers and theologians are interpreting some of the “very harsh-sounding LDS claims” in softer ways (48). One of these “harsh-sounding LDS claims” is the Lord’s (or, he would say, Joseph Smith’s) apparent condemnation of the

6 Mouw cites Robinson from Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 156.

great ecumenical and other creeds of mainstream Christendom as an “abomination.” (See his discussion on pages 48–54.)

On this latter point, I’m rather sympathetic. I’ve devoted a fair amount of effort, and hope to do still more, to increase (and, in a sense, to modify) Mormon attitudes toward the content of the classical creeds. But I share the Lord’s evaluation of them, and I’m afraid that I can’t see them as the result of calm — let alone inspired — deliberation; I can’t really see how anybody who has read Ramsay Macmullen’s *Voting about God in Early Church Councils* would be able to do that.⁷

Regarding his second “big question,” concerning the authority of the Bible, Mouw acknowledges that Latter-day Saints take a relatively high view of that scripture. “They typically use the word ‘infallible’ in talking about the Bible’s authority as the word of God,” he writes.

But then they add these other books: the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price. And they see these other writings as on a par with the Bible. Isn’t that enough simply to vote them off the Christian island? (44)

To his credit, he doesn’t actually seem to think that it *is* enough to expel us from Christendom. Not entirely and clearly so, anyway. For that reason, I feel somewhat churlish and ungrateful to look this gift horse in the mouth. But, first, I offer a quibble that will make our situation even worse from an Evangelical standpoint: In my experience, at least, it simply isn’t true that we “typically” describe the Bible as “infallible.” Believing Latter-day Saints usually have a high view of biblical historicity that’s roughly comparable to an Evangelical view, but we’re not inerrantists. Not even with regard to the Book of Mormon, which, on its own (inspired and canonical) Title Page, acknowledges the possibility of “faults” within it that it ascribes to “the mistakes of men.” I personally don’t find the notion of scriptural infallibility even remotely plausible, and I can’t see that I would find it of much help or utility even if I did.

But there are more interesting topics for discussion under the rubric of Mormonism’s view of scripture. For example, “In talking about the Mormon view of revelation and authority,” Mouw writes,

one point needs to be made clear at the outset. It isn’t just that the Mormons have more revealed books than the rest of us. They do, of course; but to say that doesn’t get to the heart of the issue. The real point is that books are not where the true

⁷ Ramsay Macmullen, *Voting about God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

authority resides for Mormons. Evangelical Christians often miss this basic point. (61)

The real authority for Latter-day Saints, he correctly observes, resides in the prophetic office.

In this regard, as in certain others, Mormonism aligns better with Catholicism than it does with Evangelical Protestantism. “The Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book,’ notes the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. “Christianity is the religion of the ‘Word’ of God, ‘not a written and mute word, but incarnate and living.’”⁸

A story related at the April 2008 General Conference by President Boyd K. Packer, of the Council of the Twelve, illustrates quite dramatically the claim of the Latter-day Saints on this issue:

In 1976 an area general conference was held in Copenhagen, Denmark. Following the closing session, President Spencer W. Kimball desired to visit the Vor Frue Church, where the Thorvaldsen statues of the *Christus* and of the Twelve Apostles stand. He had visited there some years earlier and wanted all of us to see it, to go there.

To the front of the church, behind the altar, stands the familiar statue of the *Christus* with His arms turned forward and somewhat outstretched, the hands showing the imprint of the nails, and the wound in His side very clearly visible. Along each side stand the statues of the Apostles, Peter at the front to the right and the other Apostles in order.

Most of our group was near the rear of the chapel with the custodian. I stood up front with President Kimball before the statue of Peter with Elder Rex D. Pinegar and Johan Helge Benthin, president of the Copenhagen stake.

In Peter’s hand, depicted in marble, is a set of heavy keys. President Kimball pointed to those keys and explained what they symbolized. Then, in an act I shall never forget, he turned to President Benthin and with unaccustomed firmness pointed his finger at him and said, “I want you to tell everyone in Denmark that I hold the keys! We hold the *real* keys, and we use them every day.”

8 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994), 31 (Part 1, Article 3, Paragraph 108).

I will never forget that declaration, that testimony from the prophet. The influence was spiritually powerful; the impression was physical in its impact.

We walked to the back of the chapel where the rest of the group was standing. Pointing to the statues, President Kimball said to the kind custodian, "These are the dead Apostles." Pointing to me, he said, "Here we have the *living* Apostles. Elder Packer is an Apostle. Elder Thomas S. Monson and Elder L. Tom Perry are Apostles, and I am an Apostle. We are the living Apostles.

"You read about the Seventies in the New Testament, and here are two of the living Seventies, Elder Rex D. Pinegar and Elder Robert D. Hales."

The custodian, who up to that time had shown no emotion, suddenly was in tears.

I felt I had had an experience of a lifetime.⁹

In Mormonism, authoritative teaching comes from revelation to living prophets and apostles, not from books — though, obviously, books can eventually contain records of past revelation.

But surely that was also true of earliest Christianity, as well. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, and Paul had some kind of authority in the primitive Christian movement — whether it derived from priesthood office or closeness to Jesus or some combination of those two and perhaps of other factors — well before they wrote their gospels and epistles, which, in fact, derived their own original status among believers from the status of their (purported) authors. The Christian movement had existed for decades before the Bible came to be, even in part. Christianity predates its scriptures.

Professor Mouw recognizes the problem:

9 Boyd K. Packer, "The Twelve," April 2008 General Conference, accessed April 6, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2008/04/the-twelve?lang=eng>. Significantly, I think, the Visitors' Center currently being constructed along with a temple outside of Rome will feature marble replicas not only of the *Christus*, which appears in several temple visitors centers elsewhere, but, flanking that statue, of Thorvaldsen's Twelve Apostles, including Peter with the keys. The implicit challenge to the claimed Petrine authority and keys associated with St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City is too obvious to overlook.

There were times in Old Testament history when godly people had no authoritative book to rely on in understanding the will of God. Noah, Abraham, Moses — none of these had anything like a Bible. God spoke directly to them. Similarly, in the New Testament and the early church, there was much reliance on oral tradition — the memories of what Jesus had taught and done, and later the memories of the teachings of the apostles.

There came a point, though, when these testimonies were written down; and eventually those writings that the church came to see as supremely authoritative became — in the forming of “the canon” — our Bible. Christians became a “people of the Book.” (63)

But it isn’t clear to me that he recognizes — or, at least, that he acknowledges — the implications of that problem: Trust in the living oracles is both chronologically and logically prior to trust in the transmitted written records of their sayings and deeds. Christians became solely a “people of the Book” only many generations into their history; the earliest Christians, by inescapable implication, were not “people of the Book,” not in the sense that he uses the term.

At this point, it might be appropriate to comment upon the term *people of the Book* itself. The phrase occurs in the Qur’an as *‘ahl al-kitāb*, and it’s used to designate non-Muslim adherents of faiths — such as Judaism, Christianity, and Sabianism — that possess a revealed scripture. Significantly, though, only possession of scriptural texts predating the revelation of the Qur’an — texts viewed in Islam as products of divine revelation that have become corrupted — qualifies a group for inclusion as “people of the Book.” The Baha’is, for example, don’t count as a “people of the Book” despite their possession of written scriptures because those scriptures date only to the nineteenth century, and the situation of Middle Eastern Baha’is in recent years has been precarious at best.¹⁰

In Judaism, the equivalent term is *‘am ha-sefer* (also, roughly, “people of the Book”). Apparently borrowed from Islam, it nonetheless refers specifically to the Jewish people and the Torah, or to the Jewish people and their wider canon (including, for example, the Mishnah and the Talmud). Followers of other religions in the Abrahamic tradition (e.g., Christianity and Islam) don’t count for Orthodox Judaism as “people of the Book.”

10 The Ahmadiyya movement, which originated in India under the British Raj toward the end of the nineteenth century, has struggled for acceptance within the broader Islamic community for similar but not precisely identical reasons.

In other words, insistence on status as “people of the Book” was used, whether intentionally or not, to close the door on any claim of subsequent revelation. But this should raise warning flags for a follower of Christ. Already in the New Testament, Jesus alludes to those who venerate dead prophets but decline to allow the possibility of living ones:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous,

And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.

Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.

Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.

Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:

That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.¹¹

The third of Professor Mouw’s big questions concerns the status of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He quotes a stark and fundamental question that the Latter-day Saint historian Richard L. Bushman once posed to Mouw and his fellow Evangelicals during an interfaith dialogue: “Is Joseph Smith *possible* for you?” (72). Or, as Mouw himself restates it, “Are you at least open to the *possibility* that God would raise up someone who might occupy a restored prophetic office?” (73).

He candidly acknowledges that he continues to be unsure about what to do with the founder of Mormonism: “Even while I reject the key claims that Joseph Smith made on his own behalf, ... I still struggle to find some way of explaining him” (75). The choice seems to be, “to put it crudely: *a liar or a lunatic?*” (73, italics in the original). And there’s no easy way out of that disturbingly sharp dichotomy: “I get nervous when

11 Matthew 23:29–35.

some non-Mormon scholars try to find some alternative to the ‘liar or lunatic’ options.” (74)¹²

Nevertheless, he cites Jan Shipps’s declaration that “the mystery of Mormonism cannot be solved until we solve the mystery of Joseph Smith,” and then adds that “I have no delusions about being able to solve the mystery of Joseph Smith here. Indeed, I’m content, in a sense, to live with the mystery” (76). (Later, on that same page, he says in fact that he won’t even try to solve it.)

My own judgment is that “the Prophet puzzle,” as it’s been called, is *intended* to be difficult and to force a choice. The well-attested existence of the golden plates of the Book of Mormon (to say nothing of the other artifacts seen and hefted by multiple witnesses at the origins of Mormonism) leaves no alternative, really, to a choice between deliberate modern fraud or real Nephites. Subjective hallucination on Joseph’s part doesn’t go a long way toward explaining the experiences of the Three and the Eight Witnesses.

Professor Mouw raises an interesting issue that seems worth mentioning at this point. “The very existence of an increasingly expanding Mormon intellectual ‘tent,’” he says,

is a relatively new phenomenon. It’s not unthinkable that there may come a time when the LDS church is faced with the need to establish boundaries in how the faithful are to understand — to make clear sense of — “the pure and simple spirit that had prevailed in the apostolic era.” My hunch is that when that happens, it will be very much like a “Nicene moment” for Mormonism. (59–60)

In other words, he says, a theological tradition will inevitably arise within Mormonism, demanding clearer doctrinal statements, definitions, and distinctions, and perhaps even trained, professional, academic theologians. Perhaps. But the apostolic teaching office, believing Latter-day Saints expect, will still be in place, pending the Second Coming of the Savior, into the foreseeable future, quite unlike the situation in the ancient Christian church after roughly AD 100. There will still be inspiration and prophetic priesthood authority. And we can surely hope that doctrinal issues won’t be “settled” in raucous shouting matches akin to particularly unruly political conventions — as happened at Nicaea and elsewhere.

12 On page 74, he cites Rodney Stark’s attempt to find a way around that either/or dilemma, obviously unimpressed by it.

The description of the last days given late in his life by the prophet Nephi portrays a time of apostasy that Latter-day Saints regard with sadness and dread, not as an ideal to which we aspire:

For it shall come to pass in that day that the churches which are built up, and not unto the Lord, when the one shall say unto the other: Behold, I, I am the Lord's; and the others shall say: I, I am the Lord's; and thus shall every one say that hath built up churches, and not unto the Lord — And they shall contend one with another; and their priests shall contend one with another, and they shall teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance.¹³

In that light, I would like to comment, before closing, upon a few specific issues raised by Professor Mouw.

One matter that clearly worries him is “the Mormon teaching that humans and the members of the Godhead belong to the same order of being.” For, he says, “this claim flies in the face of the traditional understanding of biblical teaching, that God is God and we are not, and that any effort to close the metaphysical gap runs the clear risk of espousing idolatry” (87). He mentions several times “the essential Jewish and Christian teaching that there’s a vast metaphysical gap between Creator and creature” (83).

Judaism and Christianity have been united in their insistence that the Creator and the creation — including God’s human creatures — are divided by an unbridgeable “being” gap. God is the *totaliter aliter*, the “Wholly Other,” who is in a realm of existence that’s radically distinct from the creation that the triune God called into existence out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) by a sovereign decree (“Let there be... and there was”). (54)

This is undeniably the standard teaching of traditional Judaism and Christianity (and, I might add, of Islam). But is it biblical? (Or even Qur’anic?) I don’t believe it to be. The Bible is silent about “ontology”; Hebrew (like Semitic languages more generally, including Arabic) is quite deficient with regard to a verb *to be*.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Bible says absolutely nothing about God’s being *totaliter aliter*. Nor is the Bible a text about metaphysics. Instead, metaphysical ideas tend to be imposed

13 2 Nephi 28:3–4.

14 For a classic discussion of this issue, see Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970).

upon it. And, for that matter, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is at best very dubiously biblical.

I'm uncomfortable, also, to read in Professor Mouw's book that Mormons "deny" the Trinity, as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Christian Scientists do (15). This isn't true. As I argue in an article soon to appear here in *Interpreter*, Latter-day Saints deny the ontological Tri-Unity associated with the Council of Nicaea — but strongly affirm a social model of the Trinity that is entirely in harmony with the biblical data and, at least in my perception, rather like the social Trinitarian models that are increasingly advocated among Protestant and Catholic theologians willing to think outside the proverbial Nicene box.

Moreover, I wasn't particularly pleased to see Professor Mouw's enthusiasm for O. Kendall White's 1987 book *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy* (25), either, and I would vigorously contest his claim that we believe in "a self-perfectible human being, and salvation by works" (27). I regret that years of friendly, substantive interaction with Latter-day Saints haven't already been enough to dissuade him of these (as I see them) misperceptions regarding our beliefs.

But these are matters for further discussion, and the discussions between Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints haven't ended. Indeed, I hope that they will continue, expand, and flourish. I recognize great value in them.

I agree with Professor Mouw, for example, on one of the areas that he identifies as "an important topic for theological discussion between traditional Christians and Mormons." That topic is "What are the basic desires and dilemmas of the human condition? What are the hopes and fears that Jesus came from heaven to address in his redemptive mission?" (57) We're all, both Evangelical Protestants and Latter-day Saints, in the same human existential condition, needing a sense of purpose and meaning, the possibility of redemption, and the hope of life beyond the grave. And there remain, as well, plenty of things to be clarified and discussed in "the unique content of Mormon thought: a continuing post-biblical revelation mediated by a living prophet, divine corporeality, eternal progression, and the like" (73).

I think that we Latter-day Saints can learn a great deal about our own faith and doctrines by trying to see them through the eyes of friendly and informed outsiders, as well, obviously, as understanding the views of others more accurately and sympathetically. Both of these are very worthy goals. And Richard Mouw is one of the friendliest and most theologically competent of such outsiders. He honors us by the

attention he's given to our faith, and we can profit considerably from our interactions with thinkers and scholars of his caliber.

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