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## **Toward Ever More Intelligent Discipleship**

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# TOWARD EVER MORE INTELLIGENT DISCIPLESHIP

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Daniel C. Peterson

*Abstract: The temporarily rather comfortable “fit” between the Restored Gospel and American civic religion is a thing of the past, and we contemporary Latter-day Saints seem to find ourselves in a more and more marginalized position, theologically and socially. This was where our predecessors, both earlier in this dispensation and among the first Christians, were located, and it may not be an altogether bad thing. It will, for instance, force us to take our beliefs more seriously, less casually. And it may well drive us back to the unique resources provided by the Restoration, which have much to offer.*

There are as-yet unplumbed depths in the Restored Gospel that might well — as one Catholic theologian has recently argued — make it uniquely able to respond to the challenges of modern thought. One of the reasons for the existence of the Interpreter Foundation is to foster the kinds of scholarship and reflection that will enable us to identify those depths and to lay them out for the benefit of both Latter-day Saints and honest and open-minded outsiders, to give us important tools for doing the Lord’s work in an ever-changing intellectual and cultural environment. Growing up in the fifties and sixties, it was easy to assume that American society respected Latter-day Saints. We might be out on the theological fringe, regarded as a bit quirky, but American civic religion was at least theoretically pretty much on our side. For example, Americans seemed to honor ideals of faithful, heterosexual marriage, with fathers taking the lead and mothers caring for children. Society was, in other words, largely in sync with, and supportive of, fundamental, practical Mormon values. In fact, Mormons seemed quintessentially American — which, in the postwar era of the Pax Americana, benefited our church not only in the United States but in Europe and Japan.

Today, though, Mormonism and Western society seem to be parting ways in crucial respects. They’re no longer aligned. The most powerful engines of popular attitude-formation and elite opinion in America and

Europe are typically amused by, when not altogether contemptuous toward, conservative Christianity — which, in the sense relevant here, certainly includes the Latter-day Saints. In an era when such things aren't appreciated, Mormonism seems socially retrograde and corporate to many outside observers. Mormonism's patriarchal orientation, for example, is, to put it mildly, out of fashion in fashionable circles. Its emphasis on heterosexual marriage is often seen as hateful, its insistence on fidelity within marriage as somewhat quaint, and its requirement of chastity outside of marriage as transparently ridiculous.

Young minds are particularly sensitive to peer pressure and fashions, and, consequently, it's unsurprising that the relatively sudden collapse of external social support for core Mormon values seems disproportionately to affect the younger generation. That generation is also exceptionally "wired," and has therefore been hit with an onslaught of attacks based on Mormon history for which traditional Church instruction has left them woefully unprepared. I'm convinced that those attacks can be met, but the fact remains that, because the details of its history aren't safely lost in, say, the distant biblical past, Mormonism is more open to such attacks, in a very real sense, than are most other, older, religious traditions.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, has repeatedly warned that the Church is never more than a generation from extinction, so everything hinges on how well and how widely the faith is transmitted.<sup>1</sup>

The way in which the Church responds to this challenge will determine much about its future over the next five, twenty, and hundred years. Fortunately, Mormonism is well equipped, in my judgment, with resources that Latter-day Saint thinkers haven't even begun to employ — including teachings and doctrinal insights that are truly radical, in every meaning of that word including the etymological sense of getting down to the roots (Latin *radix*; plural *radixes* or *radices*).

I actually think we were lulled somewhat into complacency by the seeming congruence of Mormon values with American civic religion during much of the twentieth century. We were often depicted, and sometimes thought of ourselves, as simply a family church with an extra book (and, generations earlier, with extra wives). And, of course, we are that. But Mormonism is far, far more, as well.

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1 As, for example, in Jeffrey R. Holland, "That Our Children May Know," a devotional address given at Brigham Young University on August 25, 1981, before his call as a General Authority. See [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland\\_children-may-know/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland_children-may-know/).

And, while we share much in common with others of religious faith, and especially with our fellow Christians — most importantly, in the latter case, our commitment to Jesus as the resurrected divine Lord through whom alone salvation is possible — if we emphasize only our commonalities, others will understandably wonder why they shouldn't simply keep what they have.<sup>2</sup> Mormonism, after all, is a high-demand form of religion. If it isn't in some way dramatically different from Methodism or Catholicism, why embrace it?

One observer who has noticed the radical distinctiveness of Mormon doctrine, and who can helpfully remind us of it, is the Catholic theologian Stephen Webb, author of, among many other volumes, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*.<sup>3</sup> “Much of this book,” he himself writes, describing the volume, “is nothing more than an attempt to take seriously the possibility that God has a form or shape that is something like what we call a body.”<sup>4</sup>

And that, of course, is a central doctrine of Mormonism. But it's not a notion that's been in vogue among Christian thinkers for, say, the past nineteen hundred years or so. So what's this Catholic thinker's take, in that light, on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? “*I am not a Mormon*,” he writes (and the italics are his), “*but sometimes I wish I were one*.”<sup>5</sup>

That wasn't always his attitude. For the first part of his life, his opinion of Mormonism was precisely what one would have expected from the conservative Midwestern American Protestant background in which he was raised. When he eventually gave some real attention to the subject, though, he was surprised: “I came to realize just how deeply Christ-centered Mormonism is.”<sup>6</sup>

He thought he already knew about the Book of Mormon, too. (As the Catholic sociologist Thomas O'Dea famously observed, “The Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those

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2 I don't discount the importance of stressing our common faith in Christ. I've even published a book on the topic. Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998).

3 Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4 Ibid., 5.

5 Ibid., 11.

6 Ibid., 115.

books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it.”<sup>7</sup>) But he was somewhat unprepared for the reality of the text: “When I actually read this book, however, I was utterly surprised by what I found. The Book of Mormon, I found, is utterly obsessed with Jesus Christ, and I concluded that everything it teaches is meant to awaken, encourage, and deepen faith in him.”<sup>8</sup> “Mormonism is pre-Nicene theology in a post-Nicene world,” he writes with palpable delight, “the theological equivalent to discovering that dinosaurs are still living on some isolated island.”<sup>9</sup>

“Studying Mormonism has made me a better Christian,” he says, “which is why I am eternally grateful for the teachings of Joseph Smith as well as all those scholars, church leaders, and everyday believers who have labored to maintain those teachings as a living tradition. ... BYU is a thriving, Christ-centered, and intellectually exciting place and should serve as a model for how Christianity and the academy can be productively integrated.”<sup>10</sup>

At one point, toward the end of his book, he compares the reformer John Calvin with Joseph Smith. “If I had to choose between Smith and Calvin,” he writes:

I would unhesitatingly choose Smith. A Calvinist could not begin to fathom all the riches in Mormonism, although a Mormon can go a long way toward understanding and sympathizing with Calvinism. Mormonism is just a bigger set of ideas than Calvinism. It is capacious and expansive, with plenty of intellectual room to grow.<sup>11</sup>

Webb is particularly taken with the “original, fascinating, and provocative metaphysics” of Mormonism, which he sees as “sophisticated and radical.”<sup>12</sup> I myself have often suggested that the fundamental “heresy” (if you will) of Mormonism is the assertion that God and humankind are members of the same genus or species, that divinity and humanity aren’t fundamentally different (*ganz anders*) but are points on a continuum. Much about our soteriology, our doctrines of salvation and exaltation; our conception of human nature, the purpose of life, and

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7 Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

8 Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 118.

9 Ibid., 167.

10 Ibid., vii.

11 Ibid., 182.

12 Ibid., 25, 9.

the plan of salvation; and the nature of God flows from this single, rich concept. Stephen Webb makes a similar point (if not essentially the same one): “I propose that the most basic principle of Mormon metaphysics states that all of reality ‘under the sun’ (the natural world) is of the same basic nature as all of reality ‘above the sun’ (the supernatural world).”<sup>13</sup> In Mormonism, “God is still mysterious, but his mystery is a matter of just how great, not how distant, he is.”<sup>14</sup> “Just as there is no metaphysical gap between God’s nature and human nature, there is also no moral gap between God’s perfection and human striving.”<sup>15</sup> “The early Christians were known,” he remarks,

to have remarkably positive views of the human body. Celsus was a second-century Greek philosopher who wrote the first book against Christianity (it was published around A.D. 178). In it, he called Christians a *philosomaton genos*, which means a “flesh-loving people.” Celsus was amazed that Christians took their physical existence so seriously that they wanted to take their bodies with them to the afterlife. If we take Celsus’s definition to heart, then Mormonism is the most characteristically Christian movement of all Christian traditions.<sup>16</sup>

“The Mormon imagination is solidly grounded in material reality,” writes Webb, “but it takes the physical world to new and unheard-of heights.”<sup>17</sup> In the mainstream of Christianity, by contrast, “even the least theologically astute Christians have appropriated Plato, whether they know it or not. Take away Plato from Christianity and you will get ... well, you will end up with something very much like the Mormon conception of the divine.”<sup>18</sup>

Do Latter-day Saints themselves grasp the spectacular sweep of their doctrine? The grandeur of their vision of humanity and its destiny?

Elder Orson F. Whitney, who served as a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints until his death in 1931, related an interesting experience that has made the rounds in the Church in the decades since then:

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13 Ibid., 33.

14 Ibid., 40.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 148.

17 Ibid., 10.

18 Ibid., 85.

Many years ago a learned man, a member of the Roman Catholic Church, came to Utah and spoke from the stand of the Salt Lake Tabernacle. I became well-acquainted with him, and we conversed freely and frankly. A great scholar, with perhaps a dozen languages at his tongue's end, he seemed to know all about theology, law, literature, science and philosophy. One day he said to me: "You Mormons are all ignoramuses. You don't even know the strength of your own position. It is so strong that there is only one other tenable in the whole Christian world, and that is the position of the Catholic Church. The issue is between Catholicism and Mormonism. If we are right, you are wrong; if you are right, we are wrong; and that's all there is to it. The Protestants haven't a leg to stand on. For, if we are wrong, they are wrong with us, since they were a part of us and went out from us; while if we are right, they are apostates whom we cut off long ago. If we have the apostolic succession from St. Peter, as we claim, there is no need of Joseph Smith and Mormonism; but if we have not that succession, then such a man as Joseph Smith was necessary, and Mormonism's attitude is the only consistent one. It is either the perpetuation of the gospel from ancient times, or the restoration of the gospel in latter days."<sup>19</sup>

Now, of course, that unnamed "learned man" was referring to the question of ecclesiastical or priesthood authority, not theology, but, in my opinion, the same question holds: Do we understand the strength of our position? Do we appreciate it? Are we doing our job in expounding it?

"Could it be," asks Stephen Webb, focusing on one particular area of potential strength, "that [Joseph] Smith ... foresaw a middle ground between Plato's immaterialism and the secular, atheistic ideology of materialism? ... Could it be that Smith, who had virtually no formal education, put in motion ideas that will overthrow the consensus of Western theological immaterialism?"<sup>20</sup>

And he suggests, current science is also transforming our understanding of matter and the physical world; the concept of matter has become increasingly problematic, and Mormonism's notions of

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19 Cited in LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 3–4.

20 Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 81, 82.



“pure” and “refined” matter may have something theologically and philosophically important to say in this new situation.<sup>21</sup>

Even ordinary matter is, for example, largely empty space, not really solid at all. The distance between nuclei and their protons is, relatively speaking, vast. And those protons aren’t the hard, little planet-like objects that I grew up seeing in schoolroom models and illustrations, but “probability waves” of uncertain location. Moreover, although our word *atom* comes from the Greek of Democritus, meaning “indivisible,” Los Alamos and Hiroshima and Nagasaki taught us decades ago that they are, in fact, divisible, and we’ve learned a great deal since those first atomic bombs about their constituent parts: baryons, gluons, quarks, wave-particle duality, quantum fluctuations, and Higgs bosons.

Mr. MacPhee, the sturdy-minded and skeptical materialist in C. S. Lewis’s novel *That Hideous Strength*, still has his representatives in atheistic and agnostic circles today, but his simple, stout, commonsense materialism is no longer tenable.

Consider, for example, the new world discussed in Richard Panek’s 2011 book *The 4% Universe: Dark Matter, Dark Energy, and the Race to Discover the Rest of Reality*: Our universe, which we now know to have originated in an inconceivable explosion roughly 13.75 billion years ago, is composed of 72.8% dark energy and 22.7% dark matter. The remainder — a mere 4.56% of the cosmos — is “baryonic matter.” That’s the matter that we know, the matter that we can often see and sometimes touch, the stuff of which stars and planets and mountains and pine trees and Porsches and buildings and kittens and babies are made. These figures, writes Panek, offer “an exquisitely precise accounting of the depth of our ignorance.”<sup>22</sup>

Of course, it’s never prudent to tie one’s theology too closely to current scientific theories or fashionable philosophical positions. Nicene Trinitarianism and the geocentrism of Galileo’s ecclesiastical opponents offer clear cautionary examples that could be multiplied indefinitely and should never be overlooked.

But scientific investigations of the nature of matter suggest to Stephen Webb one area where Latter-day Saints might find a congenial opportunity for mining the considerable intellectual resources that their faith offers them. “By arguing that only the physical is real,” he writes,

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21 Ibid., 78–80.

22 Richard Panek, *The 4% Universe: Dark Matter, Dark Energy, and the Race to Discover the Rest of Reality* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Mariner Books, 2011), 242.

“and that the divine is physical in ways that we can only glimpse in this world, Mormon metaphysics actually has some advantages over more traditional metaphysical schemes that emphasize the immateriality of the divine. Most significantly, Mormonism can address directly and sympathetically the question of materialism that lies at the heart of modern atheism.”<sup>23</sup> “The case can be made that the most serious alternative to fundamentalism and Catholicism in terms of having the resources to turn back the tide of modernity is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”<sup>24</sup>

And there are undoubtedly many other promising areas to consider. We need only engage in the deep thinking, reading, and reflection that is required to discover them and to lay them out: “And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”<sup>25</sup> “The things of God,” wrote the Prophet Joseph Smith,

are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity — thou must commune with God.<sup>26</sup>

I have absolute confidence that Mormonism can prosper if it draws deeply from its own well, which brims with rich and profound insights that Latter-day Saints haven’t even begun to appreciate, let alone adequately to deploy. In this, I agree with the great B. H. Roberts, who provided something of a creed for me when he wrote:

I believe “Mormonism” affords opportunity for disciples of the second sort: nay, that its crying need is for such disciples. It calls for thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of the truths, but will develop the truths; and enlarge it by that development. Not half — not one-hundredth part — not a thousandth part of that which Joseph Smith revealed to the church has yet been

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23 Ibid., 9.

24 Ibid., 147.

25 Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.

26 *History of the Church*, 3:295–96; paragraph divisions altered; from a letter from Joseph Smith and others to Edward Partridge and the Church, March 20, 1839, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri.

unfolded, either to the church or to the world. The work of the expounder has scarcely begun. The Prophet planted by teaching the germ-truths of the great dispensation of the fulness of times. The watering and weeding is going on, and God is giving the increase, and will give it more abundantly in the future as more intelligent discipleship shall obtain. The disciples of “Mormonism,” growing discontented with the necessarily primitive methods which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take profounder and broader views of the great doctrines committed to the Church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cast them in new formulas; cooperating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of development.<sup>27</sup>

If the challenges of this new era awaken Mormons from the comfortable complacency of the fifties and sixties and return them to the native theological radicalism of their faith, that won’t be a bad thing.

I recall an offensive comment made to me many years ago by a very kind man who meant nothing negative at all. He was a member of the Church, but he hadn’t been active or involved for many years, if, indeed, he ever had been. My wife and I were moving with our small family to Utah Valley to take a teaching position at Brigham Young University. “Oh,” he said, approvingly, “Provo’s a nice, quiet, churchy little town.”

I’ve thought about that innocent remark ever since. My vision of the gospel isn’t one of quaintness or churchiness. To me, the gospel offers a bracing, fundamentally transformative, deeply radical worldview that goes far beyond the homespun pieties of Old Time Religion. “Just ordinary people trying to become gods,” quips one wit.<sup>28</sup>

The Interpreter Foundation was established, in part at least, to encourage and further the kind of discipleship called for by Elder Roberts. In that spirit, although Doctrine and Covenants 88 had the Kirtland Temple in mind, it’s perhaps not entirely inappropriate to continue the quotation from above:

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27 B. H. Roberts, “Book of Mormon Translation,” *Improvement Era* 9/9 (July 1906): 713.

28 Cited by Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 309.

Organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God; that your incomings may be in the name of the Lord; that your outgoings may be in the name of the Lord; that all your salutations may be in the name of the Lord, with uplifted hands unto the Most High.<sup>29</sup>

Similar goals and a similar ethos suffuse, or should suffuse, the Interpreter Foundation, too. We invite everybody who is at all interested in this effort to join us, whether as readers, donors, volunteers, editors, or writers. In this way, we hope to serve the Lord with our minds, as well as with our hearts and hands, to build an edifice and construct a record that will be “worthy of all acceptance.”<sup>30</sup>

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29 Doctrine and Covenants 88:119–120.

30 Doctrine and Covenants 128:24.







