

Mormon Christianity: A Critical Appreciation
by a Christian Pluralist

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I RECENTLY HAD AN UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY to analyze the ideas and experience the worship of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Following four months of intense dialogue with a Mormon intellectual and former missionary, I had seven sessions with missionary elders, attended a variety of services in several wards, and read the Mormon scriptures as well as several hundred pages of theology. I think this exposure should warrant a fair-minded decision about whether or not to join the Church. The following remarks sketch my background, expectations, experience, and deliberations.

Having reinforced the Fundamentalist, Mennonite, and Presbyterian influences in my background with studies in history of religions, my graduate work in the philosophy of religion has focused on various atheistic movements and writers that view all religion as worthless — secular humanism, the Marxisms, and Nietzsche — as well as the “widespread practical atheism” (Smart 1969, 499)¹ and irreligion influenced by the individualism and consumerism of our industrial civilization. For some time I have felt that the differences between the world’s traditional religions are minor when contrasted with the enormous difference between any one of them and the post-Enlightenment atheisms. From this perspective, the differences between the various branches or versions of any one of the religions seem to me unspeakably minuscule. Access to saving experience and wisdom seems available and to some extent demonstrated in most, if not all, religions and denominations, despite apparent differences in belief. But through mutual investigation, dialogue, criticism, and appropriation, I suggest we can encourage ever more radical transforma-

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¹ See also Harrington 1985, 202–3; Bell 1978, 21; and Velasquez 1982, 243. Philip Devine (1986, 280–82) considers market “economism” to be a religion worshipping the lesser god of buying and selling. Susan Wolf (1982) argues for an easing of many scriptural prescriptions for the saintly life out of sympathy with many of the features of what I would label “all-American higher hedonism.”

tion toward a lifestyle centered in the religious ultimate, uniquely experienced and conceptualized in our various traditions.

I also presume that for many of us, local religions and denominations mold our spiritual sensibilities long before we are in a position to investigate the global alternatives, decide for ourselves, or be proselytized. Nevertheless, I have long struggled with my religious identity, being torn between two positions. First is the commitment to the Pauline ecumenical vision of one God who is over, through, and in all, with one faith, one baptism, and one body (Eph. 4:4–6). In light of this view, much of the factionalism of denominations and cults, of conservatives and liberals, is merely spiritual dissipation. Second is the need to serve this vision in a concrete movement, despite my dissatisfaction with all the options. Because of my unfinalized religious identity and my pluralist legitimation of religions and denominations, I, perhaps naively, did not shy away from the exclusivist LDS movement.

I began my investigation of Mormonism assuming that the Church has, by its very survival, proved itself more than a sect or cult and is justifiably considered a maturing denomination of Christianity. It represents a unique, legitimate attempt to instantiate part of the inexhaustible potential glimpsed in the biblical world views and lifestyles. I presumed that some youthful enthusiasm remained and contributed to the Church's strength, though I saw evidence of the inevitable transformation from cult naïveté to sophisticated, global denomination or perhaps new religion. I thought Mormonism seemed successful in creating a strong moral culture of the kind prescribed by philosophers² countering the dominant, Western, capitalist culture of hedonism and enabling unusual compliance with the domestic moral moderation advocated by the Bible. This moral culture, in turn, enabled deeper attempts to release the type of generosity prescribed in the egalitarian and liberationist strands of biblical communitarianism.³ I was attracted by W. D. Davies's suggestion that Mormonism "is the American expression of many of the same forces that led in Europe to Marxism" (in Madsen 1978, 91), and by Fawn Brodie's claim that "the spirit of true Marxian communism — 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need' — was implicit in the whole system" (1971, 106).

Though I was not inclined to take the Book of Mormon as a lost-but-found fifth gospel, I was prepared to treat it with respect as an attempt to reintroduce

² Alasdair MacIntyre concludes *After Virtue* (1981, 245) by saying, "What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us." Stanley Hauerwas says, "Our only escape from destructive histories consists in having the virtues trained by a truthful story, and that can come solely through participation in a society that claims our lives in a more fundamental fashion than any profession or state has the right to do" (1981, 127).

³ "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality" (2 Cor. 8:13–14, RSV); "Cease to do evil and learn to do right, pursue justice and champion the oppressed" (Isa. 1:17, NEB); "No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke" (Isa. 58:6, JPSA).

the biblical moral ethos in an exotic, narrative context. I was excited to discover that it is possible to affirm a selective, critical, demythologized version of Mormon Christianity without being excommunicated (see Ostler 1984; McMurrin 1959, 1965). But it seems that the official self-understanding of Mormonism dominates among Mormons, namely, that virtually all Christian history has been apostate and that the unique true church was restored by special revelation to an ancient American people, émigrés from the Middle East, whose buried scripture was made known to Joseph Smith. This large and seemingly fantastic claim makes a temperate evaluation difficult. It forces an intellectually unhealthy all-or-nothing decision that polarizes Mormons and non-Mormons. It is this polarization that I address and wish to see dissolved.

As in all religious movements, I find strengths and weaknesses in Mormonism. On the one hand, Mormonism seems to be an effective moral culture in a civilization that some philosophers presume has lost moral culture. To a large extent morality is cultivated in organized lay study of Mormon scriptures, whose negative and positive moral principles, rules, policies, and observations are similar to, and as powerful as, those in the Bible. One example is the prophetic accusation, uniquely worded in the Book of Mormon, against those who, by loving money, fine apparel, and fine sanctuaries, actually rob the poor (Morm. 8:36–39; 2 Ne. 28:13). Another timely example could be set by those who, like the first Christians and the first Anabaptists, would “rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of their enemy; and . . . [would bury] their weapons of war deep in the earth, because of their love towards their brethren” (Alma 26:32). I find such teachings in the Mormon scriptures extremely valuable.

On the other hand, there seem to be conflicting scriptural remarks about the concept of God in Mormonism. Whereas Abraham 3:2, 9, and 13 suggest that God is enthroned near a star called Kolob, and Mosiah 2:17 localizes service of God in service of one’s fellow beings, presumably on earth, Doctrine and Covenants 93:33 and 35 indicate that the eternal elements are the tabernacle of God, and Doctrine and Covenants 88:41 says God is above, in, through, and round about all things while all things are round about God, suggesting a diffused, cosmic omnipresence.

More worrisome, perhaps, are allegations of controlled history, indoctrination, authoritarianism, subordination of women, favoritism toward right-wing politics, anti-intellectualism, a notion of God as growing from a man, fabricated visions, threatened or symbolic violence to punish covenant-breaking, and perfectionism-based depression (see Ostler 1984; Roberts 1985; Bluhm et al. 1986; and Brodie 1971, 24, 409). These allegations are troubling not because they are unanswerable, but because it is unsettling, given these issues, to experience the enthusiastic certainty of missionaries who teach as if theirs is the only coherent thought system and lifestyle on earth. While Gordon B. Hinckley, for example, insists that “we don’t need critics standing on the sidelines” (“The Mormons,” 1987), I would think that religions and denominations especially need critics, since it is perilously easy to claim divine sanction for all-too-human naiveté, error, and sometimes perversity. I fear that, given

the elusiveness of the religious ultimate and the plurality of religions and ideologies, we are tempted to be dogmatic, authoritarian, and zealous precisely where the foundations are shakiest. Thus the unquestioning confidence I have noted among Mormons seems as unwarranted as it is anywhere else in the world of religion.

My provisional view of the LDS Church is that it seems to be a strong church, a remarkably staunch attempt to replicate in our age many biblical practices and beliefs. I find many understandable attempts to be faithful to the biblical gospel: the Church's stress on transformation from self-centeredness to selflessness, following the example of Jesus; salvation from sin; faith in Jesus; repentance; baptism by immersion, "after the manner of [Jesus'] burial" (D&C 76:51); obedience to commandments to love God and neighbor; and emphasis on obeying spiritual "laws," such as obedience, sacrifice, consecration, chastity, health, tithing, and the fast. However, in all this I sense a tendency toward grace-slighting, works-first legalism (Moro. 10:32; Hel. 12:24; 2 Ne. 25:23).

In my view Mormonism could be even stronger if it took steps that most would initially regard as subversive, namely, deflating what seem to me to be pious overestimations. Mormonism is strong because of its focus on adherence to biblical themes reiterated in its supplementary scriptures. Part of the task I suggest is differentiating between the moral and theological content of the Mormon scriptures, on the one hand, and the status of the founder, on the other hand. That is, many of the main ideas of the Mormon scriptures seem useful independently of their alleged origins. Thus, if Joseph Smith were viewed as a charismatic founder of a denomination, but the actual origins of the Mormon scriptures turned out to be other than officially claimed, the Church could soften its all-or-nothing approach that insulates Mormons from believers of other denominations and religions.

Now that the Church is globally established, it would remain strong even if it came to devalue the Book of Mormon to the status of edifying, amateur fiction, rather than continuing to claim it to be "Another Testament of Jesus Christ," as it is now subtitled. I suggest this because, for me, the book's narrative material seems flat, monotonous, imitative of the King James version of the Bible, and lacking in vitality in contrast to the Bible itself and other scriptures of Penguin Classics stature.⁴ Similarly, the Doctrine and Covenants seems to reword and particularize biblical phrases, from, for example, "He came unto his own" (John 1:11, KJV) to "I came unto my own" (D&C 6:21, 45:8), and from "thou shalt love thy neighbor" (Lev. 19:18) to "thou shalt love thy wife" (D&C 42:22). In my view, these are not sufficiently fresh to be taken as new revelations but are derivative.⁵

⁴ For example, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, the Dhammapada, Buddhist Scriptures (Edward Conze, ed.), the Analects of Confucius, the Tao Te Ching, the Psalms, the Four Gospels, a reprint of the New English Bible New Testament, and the Koran.

⁵ Some are quick to charge Smith with plagiarism. Brodie speaks of "a mosaic of extracts" from the Bible that "had the ring of divinity" (1971, 57). I would consider also the combination of Smith's pre-scholastic mentality and mystical personality, where perhaps the

Such a scriptural devaluation would allow the Mormon church to be seen as a *de facto*, sometimes successful attempt at restoration of aspects of the primitive church, such as Anabaptists and others have tried, rather than the uniquely authorized *de jure* restoration it now claims to be, thereby eliminating the somewhat myopic view that all traditional attempts to follow Christ are invalid (e.g., "Presbyterianism is not true" [JS-H 1:20]). It might, however, be useful to question whether replication of the first churches is desirable, deferring, rather, to a goal of "indigenization" — faithfulness to the spirit of God in Jesus, uniquely expressible in each relative cultural setting. This would enable cooperative interaction with other churches and eventually other religions, so that they could be enriched by the Mormon example, while Mormons could appropriate the occasional insights of mainline biblical scholarship, ethics, and theology that are gradually being humbled into coherence with the sciences, ecology, logic, critical world history, women's experience, and the experience of primal, Third World, and underclass peoples.

In my view, the real strength of the Mormon church is not some unique mandate from God withheld or unavailable for eighteen centuries, but its unique faithfulness to the ancient Hebrew experience and wisdom. As Gordon B. Hinckley remarked, "in essence, Mormonism claims to be a modern revelation of old principles divinely pronounced with new emphasis and completeness in our day" (1982, 9). Mormonism, I think, simply takes those biblical principles more seriously than most. That, I submit, is its real strength, not the Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants. The latter are texts of contestable quality, novelty, origin, historicity, and theology, useful for renewing interest in and reinforcing commitment to biblical vision and virtue.⁶

While aspects of Mormonism's scriptures and doctrines interest me, I find Mormon worship dreary and lackluster in contrast with, for example, some Presbyterian churches. I am left with a sunken feeling without a sermon and pastoral prayer. Sacrament meeting "talks" may well contain true material, but they lack clout for me because they are delivered by laypersons. For me the dangers of theological professionalism in leadership are outweighed by the dangers of uncritical handling of texts and doctrine. However, this is certainly

boundaries between self and others (and their creations) become blurred. Even if Smith were not entirely innocent, one also needs to consider what millions of believers have made of the spiritual and moral substance of the texts *they* took to be revelatory in combination with the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

⁶ Here I suggest an alternative to Brodie's view that "the moving power of Mormonism was a fable" and that the energizing forces in the lives of Mormons are the myths of an imaginative genius (1971, ix). I am suggesting an analysis of the deepest foundations of Mormonism — God in Christ and biblical spirituality — which can be appropriated from within and appreciated from without and are not dependent on the historical authenticity of Smith's visions, revelations, and scriptures. I tend to agree with McMurrin that "the best things in Mormonism would survive an honest and open search for the truth and that even the skeletons in the closet should not be hidden from the people" (Ostler 1984, 22), that "the best kind of theology is one which is open to criticism and growth and improvement" (Ostler 1984, 35), and with Brodie's less polite view that "the religious legacy of Joseph Smith can be shorn of its abracadabra of magic and still have sufficient strength to stand by itself" (1971, 425).

debatable. There seems to be a strong tendency toward conformity of expression and dogmatic assertion, with little fresh, independent observation.

Testimonies often seem to be little more than rubber-stamping the official line. I fear there may be a tendency to create virtue by cloistering away from temptations to maintain innocence (a recurring strategy in religious history), rather than by teaching *why* things are viewed as right and wrong. Fear of unknown but threatened consequences is fostered rather than knowing and wise moderation. There seems, further, to be little awareness of the world of scholarship that challenges every one of these ideas and all interpretations. In my world there is no immunity from the morass of pluralism, interpretation, and controversy. Joseph Smith's transcendence of the "tumult of opinions" (JS-H 1:10) seems to me to have been a bit too facile. Moreover, within Mormonism itself we find factionalism and multiple interpretations of doctrine — official statements versus a nonauthoritative, speculative, oral tradition, and changes in "official" opinions over time. None of this is meant to imply any final illegitimacy of Mormonism, nor to minimize its great strengths — puritan moderation, welfare, and organization.

At present I am planning not to join the Church, but rather to investigate further the traditions responsible for my actual spiritual formation. But I have wanted to defend my vision of Mormon potential in order to try to help transform internecine struggle into solidarity against our common foes — irreligion and decadence.

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