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Roundtable

THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE MORMON RELIGION

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*This section will regularly feature a variety of responses to topics of particular current interest. In this case, the subject is a book¹ which is unique in its attempt to describe Mormon theology in relation to the traditional categories of Western thought and which is attracting unusual interest both in the Mormon community and among others. Robert McAfee Brown, a Protestant theologian and ecumenist and Professor of Religion at Stanford, is the author of *An American Dialogue* (with Gustave Weigel, S. J.) and *Observer at Rome* (on the Vatican Council). Richard L. Anderson, Professor of History and Religion at Brigham Young University and bishop of one of the student wards, is finishing a book on the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. David W. Bennett is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah and a member of the L.D.S. Church's Coordinating Committee.*

A NEW STEP IN UNDERSTANDING

Robert McAfee Brown

To the non-Mormon, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is usually a very mysterious entity. His knowledge of Mormonism is roughly the following: (a) Utah is the center of the Mormon universe, (b) there was something about polygamy awhile back that got the Mormons in trouble with the courts, (c) Mormons "look after their own" very well and stay off relief rolls,

¹ *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*. By Sterling M. McMurrin. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965. 151 pp. \$3.00, paper \$2.00.

(d) there was something about polygamy awhile back that got the Mormons in trouble with the courts, (e) Mormons are zealous in trying to convert people, (f) there was something about polygamy awhile back that got the Mormons in trouble with the courts. Recently a new item has been added to the American lore: (g) the Mormons aren't quite right on the race issue.

That this is hardly a fair summary of the faith once delivered to Joseph Smith would be granted by all who have ever given the matter any thought, whether Mormon or not. What has been the reason for the isolation of Mormonism from other currents of American Christianity that could have produced such misunderstanding? On the non-Mormon side there has certainly been the suspicion and hostility with which any majority confronts a minority, particularly a dedicated minority like the Mormons, who know what they believe and whereof they speak. On the Mormon side, I suspect that this feeling has been enhanced by the picture that Mormons have usually communicated to non-Mormons, that their concern for the latter is to produce "conversions" rather than to foster "dialogue." The Mormon missionary has not been out to establish understanding as much as to produce converts. His contacts have had a clear end in view: to convince the other person of the wrongness of his present position and bring him around to accepting the rightness of the Mormon position.

A further consequence of this situation has been that non-Mormon ignorance of things Mormon has been matched by Mormon ignorance of things non-Mormon. Convinced of the superiority of his own faith, the Mormon has not needed to understand the faith of the object of his conversion-procedures, but has simply proceeded step by step to lay forth the superior insights of his own faith. Real mastery of the faith of the other person was beside the point. Understanding and rapport were not the goals of the human encounter. Conversion was.

This description is surely a caricature of many dedicated Mormons, but it does, I think, convey the *overall* impression that much Mormonism has created. And the point of the description is not to engage in polemics, but rather to give added force to the contention that Professor McMurrin's book indicates the beginning of a new direction. It is at least a prolegomenon to a new method — a first word if not a last word. For whatever else this book may accomplish, it illustrates clearly a concern to *relate* the Mormon religion to classical and liberal Christianity, as well as to streams of ancient and contemporary philosophic thought. The book is not an

exposition of Mormon religion in isolated splendor, but an exposition of Mormon religion in relation to the living options that confront both Mormons and non-Mormons today. Only as this kind of approach begins to dominate the discussion — from both the Mormon and the non-Mormon side — can we hope to overcome the misunderstandings and caricatures described in the paragraphs above.

To some, the venture will seem risky in the extreme, for if two points of view are fairly compared, there is always a danger that the reader may opt for the greater attractiveness of the alternative. (My own initial exposure to the theology of Emil Brunner, for example, came through a book attacking him vigorously, but the author quoted so generously from Brunner's writings, in an effort to refute him, that I quickly decided that Brunner was far and away the more persuasive thinker.) Those engaging in genuine dialogue may also be accused of capitulating to indifferentism; if one really gives the alternative a fair hearing, the complaint runs, he will seem to be granting at least its partial validity, and the dynamic of missionary witness will be stifled.

But the Catholic-Protestant dialogue has shown that we must genuinely seek to understand the position of the other, enter into it as fully as we can, and then look again at our own position, and at the other position, in the light of this new insight. The venture is risky, for it may destroy our convenient stereotypes and render invalid our easy dismissals of the alternative; but once we grant that a position other than our own can contain *some* truth, at least, we have no alternative but to embrace the venture, risky though it be.

Until a few years ago I would not have thought that this attitude was a real possibility within Mormonism. Now I see that it is. This does not mean, it must be clear, that the Mormon (or anyone else) is called upon to surrender the compelling quality that his faith has for him, and therefore, as he believes, for all men; but it does mean that his attempt to share that faith is going to be based less on verbal bludgeoning and personal persuasive pressures and more on give-and-take, on willingness to listen as well as to speak, on openness to the other person as one whose present convictions are sincerely held and are not simply the result of wrong-headedness or sin.

Professor McMurrin, I suggest, has taken this step from the Mormon side, and the non-Mormon is therefore called upon to extend the dialogue by a response. A few lines cannot do justice

to a book, but a few lines can at least indicate that the book is being taken seriously. The most important thing to me about Professor McMurrin's book, I repeat, is its intent. The author has not been content simply to write a book saying, "Here is the truth, period." He has written a book saying, in effect, "Here are the claims to truth of the Mormon religion, related to the claims to truth of other religions and philosophic positions, so that you can see more clearly where we fit. If you are a classical Christian, now you know where we differ from you. If you are a philosophic idealist, now you know what points we share with you." And so on.

Rather than dwell on the manifest attractiveness of this approach, it will be more constructive, I believe, to take it for granted — with gratitude — and indicate some of the places at which the non-Mormon looks for further clarification.

1. Rather curiously, I learned considerably less about the Mormon religion than I expected to. The book says very little in a systematic way about the *content* of Mormon belief. In retrospect, I realized that I had not taken the title seriously enough. The title reads, after all, "the theological *foundations* of the Mormon religion." The book is more a treatment of the methodology of thinking *about* religion, than it is a description of the Mormon religion. I say this not to condemn the book, but to urge its author to complete the task he sets for himself in the foreword, namely the production of a number of further books, one of which will deal specifically with the content of the Mormon faith.

I raise one other question about the title. To me, the book centered much more on the *philosophical* foundations of the Mormon religion. The problems that abound in the early pages are the problems of necessity and contingency, monism and pluralism, being and becoming, universals and particulars, and so forth. Later on, to be sure, the book deals with questions of sin, grace, and salvation, but the impression one gets, from the book's structure, at least, is that Mormonism is solidly built on philosophical concepts and that revelation is strictly subordinate — this despite the disclaimer on page eighteen.

2. Revelation itself is an issue on which the non-Mormon needs further help. As indicated above, the book gives the impression that Mormonism is a highly intricate and subtle philosophical system, and Professor McMurrin's *expertise* in philosophy makes it possible for him to draw helpful analogies and parallels from many philosophic systems in ways that illumine the Mormon perspective. But the issues of revelation and authority are thereby left

hanging in mid-air. To what degree, for example, does Professor McMurrin speak for what might be called “normative Mormonism” and to what degree does he simply speak for himself as one Mormon? How, indeed, would one determine the content of “normative Mormonism,” assuming there is such a thing? Without knowing anything directly about schools of thought within Mormonism, I would suspect that Professor McMurrin clearly lies within the “liberal wing” — and a second reading, particularly of page 113, convinces me of this. But I am not clear from his account how a Mormon weighs those things within the tradition that he will accept or reject.

Some examples may clarify the problem. “Mormon literature,” the author asserts, “is not entirely free of the concept of original sin. . . . This is especially true of the *Book of Mormon*. . . .” (p. 67) And yet, Professor McMurrin roundly rejects the concept of original sin. After decrying a kind of “Jansenist movement” in Mormon circles, he continues that “such negativism in the assessment of man, whether scriptural or otherwise, is a betrayal of the spirit and dominant character not only of the Mormon theology but also of the Mormon religion.” (p. 68) But who determines what is “the spirit and dominant character” of Mormonism? Still speaking of the doctrine of the fall, Professor McMurrin advances a position which he holds “notwithstanding the statements of some Mormon theologians. . . .” (p. 74) On what basis does the reader accept one view as authentic and reject another? On the issue of free will, the author asserts that “the Mormon writers of earlier generations enjoyed a more profound grasp of philosophical issues and exhibited greater intellectual acumen in their attempts upon those issues than do their present successors.” (p. 82) Again, one wonders what criterion has been employed in making this judgment. Commenting on the rhetoric of the Mormon pulpit when dealing with the transcendence of God, Professor McMurrin asserts that “the Mormon theology in its more thoughtful moments disagrees. . . .” (p. 104) But the outsider still has no way to judge what criteria are used to isolate “the more thoughtful moments” in Mormon theology. Reference is later made to “Mormonism in those moments when its thought is clear, careful, and consistent with its own primary insights, and when it forcefully exhibits its distinctive character.” (p. 105) The identical query remains.

The question with which one is left, then, is Who really speaks for Mormonism? What is the doctrine of authority, and how does it relate to a doctrine of revelation? It may be that this is to be the

subject of other books in Professor McMurrin's projected series, and one must hope that attention will be given to it. (The question, of course, is one that the Mormon is entitled to voice when he examines Protestant theology with all of *its* diversities, and perhaps one of the best fruits of a future Protestant-Mormon dialogue will be the joint necessity for clearer articulations, on both sides, of a doctrine of authority.)

3. Our twin tasks in dialogue are to articulate our own faith and to understand the faith of the other. Professor McMurrin has taken giant strides in both of these directions, and he has read widely in the literature of traditional Christian faith. It may be helpful, therefore, to point out some of the places where his descriptions of traditional Christian theology still seem inadequate to one who stands within that stream.

(a) Some generalizations are too sweeping. Reference is made, for example, to "the typical mind-body dualism that has typified Protestant thought, for example, since Descartes." (p. 6) But Protestant thought, certainly in recent times, has vigorously attacked this notion, preferring a Hebraic view of the unity of man. Similarly, there is a description of "the general pattern of Christian theology, that the soul or spirit is immortal though the body is subject to death." (p. 7) Again, the whole Biblical perspective has radically challenged this dualism, which entered into Christianity through Greek rather than Jewish sources.

(b) Some theologians are over-simplified. With a minimum of qualification, Schleiermacher, for example, is described as a thinker who "flirted somewhat blatantly with pantheism. . . ." (p. 22) This is simply too neat a pigeon-holing of one of the seminal thinkers of recent Protestant history.

(c) Some descriptions fall short of reality. In describing tendencies toward finitistic theology, Professor McMurrin asserts that "the churches have quickly condemned them as heretical." (p. 34) Theological fortunes wax and wane, to be sure, in contemporary church life, but heretical condemnations are a very scanty part of our organizational life as churches. I would be hard put to describe where such condemnations have been going on, or who, indeed, has the power to engage in issuing them.

(d) Some descriptions are applicable only to small pockets of Christian life or history. When he deals directly with theological matters, Professor McMurrin's foil often seems to be fundamentalistic Protestantism, interpreted in rather narrow terms that take little account of movements in Protestant thought within the last

half century or so. The author distinguishes Mormon thought most sharply from traditional thought on the issue of original sin, yet in his treatment of original sin, couched almost exclusively in the extreme forms of the Augustinian-Pelagian controversy, there is no recognition of what Chesterton once called "the good news of original sin," the news, namely, that man is not left to his own resources but is the recipient of the grace of God. I would strongly dissent from the statement that "The central dogma of traditional Christian orthodoxy is the doctrine of original sin." (p. 57) The central dogma of traditional Christian orthodoxy is the doctrine of grace. Luther and Calvin do not revel in man's vileness; they glory in God's greatness, and the doctrine of original sin is a way of asserting that man's greatness is anchored in God rather than in man himself. Even the devil can quote Calvin for his purposes.

Similarly, the treatment of evil in traditional Christian faith is presented almost wholly as something privative. To be sure, Augustine gave much space to this notion, particularly during the neo-Platonic hangover from which he never quite recovered even in his later heights of Christian sobriety, but more attention, I think, should be given to the recognition (even in Augustine) of evil as a positive reality, a perversion of the good rather than an absence of it, and a very powerful force at work in the human scene.

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These are only a few indications of places where the issues at stake in the conversation can be sharpened. Professor McMurrin has broken important ground in this book and initiated a dialogue that is long overdue on the American scene. All of us will look forward to his next installment.

THE STRENGTH OF THE MORMON POSITION

Richard Lloyd Anderson

The reader of *Theological Foundations* will see for himself that Mormonism is a religion of intellectual adventure. Joseph Smith reported divine instructions not to rely on traditional theologies, and Professor McMurrin shows how radical are the results. The foreword denies the singularity of individual Mormon doctrines, but the book attests the uniqueness of the L.D.S. synthesis by such observations as "most uncommon" (p. 6), "radical digression" (p. 36), and "basically at variance not only with traditional Christian theology . . . but with occidental philosophy generally, both sacred