

sup, . . . and you hear him talk very piously. Well, you think he is a very good man. Now suppose that one of his poor neighbors should owe him the value of a cow, and that this poor man had eight little children; moreover, that the should be taken sick and die, leaving his wife with one cow, but destitute of every other means of supporting herself and family — now I tell you, that Deacon Jessup, religious as he is, would not scruple to take the last cow from the poor widow and orphans in order to secure the debt, notwithstanding he himself had an abundance of everything.”³

³Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City, 1954), pp. 90–91.

The two following commentaries on O. Kendall White's "The Transformation of Mormon Theology" (Summer 1970) were received as Letters to the Editor, but due to their length we felt they would receive more attention here.

THOUGHTS ON MORMON “NEOORTHODOXY”

“Religion which cannot save man temporally cannot save him spiritually.” With those words O. Kendall White would end his generally well reasoned critique of what he has termed Mormon neoorthodoxy. Much hangs, however, on whether one reads this sentence with the assumption that the means provided to accomplish salvation both temporally and spiritually are the same or dissimilar. If we restrict our understanding of “means” to a religion’s ability to provide revealed guidance towards solutions for problems (the most likely intent of the author originally), there is little room for argument. If, on the other hand, we assume, as White seems to imply, that religion provides more than one means of salvation, then we open a debate which will unlikely ever be closed — at least within the covers of *Dialogue*.

While criticism of neoorthodox trends might be valid from the perspective of an historically established mainstream (consensus) of belief, neoorthodox trends are not “new” in Mormonism since the Church’s history is one of the conversion, assimilation and re-education of in large part Calvinist Protestants. At least one BYU religion professor comes from such a background for instance, and such converts tend to bring intellectual baggage with them, losing it very slowly if at all. At the same time neoorthodoxy tends toward teaching the doctrines of men, mingled with scripture and copious out-of-context quotes from General Authorities — so that sifting and distinguishing one from another is a veritable Augean byre cleaning, at best. The task is not only difficult, but also probably fruitless since, as White points out, most proponents of neoorthodox thought are so ignorant of the implications of Protestant thought as to miss the most obvious parallels with their own ideas. That fact, coupled with neoorthodoxy’s persistent self-proclamation as bearing *the* authorized tradition minimizes the

effect of any careful analysis. Indeed the hallmark of BYU neoorthodoxy is an outright evasion of criticism, couched either as “if you disagree you had better go home and pray about it” or “do you think the Brethren would leave me here if I were wrong?” The latter comment being one which could have been well used by Judas if he had been so minded.

Unfortunately White falls beneath the same criticism — as do most of us. There is nothing easier than selectively perceiving currents of thought within Mormonism, thereby ignoring the breadth of understanding and diversity of interpretation evidenced even among the General Authorities in the last 140 years. (Please note I said variance in understanding and interpretation — not in doctrine.) For White to look at one theological perspective and label it “neo” is to imply the existence of an “orthodox” theological position (be it his own or some normative historical perspective). All this is but to emphasize the fallacy in “doing” Mormon theology.

The whole point of Mormonism is that there is *no* orthodox theological position. This religion stands or falls as a revealed religion, both individually and institutionally. *Logos* (with a small “l”) is entertaining, but it is quite irrelevant in the ultimate sense. “Testimony” is simply another world of discourse. One can speak of historically orthodox beliefs and debate the relative popularity of different perspectives (making occasional reference to the rare “authoritative proclamations” regarding specific doctrines), but “doing” interpretive or creative theology is something very different. Mormonism’s peculiar message has a distinct relevancy for those who have ears to hear; for others it cannot, worlds without end, be interpreted through theology.

With the foregoing as a qualifier I will allow myself to delve into two other branches of theology, polemics and apologetics, in response to an issue which I feel White has slighted. I would assert that there exists a definite historical strand within Mormonism that stands at variance with popular Mormon thought and White’s treatment regarding the nature and utility of knowledge and education. I will ask readers to make a leap of faith and take my word for the fact that if I were of a mind to make this into an “article” I could provide copious documentation (“it’s in my files . . . somewhere”) but my career makes more pressing demands. What notes I provide serve as examples rather than as evidence. With that caveat let us proceed.

White makes reference to “the spirit of traditional Mormon faith in education.” Is that faith a reverencing of education as a means or an end? If it is as a means, then to what end? And if it is an end . . . ? While it is the case that Mormonism would embrace all truth, and all truth is part of our religion, does it necessarily follow that all truths are of equal value? Can some truths be of great value during mortality and of lesser value in eternity, or vice versa? With an obvious and absurd example, the utility of medicine to immortal beings, I would assert that not all knowledge or truth is of equal value. Some truths are more equal than others. But which are they?

Education is a good thing, and blessed is the man who has it, and can use it for the dissemination of the Gospel without being puffed up with pride. (*J.D.* 11:214)

Brigham Young certainly valued education as a means to increase our ability to preach the Gospel, and also as a means to sustain, gather and bless the Saints through an improving technology. He in fact recognized a "secular" learning and encouraged its acquisition while making obvious the bifurcation which is a part of Latter-day Saint thought.

the children of light . . . can teach kings, and queens, statesmen and philosophers [the Gospel], for they are ignorant of these things; but in things pertaining to this life, the lack of knowledge manifested by us as a people is disgraceful. Your knowledge should be as much more than that of the children of this world with regard to the things of the world, as it is with regard to the things of the Kingdom of God. (*J.D.* 11:105)

For all the emphasis in Mormonism on the value of education I would insist that there is no historical basis for asserting its all-sufficiency. Joseph F. Smith, in the current Melchizedek Priesthood Handbook, voices a feeling that has its echoes from Isaiah to the present day:

But can we through our own wisdom find out God? Can we by our unaided ingenuity and learning fathom His purposes and comprehend His will? We have, I think, witnessed examples enough of such efforts on the part of the intelligent world, to convince us that it is impossible. The ways and wisdom of God are not as the ways and wisdom of men. (p. 92)

Whatever the implications of D. & C. 88:77-80, 118; 90:15; 109:14; etc. (a minimum of reading makes it evident that in these cases knowledge is valued in terms of teaching the Gospel), and in spite of popular usage and the motto emblazoned at the entrance to the BYU campus, there is neither an obvious historical nor a necessary logical connection between such admonitions and D. & C. 93:36 or 131:6. Joseph Smith did not tell the Saints "it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance" to encourage the donation of either money or labor to build the University of Nauvoo or even another school of the Prophets. This was part of an admonition to build the Temple wherein Saints could contract the new and everlasting covenant of marriage and receive the ordinances which he had been performing since at least 1842. Joseph spoke of providing "a knowledge to triumph over all evil spirits in the world to come" (*TPJS*, p. 297) and felt this was the real salvation his religion offered. He wrote that the saving knowledge dealt with

the principles and orders of the priesthood, attending to washings, anointings, endowments, and the communication of keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest order of the Melchizedek Priesthood, setting forth the order pertaining to the Ancient of Days, and all those plans and principles by which anyone is enabled to secure the fullness of those blessings which have been prepared . . . and come up and abide in the presence of the Eloheim, in the eternal worlds. (*TPJS*, p. 237)

Or, in the words of Brigham Young, receiving

those ordinances . . . which are necessary . . . to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the Holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell. (*J.D.* 2:31)

All of this "knowledge" was to be revealed in the context of teachings that were revealed even to Adam as he discovered the ultimate mystery that God is *Anthropos*, or in the words of Brigham Young to Lorenzo Snow on February 16, 1849: "as God was, so are we now; as he is now, so shall we be." All of this studied irrationalism causes no end of embarrassed foot-shuffling among pseudo-intellectuals within the Church who would prefer a "religion within the limits of reason alone," purged of "mysticism" (read ordinances).

Brigham Young, as perhaps the best example, constantly sought to increase the Saints' knowledge of earthly skills to advance the Kingdom, but he never confused that end and the means whereby it might be obtained (apart from revelation), with the "real" knowledge which could only be obtained from one source, by one method, under covenant in the Temples of the Most High.

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Dear Sirs:

O. Kendall White in his article "The Transformation of Mormon Theology" [Summer, 1970] is perceptive in pointing out several theological movements that have taken place in Mormonism since Joseph Smith's day. His classification of Mormon neo-orthodoxists needs considerable clarification, however. The individuals he alludes to as neo-orthodoxists, viz. Yarn, Bankhead, Pearson, and Andrus, in reality, are exponents of the traditional and scriptural views promulgated by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and succeeding prophets. The new theological views which have "crept in" can be readily traced to the phenomenon called "Mormon liberalism." It has arisen to plague the Church in every dispensation. It can be described as "intellectual dissent" from the revelations of God. It is in full flower and bloom at the present time.

As a case in point, Mormon liberals (generally philosophers, intellectuals, and educationists) have brought about, contrary to Mr. White's premise, drastic changes in the traditional and scriptural philosophy concerning secular education as it pertains to our salvation (exaltation). As a result, there are too many members of the Church (it has sadly become nearly a universally accepted philosophy in the membership) who equate the statement,

"The Glory of God is Intelligence," with academic learning or secular education. They likewise use the aphorisms, "A man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge" and "It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance," to add emphasis to their premise. A few years ago a committee of church school professors (B.Y.U.) formulated the following statement on church education which is still accepted wholeheartedly in educational circles of the Church: "Spiritual salvation cannot be gained in ignorance of the world's knowledge."

President Joseph Fielding Smith, the Church's foremost living scriptionist, has pointed out in numerous talks and articles that the aforementioned aphorisms have nothing whatsoever to do with academic learning, but to the learning pertaining to eternal truths found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A complete quotation of President Smith's personal letter in answer to an inquiry of mine is appropriate: "It is true that we have some among us who interpret the words of the revelation 'The Glory of God is Intelligence,' as having reference to secular learning, but the Lord had something entirely different in mind. Too many who quote this statement fail to include the second half of the verse '. . . or, in other words, light and truth. Light and truth forsake that evil one.'"

"The complete quotation gives the true significance to the expression. It has no meaning whatever to secular learning, but to learning pertaining to eternal truths found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The accompanying statement, 'A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge,' should have added to it 'of the things of God.' Therefore the learning which is obtained in secular schools, while it is extremely important, will not bring men nearer to their Maker. That which leads to exaltation and will bring eternal salvation, must be based on the fundamental truths which are discovered in the revelations of the Lord, and which pertain to eternal progress and salvation."

"Academic learning is good as far as it goes, but it will not bring to any living soul remission of sins or insure eternal progress in the kingdom of God. Therefore, a true education requires faith in the Supreme Ruler of the universe, and in the obedience to all the ordinances and principles of divine truth which can only come from the divine source."

"Reading good literature, while helpful, cannot impart to any living soul the knowledge that saves. That can only come through the divine source, and then must be in perfect harmony with the divine ordinances of the Gospel."

This remarkable statement of President Smith's represents the traditional and scriptural view of the Church. Professor Yarn very correctly points out that redemptive truths are the ones necessary for exaltation. Conflicting views on these quotations and other problems mentioned by Mr. White have, indeed, created a crisis theology and a most serious dilemma in the Church. In my opinion, this is part of the process of "separating the sheep and the goats." Human reasoning has taken priority over the word of God with too many individuals in the Church.

Hugh Nibley pinpoints the dilemma in his famous "Burgon Letter" as follows: "The university has dictated doctrine and policy to every church that has sponsored it, and the churches have listened to its voices only for a lack of a better guide. The true Church needs no such crutch to lean on. Our young people are desperately in need of knowledge that neither the life adjustment experiments of the educationalists nor the posturings of our self-certified experts can supply." What an indictment!

Why then should the Church approve of secular education? In the oft quoted Doc. & Cov. 88:77-81, the Lord makes it clear that the purpose for gaining secular knowledge is to be better prepared to carry out missionary work. In Doc. & Cov. 90:15-16, the Lord makes it clear that the reason for the injunction to "study and learn and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people" is to "preside in Council and set in order all the affairs of this Church and Kingdom," which refers both to improving our administrative capabilities and preparing the members to promulgate the Gospel in a more efficient manner. Schooling is also good, even necessary, in terms of the demands of our society for making a living, and often results in added comforts and satisfactions; but it is not directly connected with our exaltation. A secular education does not sanctify or cleanse. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can purify or cleanse us so we can return to the presence of Our Heavenly Father and His Son.

The whole purpose of the Gospel is to bring about that cleansing or sanctification, and it cannot be accomplished apart from the redemptive Gospel and Atonement of Jesus. Therefore, it is necessary to make the first principles and ordinances of the Church real and effective in our lives in order to produce the necessary cleansing. "No unclean thing can enter into His Kingdom," Jesus told His followers.

The Gospel is clear and simplified on all the theological problems presented by Mr. White. Some of the doctrines, however, have been perverted, equivocated, polluted, and even prostituted by individuals, with the purpose of "watering them down" to a point that they become absolutely meaningless. Thank the Lord, the faithful lack the philosophical and the theological training that has perverted and obfuscated the true Gospel throughout every dispensation. Paul the Apostle hit the nail on the head when he said, "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God." The pseudo-intellectuals "gnash and foam and froth" at that statement, but Paul knew whereof he spoke. So be it.

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