

NOTES AND COMMENTS

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A Reply to Critics of the Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Hypothesis

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When *Dialogue* editors invited me to respond to Julian Durham's and Gordon Thomasson's critiques of my article on Mormon neo-orthodoxy, they indicated that I must reply immediately. Assuming the critiques would be published in the following issue, I neglected to respond because I was in the midst of planning a marriage, preparing a syllabus for a new course, and working on final examinations. Having completed them, and then having discovered that *Dialogue* not only published the critiques of Durham and Thomasson in the "Notes and Comments" section but also two letters to the editor dealing with my essay, I decided to comment on the various points made by the four critics.

I must begin on a note of apology. Professor Carl J. Christensen, in his letter, claims John H. Gardner's letter to *Dialogue* (vol. II, no. 1, p. 5), from which I quoted, misrepresents the point Christensen was making in *The Gospel in the Service of Man*, a teacher's supplement to the Gospel Doctrine class, from which Gardner quoted.* Not being in a position to verify Christensen's point, I do find the remainder of his letter consistent with my position concerning the meaning and use of the concepts of "intelligence," "spirit," and "soul" in traditional Mormon discourse. Moreover, I concur with his suggestion that the three concepts are probably used interchangeably in the Abraham 3:22 passage because their "distinctive meaning" in Mormon theology had not yet "crystallized." While I used the Gardner quote as an illustration of certain tendencies to debase man within contemporary Mormon theology, it was only one of several examples. The apparent inaccuracy of the quote, for which I apologize, does not negate the argument.

In another letter, Virginia Kammeyer misunderstands both my intentions and arguments. I was not, as she believes, trying to argue that Mormon theology "can't be true" or that it is "going down the drain." The problem of the truth-claims of Mormon theology was well beyond the scope of my paper. I did not assume that either traditional Mormonism or Mormon neo-orthodoxy is true or false. Since I was describing what I believe to be a new theological movement, along with a discussion of some implications

*See Gardner's reply to Christensen in *Letters to the Editor* — Ed.

it may pose for Mormon theology and religion, to charge that if Mormonism never was true then I was “flapping my arms in vain” completely misses the point. That I perceive some implications of the growth of neo-orthodoxy to be unfortunate is obvious enough, but this does not mean that I believe traditional Mormonism to be true and neo-orthodoxy to be false. It merely assumes that, according to my value system, certain neo-orthodox ideas are undesirable. If I had been addressing myself to a different issue, I would have discussed what I believe to be certain unfortunate implications of traditional Mormon theology. In other words, from my perspective, both negative and positive consequences may follow from the ideas of Mormon neo-orthodoxy and traditional Mormonism.

Kammeyer also accuses me of taking statements out of context. Explaining Andrus’ emphasis on God’s greatness as a function of a different audience from earlier Mormon leaders, she dismisses all theological implications such changes in emphasis generate by claiming that basic doctrines remain intact. Were this the only departure in Andrus’ theology I might be tempted to concede her point. However, I must remind Kammeyer that Andrus clearly opts for an assessment of human nature much more consistent with the presuppositions of Protestant Reformation and neo-orthodox theologies than traditional Mormonism. No Mormon theologian sounds more like John Calvin. Andrus’ argument that the seeds of corruption are hereditarily “transmitted to each embryo at conception” is far more reminiscent of a classical Protestant doctrine of original sin than it is of Mormon repudiations of the same doctrine. This conception of man quite naturally leads Andrus and his colleagues to their inordinate reliance upon grace as they discuss salvation.

A final point with respect to Kammeyer’s letter again indicates that she does not understand my position. I certainly do not demand from religion “absolute agreement” among its devotees; nor do I believe that it “must offer instant understanding, in everything.” Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it is she who opts for this position. The fact that there is a contradiction between her belief in God’s omniscience and her own personal freedom does not allow her to regard this as a theological matter worthy of intellectual consideration. Rather, it leads her to assert that she is free and God is omniscient. Her solution is to take the two contradictory propositions, believe them both, and let God worry about the difficulties. The contradiction, as she says herself, “doesn’t bother me in the least.” It seems that she, rather than I, prefers simplistic answers and instant solutions.

The problem that led her to the above assertion was itself based on a misinterpretation of my argument. She was responding to a point that I made concerning the widespread lack of understanding among Mormons of concepts such as “infinite, absolute, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.” I had observed that this lack of understanding does not inhibit Mormons from using these concepts, but it surely leads them into serious conflicts because of the temptation to affirm two opposing metaphysical systems. To answer the problem by asserting that “it doesn’t bother me in the least” is not only a simplistic response to a serious problem but a typical reaction of Mormon neo-orthodox theologians who are unwilling to address themselves to the major conflicts in Mormon theology. In a very convenient manner,

they, like Kammeyer, absolve themselves from any intellectual effort by laying their problems in God's lap.

The critiques of Durham and Thomasson were both directed primarily to my interpretation of the role of education, particularly "secular" knowledge, in Mormon theology — both reaching essentially the same conclusion. Claiming that I have misinterpreted several Mormon passages, they argue that scriptures emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge mean only "spiritual" matters or secular knowledge to enable missionaries to preach the gospel. Quoting Joseph Fielding Smith and Hugh Nibley, Durham concludes that church approval of "secular education" is for better preparation to "carry out missionary work." Though conceding that a consensus might be on my side, that the interpretation I urged is "nearly a universally accepted philosophy" among "the membership," Durham contends that this is only because of the influence of liberal "pseudo-intellectuals."

In a more perceptive critique, Thomasson makes the same point. He argues, with respect to education, that "there is no historical basis for asserting its all-sufficiency," and that even a cursory examination of the passages I cited will show that "knowledge is valued in terms of teaching the Gospel." Raising the fundamental question of whether the Mormon value of education is as a means or an end, he asserts it is a means to enhance missionary work and to build the Kingdom of God, concluding that "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)."

I must state that I was not arguing that the Mormon value of education did not involve the use of education as a means to attaining other ends, as Durham and Thomasson appear to assume. In the original essay, I argued that man's salvation, according to Mormon theology, was assured only by: (1) the grace of God; (2) acquisition of the requisite knowledge, "secular" and religious; (3) development of the proper moral character; and (4) participation in specific sacraments and ordinances. None of these could be ignored by the individual who seeks to become like God, to be exalted. Surely this does not imply the "all-sufficiency" of education.

The basic point I was trying to make is that traditional Mormon theology locates the primary responsibility for salvation in man, not God. Man must act to work out his own salvation, and part of that act must be a process of education in order to obtain the requisite knowledge. Here I am not in disagreement with my critics, for they would certainly argue that any individual seeking exaltation must learn about the nature of God, Jesus' life and mission, the human predicament, and the need and function of salvation. In short, they would argue for knowledge to redeem man, to liberate him, and to enable him to become like God. Where we disagree is in our definition of what this knowledge is.

My essay was not an attempt to suggest that "all truths are of equal value," as Thomasson infers, nor that Mormonism valued education merely as an end in itself. What I was arguing is that early Mormonism went well beyond classical Christianity in the direction of Judaism to affirm the basic goodness of the world, the body, and the mind. Consequently it did not need the classical Christian distinction between secular and sacred, since

things previously regarded as secular were now sacred. Man himself was an uncreated being capable of becoming a God. Mormon theology denied the old discontinuities between God and his "creation." This orientation was clearly compatible with the emphasis Mormonism would eventually place on education, compatible with the belief that education may help man solve basic problems as well as the belief that education may bring him closer to godhood. Insofar as a knowledge of matter and physical properties is necessary to enable him to create and control worlds, then some body of knowledge functionally equivalent to physics and chemistry is necessary for his exaltation. Insofar as a knowledge of physiology and human behavior is necessary for an understanding of man, then some knowledge base functionally equivalent to biology and psychology is necessary for exaltation, and so on. This conception of education not only follows logically from Mormon metaphysics and theology but, I believe, also provided the basis for many of the Church leaders' and prominent theologians' belief that Mormon theology does indeed embrace all truth.

Obviously Thomasson will argue that my reply merely underscores "the fallacy in 'doing' Mormon theology." He is referring here to the notion that Mormonism is a "revealed religion" and accordingly not a justifiable subject for "interpretative theology." But, of course like the rest of us, he is hardly inhibited in interpreting what Mormon revelations say about the role of education. The dilemma, however, is not Thomasson's, but man's. For it is impossible to get away from the problem of interpretation.

Though the problems of interpretative theology may be complex, I believe that to accept Thomasson's assertion regarding "revealed religion" is even more misleading. For he implies that those to whom Mormonism has "a special relevancy" because they have "ears to hear" do not engage in an act of interpretation. But can they receive any communication without interpreting it? Coming from a revealed religion or not, the command that "thou shalt not kill," for instance, requires considerable interpretation. Not only must "killing" be defined, but some determination must be made of what can or cannot be killed and so forth. The basic point is that whenever anyone acts on an idea, no matter what its source, he necessarily interprets it. He cannot do otherwise. This sort of debate over interpretative theology in Mormonism, or anywhere else, is meaningless.

It is of interest to me that none of these critics addressed himself to my basic argument. They were all concerned with peripheral issues. Even the extensive discussion of education by Durham and Thomasson was concerned with a minor point in the original essay. I was providing additional illustration of Mormon neo-orthodoxy's pessimistic conception of man. The basic points concerning Mormon neo-orthodoxy's emphasis on the sovereignty of God, its preoccupation with a pessimistic assessment of human nature, and excessive reliance on grace were not challenged.

As a final comment, I would like to suggest that I do not regard the appearance of a neo-orthodox movement within Mormon theological circles as necessarily undesirable. Such a movement may help to correct the naive optimism of traditional Mormon thought, and it may infuse Mormonism with a new vitality. Unfortunately, Mormon neo-orthodoxy has not yet done either.