

Mormons and the Omnis: The Dangers of Theological Speculation

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ENGAGING IN DOCTRINAL SPECULATION, and then later adopting these speculations as religious dogmas, is as old as recorded history. One example is the adoption of the traditional geocentric, flat-earth cosmology of antiquity into the doctrinal system of the Christian Church. Early Christian theologians found support for this worldview, which everyone at the time assumed to be literally valid, in biblical references to the “four corners,” “foundations,” “pillars,” and “ends” of the earth,¹ as well as in other passages describing the earth as fixed and immovable with heavenly bodies moving around it.² As a result, this cosmology became part of traditional Christian dogma, in spite of the fact that these ancient poetic passages most likely were never intended to be read as authoritative statements of scientific fact. In the sixteenth century, Copernicus’s heliocentric theory was rejected as incompatible with this doctrine, and the In-

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1. 1 Sam. 2:8; 2 Sam. 22:16; Job 28:24, 38:4; Ps. 75:3; Isa. 11:12, 48:13; Jer. 31:37; Heb. 1:10; Rev. 7:1; and others.

2. Ps. 93:1, 104:5, 104:19; Eccl. 1:5; Job 9:6–7; Isa. 38:7–8; Amos 8:9; and others.

quisition forced Galileo to recant his arguments in support of it.³ But this was not just a Catholic phenomenon. Martin Luther, who taught that the Bible was the infallible word of God, rejected the Copernican theory because Joshua commanded the sun, not the earth, to stand still.⁴

Another example is the Catholic doctrine of Mary. In the first few decades after Christ, early Christian theologians who had devised the doctrine of original sin were concerned that Jesus could have inherited Adam's sin from Mary. Thus, they taught that Mary was a literal virgin, in spite of some biblical passages that suggested otherwise.⁵ Subsequently Mary was declared to be a permanent virgin, in spite of several biblical references to Jesus' brothers and sisters (Matt. 13:55-56; Mark 3:31, 6:3). Later she became a postpartum virgin, out of unease that she may have retained the physical evidence of her delivery. In the nineteenth century, once scientific evidence came to light indicating that both the male and female contribute genetic information (so that women, in the Catholic view, also transmit the sin of Adam), the Church taught that Mary herself was immaculately conceived. Finally, in the twentieth century, the Church taught that Mary was physically assumed into heaven. What started out with the good intention of resolving a point of theology eventually mushroomed into a system of doctrines that many now regard as both dubious and baroque.⁶

A third example, which leads to the main topic of this article, is the doctrine of predestination. It is well known that early Christian theologians were heavily influenced by Greek Platonic philosophy, which viewed qualities of this world as mere shadows of "ideals" that exist in an unseen world. Thus even by 413 C.E., God's omniscience was taken for granted in the writings of Augustine.⁷ He argued that, since God sees the

3. Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, Vol. 7 of *The Story of Civilization*, 11 vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 600-612. Ariel Durant is listed as coauthor on vols. 7-11.

4. Josh. 10:12-13; Durant, *The Reformation*, Vol. 6 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 858.

5. John 1:45, 6:42; Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:4. See also John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 87, 112, 118.

6. Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, 111-12.

7. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods, Vol. 16 of *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), bk. 5, chap. 9.

future in all details, future events are irrevocably predestined.⁸ During the middle ages, Augustine's predestination was deemphasized in Catholic thought; but in 1525, Martin Luther brought the issue to the fore again. Luther, citing Augustine, argued that, since God is omniscient, everything must happen as he has foreseen it. Therefore, all events through all time have been predetermined in God's mind and are forever fated to be. Citing Romans 9:18 and Ephesians 1:3-7 for additional support, Luther then concluded that by divine predestination the elect are chosen for eternal happiness. The rest are graceless and damned to everlasting hell because, according to Luther, man is as "unfree as a block of wood, a rock, a lump of clay, or a pillar of salt."⁹

John Calvin took these doctrines even further in 1535, conceding that, although predestination (the notion that God has arbitrarily determined the eternal fate of billions of souls) is a "horrible decree," its purpose was to promote our admiration of God's glory by the display of his power. As Calvin explained, "No one can deny that God foreknew the future final fate of man before He created him, and that He foreknew it because it was appointed by his own decree."¹⁰ In other words, whereas Luther had argued that the future is determined because God has foreseen it and his foresight cannot be falsified, Calvin taught that God foresees the future *because* he has willed and determined it to be so. Historian Will Durant observed that Calvin ignored Christ's conception of God as a loving and merciful father, as well as numerous biblical passages (e.g., 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:4; 1 John 2:2, 4:14) that describe human beings' freedom to mold their own destiny. Instead, Calvin developed the thought of his predecessors, in Durant's terms, to "ruinously logical conclusions." Durant summarized Calvin's career in unusually blunt terms: "We shall always find it hard to love the man who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense."¹¹

Unfortunately, Latter-day Saints cannot take much comfort in the above examples, because there has also been a considerable amount

8. Durant, *The Age of Faith*, Vol. 4 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990 edition), 68.

9. Quoted in Durant, *The Reformation*, 6:375.

10. *Ibid.*, 464.

11. *Ibid.*, 467, 490.

of free-wheeling doctrinal speculation in LDS history. Some well-known examples of speculative doctrines that once were taught at least semi-officially in the Church include: (1) Adam was the father of Jesus;¹² (2) certain sins require one's blood to be shed in retribution;¹³ (3) practicing polygamy is essential to exaltation;¹⁴ (4) certain racial groups were "less valiant" in the pre-mortal existence;¹⁵ (5) the seven periods of creation lasted a literal 1,000 years each;¹⁶ (6) the Book of Mormon is the history of the entire ancient western hemisphere;¹⁷ and (7) humankind will never venture into space.¹⁸

One common thread in these and other examples that could be cited is the attempt to justify, by doctrinal exposition, concepts that have already been widely assumed in the religious movement. Another common thread is the use of quasi-axiomatic reasoning to press questionable premises to logical extremes. But perhaps the most pervasive underlying thread is the perennial desire for "answers" among religious believers, even in cases where ultimate answers cannot be provided. According to the Apostle Paul, the early Christians, not content with "sound doctrine," had developed "itching ears" (Tit. 4:3). A similar comment could be made of religious movements in almost any age, including our own.

The Omni Doctrines

The terms *omnipotent*, *omniscient*, *omnipresent*, and *omnibenevolent* play a central role in the definition of God for traditional Christian

12. Brigham Young, April 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855-86), 1:50-51.

13. Brigham Young, September 21, 1856, *ibid.*, 4:53-54.

14. Brigham Young, August 19, 1866, *ibid.*, 11:269; Joseph F. Smith, July 7, 1875, *ibid.*, 20:28.

15. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 527.

16. *Ibid.*, 255.

17. Spencer W. Kimball, "Of Royal Blood," *Ensign*, July 1971, 7; Mark E. Petersen, *Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, April 5, 1953 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semi-annual), 81.

18. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 2:191; Joseph Fielding Smith, Letter to Orville Gunther, May 7, 1958, photocopy in my possession.

faiths, although at the present time they are used more often by conservative and evangelical denominations. Some Latter-day Saints also use these terms (at least the first two). Nonetheless it is a curious fact that these words, with the sole exception of "omnipotent" in Revelation 19:6, a highly poetic verse, do not appear in the Bible. Instead, these terms and corresponding doctrines were devised with the creeds of early Christianity during the first few centuries after Christ, when Christian theology was recast in terms of Greek metaphysics. As we mentioned above, the omniscience of God was already taken for granted by the time Augustine wrote his *City of God* in 413 C.E. By 1265, God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence were prominently featured in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.¹⁹

Biblical support for these doctrines is mixed. In the Old Testament, one can certainly find passages describing God's great power and wisdom, but also God's compassion and flexibility. The Old Testament describes God as regretting his creation in light of human wickedness at the time of Noah (Gen. 6:5-6), being willing to negotiate with Abraham over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah on behalf of a handful of righteous people (Gen. 18:23-33), and instructing the Israelites not to consider children guilty because of the sins of their parents or ancestors.²⁰

The New Testament also is largely devoid of absolutist theology. The Apostle Paul makes fleeting references to speculative doctrines such as predestination, as noted above, but his focus is clearly on the basic principles of salvation, as exemplified by his "faith, hope, and charity" sermon (1 Cor. 13:1-13). Christ's teachings focused on righteous, humble, and unselfish living, as exemplified by his Sermon on the Mount and numerous parables. Jesus described God as his "father" (Matt. 6:9, 7:21; Mark 14:36; Luke 10:21, 22:42; John 5:17). He reduced the extensive Mosaic law to just two principles: love God, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:39). He mentioned only simple criteria for being considered one of his disciples: "continue in my word" and "love one another" (John 8:31, 13:35). Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that affirming a

19. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 17 in *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), pt. 1, chaps. 7-14.

20. Ezek. 18:1-32; cf. Deut. 23:2-4, where sins of fathers are to be visited on the heads of children for multiple generations.

detailed "creed" is required for salvation, much less the omni doctrines that later arose in medieval Christianity.

LDS people for the most part use the omni terms rather informally—the equivalent of referring to God as the "Almighty." But some modern-day Latter-day Saints use these terms as formal statements of theological fact. For example, LDS scholar Stephen E. Robinson, responding to criticisms that "Mormons aren't Christian," recently declared, "God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, infinite, eternal and unchangeable."²¹ Another LDS writer, after documenting in detail how the simple primitive Christian concept of God changed under the influence of Greek philosophy in the first few centuries after Christ, still managed to affirm that "Mormonism teaches that God is omnipotent" and omniscient.²² Such writings appear to be characteristic of "Mormon neo-orthodoxy," as described by O. Kendall White. White referred to a trend away from the flexible doctrines of early Mormonism and toward doctrines more typical of modern-day evangelical Protestantism. In particular, this phenomenon (which White noted especially in the Church Education System) is marked by an increasing emphasis on the absoluteness of God, the inscrutability of God's ways, the depravity of humankind, salvation by grace, the need for unquestioning faith, and a minimization of human free will.²³ More recently sociologist Armand Mauss analyzed these developments and concluded that, since the middle of the twentieth century, the LDS Church has in some respects moved toward convergence with Protestant fundamentalists, partly under external pressures and partly because of internal forces.²⁴

I often wonder if modern-day Latter-day Saints who teach and use the omni terms fully appreciate what they really mean, as they are generally understood today by the Christian world and by evangelical Protestants in particular. While a comprehensive study of the omnis is beyond

21. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 59, 72. The two authors wrote separate chapters in this book.

22. Richard R. Hopkins, *How Greek Philosophy Corrupted the Christian Concept of God* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1998), 309-11.

23. O. Kendall White Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 89-137.

24. Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 177-92.

the scope of this article, we can get the flavor of this theology from the website of a large conservative Protestant organization: "The God of Biblical Christianity is at least (1) personal and incorporeal (without physical parts), (2) the Creator and sustainer of everything else that exists, (3) omnipotent (all-powerful), (4) omniscient (all-knowing), (5) omnipresent (everywhere present), (6) immutable (unchanging) and eternal, and (7) necessary and the only God that exists."²⁵

This document elaborates further on the implications of these omni doctrines:

Unlike humans, God is not uniquely associated with one physical entity (i.e., a body) . . . Unlike a god who forms the universe out of preexistent matter, the God of the Bible created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Consequently, it is on God alone that everything in the universe, indeed, the universe itself, depends for its existence. . . . Omnipotence literally means "all-powerful." When we speak of God as omnipotent, this should be understood to mean that God can do anything that is consistent with being a personal, incorporeal, omniscient, omnipresent, immutable, wholly good, and necessary Creator . . . God is all-knowing, and His all-knowingness encompasses the *past, present, and future*. He has absolute and total knowledge. . . . Since God is not limited by a spatiotemporal body, knows everything immediately without benefit of sensory organs, and sustains the existence of all that exists, it follows that He is in some sense present everywhere. When a Christian says that God is immutable and eternal, he or she is saying that God is *unchanging*. . . . There never was a time when God was not God. . . . Moreover, since everything that exists depends on God, and God is unchanging and eternal, it follows that God cannot *not* exist. In other words, He is a *necessary* being, whereas everything else is contingent (or dependent on God for its existence).

For some denominations, especially some evangelical Protestant denominations, another corollary of the omnipotence and omniscience of God is that the Bible must be inerrant and complete. It follows that no further revelation is possible: "Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches. . . . Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teach-

25. North American Mission Board, "A Closer Look at the Mormon Concept of God," retrieved on March 27, 2004, from <http://www.namb.net/evangelism/iev/Mormon/Concepts.asp>.

ing. . . . We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings."²⁶

Early LDS Doctrine and the Omnis

Just from this quick summary, it should be clear that the omnis, as these terms are widely understood in the Christian world today, correspond to theological concepts that most Latter-day Saints would find unacceptable. To begin with, Joseph Smith and other LDS leaders have taught that God is not incorporeal, but instead has a literal physical existence within space and time. Second, Doctrine and Covenants 93:29-33 clearly states that the "elements" are eternal, not created by God, and that human "souls" are also eternal and thus not contingent upon God. In 1835, Joseph Smith explicitly rejected the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*: "Now, the word create . . . does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship."²⁷

In his 1844 King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith elaborated on these ideas, rejecting the traditional Christian notion that God is on an utterly different plane of existence than humans. Instead humans are, at least in intelligence, of the same race as the Gods:

You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done—by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation. . . . Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no creation about it. The first principles of man are self-existent with God.²⁸

Although Protestants and Catholics do not accept the concept that God has a physical form, in a larger sense Joseph Smith anticipated the thinking of many modern theologians who recognize that the tradi-

26. "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," retrieved on March 27, 2004, from <http://www.carm.org/creeds/chicago.htm>.

27. Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 6 vols. published 1902-12, Vol. 7 published 1932; 1978 printing), 6:308-9.

28. Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 198-208.

tional Christian notion of the depravity of humankind, compared with the solemn omnipotence of God, is an outdated concept that denies the tremendous human achievements in charity, science, art, and literature through the ages. Anglican bishop and theologian John Shelby Spong, for example, laments the “enormous chasm between the human and the divine” in traditional Christian thought, “a chasm so broad and so deep that we have almost come to think of human and divine as opposites.”²⁹

Joseph Smith also rejected the prevailing doctrine of predestination. He argued that the ancient apostles did not teach the unconditional election of individuals to eternal life. While individuals might be preordained to salvation, God “passes over no man’s sins, but visits them with correction, and if His children will not repent of their sins He will discard them.”³⁰ In the 1950s, President David O. McKay noted that several large Protestant denominations had revised their creeds to remove references to divine predestination, a theological concept that Joseph Smith had rejected a century earlier.³¹

In fact, Joseph Smith rejected all of the traditional creeds of Christianity. In his first vision in 1820, the young Prophet learned that the creeds of the competing churches were an “abomination” (JS-H 1:19). In 1843, in response to a question from a local political official, he declared: “I stated that the most prominent difference in sentiment between the Latter-day Saints and sectarians was, that the latter were all circumscribed by some peculiar creed, which deprived its members [of] the privilege of believing anything not contained therein, whereas the Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time.”³²

On another occasion, Smith recorded his strong disapproval of a disciplinary council that had accused an elderly member of preaching “false” doctrine: “I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodists, and not like the Lat-

29. Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, 151.

30. Joseph Smith, “Sunday Morning May 16, 1841,” *Times and Seasons* 2 (May 16, 1841): 429–30.

31. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 25–26.

32. *History of the Church*, 5:215.

ter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled. It does not prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine."³³

In this regard, Joseph Smith again anticipated modern religious thought, at least in certain mainstream denominations, which now recognizes both the futility of attempting to encapsulate God in a creed as well as the potential for abuse in imposing creeds on others. Spong, for instance, recently wrote:

In the Christian West today, we are far too sophisticated to erect idols of wood or stone and call them our gods. We know that such an activity no longer has credibility. In our intellectual arrogance, however, we Westerners—especially the Christian theologians among us—have time after time erected idols out of our words and then claimed for those words the ability to define the holy God. We have also burned at the stake people who refused to acknowledge the claim that God and our definitions of God were one and the same. Truth now demands that we surrender these distorting identifications forever.³⁴

Subsequent LDS leaders continued Joseph Smith's open-ended tradition, avoiding for the most part traditional dogmas in general and the omnis in particular. Brigham Young emphasized that there is "no such thing" as a miracle, in the sense of God acting supernaturally from outside nature.³⁵ At the turn of the twentieth century, B. H. Roberts pointed out in detail how Mormonism's distinctive "finitistic" theology avoids many of the pitfalls of traditional Christianity.³⁶ James E. Talmage, later an apostle, amplified Brigham Young's rejection of miracles as supernatural: "Miracles are commonly regarded as occurrences in opposition to the laws of nature. Such a conception is plainly erroneous, for the laws of nature are inviolable. However, as human understanding of these laws is at best . . . imperfect, events strictly in accordance with natural law may appear

33. Ibid., 5:340.

34. Spong, *A New Christianity for the New World*, 60–61.

35. Brigham Young, July 11, 1869, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:140–41.

36. B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (1903; reprinted., Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1982), 95–114.

contrary thereto. The entire constitution of nature is founded on system and order."³⁷

Once more, these notions have resonance in modern religious thought. Protestant scholar John F. Haught recently acknowledged: "Too often we have understood the conception of God as 'all-mighty' in a way that leads to theological contradictions, many of which have been pointed out quite rightly by scientific skeptics. Our view however, is that God's 'power' (which means 'capacity to influence') is more effectively manifested in a humble 'letting be' of a self-organizing universe than in any direct display of divine magicianship."³⁸

On the other hand, some LDS thinkers and authorities have asserted or implied the omnis. Orson Pratt taught in 1853 that God was omniscient and therefore could not increase in intelligence. Subsequently in 1865, Brigham Young, in an official statement from the LDS First Presidency, declared Pratt's teachings "false."³⁹ Wilford Woodruff agreed in 1857: "If there was a point where man in his progression could not proceed any further, the very idea would throw a gloom over every intelligent and reflecting mind. God himself is still increasing and progressing in knowledge, power and dominion, and will do so world without end."⁴⁰

In the twentieth century, James E. Talmage affirmed the omnis in his *The Articles of Faith*, although he did not provide much scriptural support.⁴¹ McConkie affirmed the omnis in *Mormon Doctrine*, citing as his source this quotation from *Lectures on Faith*, which is traditionally attributed to Joseph Smith: "We here observe that God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell;

37. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (1899; rev. ed. 1924; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966 printing), 220.

38. John F. Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 161.

39. James R. Clark, ed., 6 vols., *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 2:214-23.

40. Wilford Woodruff, December 6, 1857, *Journal of Discourses*, 6:120.

41. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 42-44.

who is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient; without beginning of days or end of life."⁴²

However, historical research has cast doubt on Joseph Smith's authorship, identifying Sidney Ridgon as a more likely author, particularly for the Second Lecture, in which the omni doctrines are discussed.⁴³ In part because of the authorship question and also because of the presence of questionable doctrines, the *Lectures* were dropped from the LDS scriptures in 1920.⁴⁴ In any event, the question of who authored the *Lectures* is largely an academic one, because it is clear from other sources (notably the King Follett discourse) that Joseph Smith later distanced himself from the traditional omni theology of orthodox Christianity.

Difficulties with the Omnis

Christian scholars and theologians have recognized for centuries that there are numerous philosophical and scientific difficulties with the omnis. There is not room here to analyze these complex issues in detail, but five examples will illustrate the point.

1. If God is literally all-powerful and all-good and if he created all things, then what are we to make of Satan or of evil in general? Was evil created by God? Why?

2. If God is literally all-powerful and if he has acted in the world throughout history, why has he permitted human suffering, disease, and premature death? For example, why did God permit the September 11 terrorists to slam their hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center, killing thousands of good people from many religious faiths?

3. If God literally possesses all knowledge and can see arbitrarily far into the future with complete fidelity, then what is the meaning of human free agency? How do we escape the conclusion that we are mere robots, acting out a course that was irrevocably set in motion eons ago? How then

42. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (1835; reprinted., Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1985), 13.

43. Kent Robson, "Omnis on the Horizon," *Sunstone* 8, no. 4 (July–August 1983): 21–24.

44. Richard S. Van Wagoner, Steven C. Walker, and Allen D. Roberts, "The Lectures on Faith: A Case Study in Decanonization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 71–77.

can we justifiably be punished for misdeeds, or, for that matter, rewarded for righteous living?

4. If God is omnipotent in this strong sense and if God supernaturally intervenes in the world about us, then how do we explain scientific laws, where we see principles obeyed with extreme precision and unfailing consistency?

5. If God's nature is completely uniform and undifferentiated, then how can God also be omniscient, given that fundamental principles of thermodynamics and computer science rule out the possibility that such an entity could be the repository of information?⁴⁵

On the question about human free will and God's foreknowledge, some theologians, beginning with Augustine, have argued that God's absolute foreknowledge does not imply that God is responsible for what happens. But if the future can be foreseen and/or predicted with complete fidelity by any means, even by a future super-powerful computer, then only one future course is logically possible. In that event, human free agency is at best an illusion, and we are indeed acting out a course that was defined eons ago. It only compounds these difficulties to further assert that God is the Being who possesses this absolute foreknowledge and who set the system into motion.

The notion that the future can be perfectly predicted goes back at least to Pierre-Simon Laplace who wrote in 1812: "An intelligence knowing all the forces acting in nature at a given instant, as well as the momentary positions of all things in the universe, would be able to comprehend in one single formula the motions of the largest bodies as well as of the lightest atoms in the world, provided that its intellect were sufficiently powerful to subject all data to analysis; to it nothing would be uncertain, the future as well as the past would be present to its eyes."⁴⁶

Fortunately, Laplace's notion of a "clockwork universe" was destroyed by twentieth-century science. First, the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics showed that the very information needed to make such predictions (namely, the unlimited precision measurement of the current state of a physical system) is unattainable. This is not a limitation

45. Hollis Johnson and I examine this question in "Information Storage and the Omniscience of God," available at <http://www.dhbailey.com>.

46. Durant, *The Age of Voltaire*, Vol. 9 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 548.

of current measurement technology but is, rather, as far as we know, a fundamental characteristic of the universe that we inhabit. Some have questioned whether quantum mechanical laws can have any macro-scale impact worth taking seriously. But consider, for example, the moment when the genetic molecules from two human beings unite to form a new individual. Even a slight disturbance to such delicate processes, such as a chance encounter with a cosmic ray, can have drastic, long-term consequences. What's more, recent research in the field of chaotic processes suggests that this type of magnification of microscopic effects is more the rule than the exception. In many physical systems, very small changes or uncertainties in its current state can lead to arbitrarily large deviations in its future state.

This does not mean that any prediction of the future is impossible. Present-day supercomputers can, for example, accurately predict future climate patterns. But it appears fundamentally impossible to predict in detail the weather at a specific geographical location at a specific point far in the future. In a similar vein, it follows that, while general trends of future events can be anticipated, beyond a certain point their details cannot be foreseen.

Modern LDS Analysis of the Omnis

Issues related to the omnis have been studied by several LDS scholars, beginning with B. H. Roberts's book *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*. In *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, philosopher Sterling M. McMurrin noted: "Mormon theologians have moved somewhat ambiguously between the emotionally satisfying absolutism of traditional theism and the radical finitism logically demanded by their denial of creation and encouraged by the pragmatic character of their daily faith. Here they have often failed to recognize the strength of their own position and have, therefore, neglected to grasp and appreciate the full meaning of its implications."⁴⁷

In a 1975 analysis of LDS theology, philosopher Truman Madsen quoted Anglican theologian Edmond B. LaCherbonnier as observing: "Mormons also conceive God as temporal, not eternal in the sense of timeless. This idea of a timeless eternity is incompatible with an acting

47. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 29.

God, for it would be static, lifeless, impotent. If God is an agent, then he must be temporal, for timeless action is a contradiction in terms."⁴⁸ In 1989, LDS philosopher Kent Robson, examining God's foreknowledge and human free agency, concluded: "The issue is this: as Mormons we believe in freedom and free agency. In order for me to have freedom, I must have alternatives in my future that are truly *open* and not just *appear* to be open . . . [If] God knows my every specific act, then I have no *real and meaningful* freedom."⁴⁹

Other recent studies include a 1999 article and a 2001 book by Blake Ostler, and a 2000 article by Dennis Potter.⁵⁰ They discuss in significant detail issues such as the principle of free agency and the problem of evil.

Perhaps the most eloquent treatment of these issues in recent LDS scholarly literature is Eugene England's posthumously published essay, "The Weeping God of Mormonism."⁵¹ England's title is a reference to a passage in the Book of Moses:

And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?

And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? . . .

The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency;

48. Truman G. Madsen, ed. *Reflections on Mormonism: Judeo-Christian Parallels* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1975), 157.

49. Kent E. Robson, "Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, edited by Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 71. Robson also quotes the same statement by LaCherbonnier as Madsen.

50. Blake T. Ostler, "Mormonism and Determinism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 43-75; his *Exploring Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001); and R. Dennis Potter, "Finitism and the Problem of Evil," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 83-96.

51. Eugene England, "The Weeping God of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 63-80.

And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood. . . .

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto Enoch, and told Enoch all the doings of the children of men; wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook. (Moses 7:28-41)

This passage affirms that the agency that God has given to humankind is fundamental and cannot be abrogated. Partly for this reason, God's power to remove evil and sin is limited. So God weeps with Enoch over the suffering that results. England notes that this passage represents a theodicy which, if not unique to Mormonism, is at least unique among large, growing churches. He adds, "It is also, I believe, a theodicy that makes a crucial contribution to Mormonism's emergence as a mature, compassionate world religion, one that is able to contribute in important ways to God's efforts to save all his children not only through conversion but through sharing our revealed insights into the nature of God, in dialogue with others."⁵²

England's essay has already attracted attention. Brian Ferguson, in a letter to the editor, recommended "Make copies for everyone you know" of England's essay, in an attempt to counter the lamentable trend of the omni being advocated in some quarters of the Church Education System.⁵³

Scholarly articles such as those listed above are not widely read in the Church. Nonetheless, many rank-and-file Latter-day Saints appear to have at least a fair understanding of these principles, even if they often do not fully appreciate the implications for omni doctrines. For example, many individual Latter-day Saints respond to the first difficulty (the existence of evil) by arguing that Satan lived in the premortal world and, like us, had an eternal existence independent from God. This is actually a rather effective response. But note that this argument implicitly rejects the traditional Christian omni doctrine that God is the only uncreated and noncontingent being.

Rank-and-file Latter-day Saints typically respond to the second difficulty (human suffering) either by assigning these calamities to the influ-

52. *Ibid.*, 64.

53. Ferguson, "A 'Traditional Mormon' Thanks Gene," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): v-vi.

ence of Satan or by appealing, as England did in the "Weeping God of Mormonism," to the indispensable nature of human free agency. Note that appeals to free agency beg the fundamental question of why human free agency is indispensable. Again, many Latter-day Saints would argue that this is a fundamental law to which even God is subject (or at least that he chooses to obey) based upon some higher principle. This notion is implicit in Moses 7, which England highlighted in his "Weeping" essay. But this argument rejects the traditional Christian omni doctrine that God's omnipotence places him absolutely above any other law or principle.

Some modern-day Latter-day Saints respond to the third difficulty (free agency and God's foreknowledge) by arguing that God's foreknowledge does not necessarily preclude human free agency. Others, notably LDS writers such as McMurrin and Robson, are not persuaded by these arguments and, in any event, are not content with the conclusion that free agency is merely an illusion. But as we have seen, modern science provides some important perspectives here, suggesting that there must be specifics that cannot be precisely foreseen by God, even if the overall course of human affairs proceeds as anticipated. In any event, most Latter-day Saints are generally aware that the Church rejects traditional Christian ideas about predestination.

Where the fourth difficulty is concerned (scientific law and God's omnipotence), there is a strong tradition of scientific excellence in the Church, and Church leaders in recent years have wisely attempted to steer clear of scientific controversies. On the minus side, many individual Latter-day Saints continue to hold to a highly traditional worldview that dismisses much modern science as mere "theories." It is also common to hear LDS accounts of answers to prayers in which it is taken for granted, to paraphrase Ambrose Bierce, that God has annulled the laws of the universe on behalf of a single petitioner, who by his or her own confession is unworthy.⁵⁴ In any event, the solution here is clear. Once one acknowledges that God works mostly, if not entirely, within the realm of natural law and not utterly beyond natural law or by capriciously setting aside natural law, then the scientific "issue" loses most of its impact. This principle

54. Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*, 1911, s.v. "pray," retrieved on March 27, 2004, from <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Bierce/DevilsDictionary>.

is also in keeping with the basic LDS precept that God allows free agency to operate largely without interference.

One important note here is to observe that, as a consequence of the modern scientific findings mentioned above, a God who works within natural law is not condemned to irrelevance. As Protestant theologian John Polkinghorne has written:

The dead hand of the Laplacean calculator, totally in control of the sterile history of his mechanical universe, has been relaxed. In its place is a more open picture, capable of sustaining motivated conjectures that can accommodate human agency and divine action within the same overall account. Modern science, properly understood in no way condemns God, at best, to the role of a Deistic Absentee landlord, but it allows us to conceive of the Creator's continuing providential activity and costly loving care for creation.⁵⁵

In this regard, Brigham Young, Talmage, and other LDS writers who have taught that there is no such a thing as a "miracle" and that behind every act of God is a rational, natural explanation are in accord with progressive thinking in this arena. This principle has also been taught in recent years, for instance by Apostle Russell M. Ballard: "If there is a God,' the empathetic observer might wonder, 'how could He allow such things to happen?' The answer isn't easy, but it isn't that complicated, either. God has put His plan into motion. It proceeds through natural laws—which are, in fact, God's laws. And because they are His, He is bound by them, as we are."⁵⁶

It should be noted that in each case, a reasonable response to the omni issues listed above is to qualify the notions of omnipotence and omniscience, or in other words to place reasonable, common-sense limitations on the absoluteness of these terms. What most Latter-day Saints do not realize is that these reasonable limitations implicitly reject the omni doctrines as they are widely taught in traditional Christianity and especially in the conservative Protestant world today. But Latter-day Saints are not obligated to accept these omni doctrines, certainly not in the same absolute sense as evangelical Protestantism. No one knows the full resolu-

55. John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 75.

56. Russell M. Ballard, *Our Search for Happiness* (New York: Deseret Books, 2001), 76.

tion of these questions, but they generally are not (or at least should not be) crucial, burning issues for Latter-day Saints. This is a major, and largely unappreciated, advantage of Mormonism's rejection of traditional creeds.

Conclusion

We have seen that the traditional Christian notion, taught widely even today in numerous denominations, of an absolutely omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Deity, is not only problematic from a number of philosophical and scientific points of view but also goes against certain fundamental beliefs that have been taught in the LDS movement from its inception. In this light it is truly unfortunate that these omni doctrines are being taught in the LDS Church today. Why follow other denominations down a theological path that has proven to be so problematic and destructive of faith and, indeed, which many would argue has been refuted both by modern thought and day-to-day experience?

Certainly it is reasonable to believe that God is very powerful and possesses great knowledge. Certainly it is reasonable to believe that everyone can experience God's presence in the form of a Holy Spirit that infuses all of creation. But it is essential that we avoid inflexible and dogmatic theological positions (creeds) in this arena. If this means that we must simply reject the omni doctrines, then so be it.

At the very least, Latter-day Saints must insist that God's omnipotence and omniscience (1) do not place God utterly beyond space and time, as the only uncreated entity, (2) do not require that God's ways be viewed as inscrutable or incomprehensible, (3) do not abrogate or trivialize human free agency, (4) do not require that God acts in violation of natural law, and (5) do not relegate humanity to a depraved status, utterly distinct in nature from God. It is also essential that Latter-day Saints not attempt to deduce, by technical arguments reminiscent of medieval scholastics, doctrines based on literal interpretations of the omnis.

Some may say that modern "conservative" LDS discourse, which often includes the awe-inspiring language of the omnis, should be countered by a more "liberal" flavor of discourse, such as the progressing nature of God as taught by several early LDS leaders. But it seems to me that the deeper and more significant lesson here is that there is danger in any sort of theological speculation or dogmatism, as both LDS and modern non-LDS theologians have observed. We have seen all too many instances where well-meaning speculation in one era becomes a theological

quagmire for subsequent eras, and this is true both in general Christian history and in LDS history as well.

Besides, there is also an everyday, practical benefit to steering clear of theological dogmatism. When someone teaches or insists on a questionable doctrinal notion in a church meeting, experience has shown that engaging in a debate with this person is often more divisive than convincing. In contrast, it is usually much easier and less likely to give offense to merely point out privately that the notion in question represents an extrapolation from well-established principles and thus should be avoided, at least in official settings. But it is important to keep in mind that this sword cuts both ways. LDS “liberals” are often annoyed when they hear someone commenting authoritatively about what “really” happened in the council of heaven or what “really” is contained in the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon. But do such persons expect LDS “conservatives” to react any differently when they hear someone discussing at length the attributes of Mother in Heaven? Dogmatism is dogmatism, and speculation is speculation, whether it is “conservative” or “liberal” in origin.

Along this line, it follows from the fundamentally creedless nature of the LDS religion (and the ninth Article of Faith) that Latter-day Saints should never presume that the current understanding of any precept is forever unchangeable or unchallengeable. Perhaps even some rather basic doctrines, such as some of those mentioned in this paper, may one day be changed, refined, or set aside.

Mormonism has a tradition (even if it is not always followed very faithfully) of being a practical, reasonable religion; people are more important than dogmas. In this regard, the Church is well advised to maintain a relatively simple doctrinal foundation, avoiding theological quagmires, and focusing instead on good, clean, charitable living. This is one arena where all the Church can unite—liberals and conservatives, young and old, newly baptized and life-long members, foreign converts and five-generation pioneer descendants. And it is also an arena where thinking Latter-day Saints can participate with full intellectual honesty.