"The Grandest Principle of the Gospel": Christian Nihilism, Sanctified Activism, and Eternal Progression

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In February 1895, the editors of a small journal known as *The Index* (an obscure periodical produced by the Mutual Improvement Association of Salt Lake City's Twentieth Ward) submitted the following inquiry to ten prominent Church leaders: "What, in your opinion, constitutes the grandest principle, or most attractive feature of the Gospel?" The Church leaders' answering letters were published in *The Index* and shortly thereafter as a symposium in the pages of *The Contributor*, one of the many Church magazines in publication at that time. One respondent said that eternal marriage was the grandest principle. Two more replied that love was the most crucial component of the gospel. Another answered, in essence, that all the principles of the gospel were so grand that he could not choose just one. Interestingly, there was a consensus among the remaining six Church leaders (among whom were such well-known leaders as Joseph F. Smith, B. H. Roberts, George Reynolds, and Orson F. Whitney) that the grandest and most attractive feature of the gospel was the doctrine of eternal progression.[1]

Why eternal progression? There was no mention in the survey of such critical doctrines as the atonement, continuing revelation, or salvation for the dead. Yet many Mormon writers and thinkers, from founding prophet Joseph Smith through early twentieth-century intellectuals discussed in this essay—B. H. Roberts and John A. Widtsoe—undeniably had a fascination with the doctrine of eternal progression, which I will loosely

define for purposes of this discussion as the belief that all human beings can advance and improve from one qualitative level of existence to the next forever—until the attainment of godhood and beyond—and that God also advances in like manner under this same system. These thinkers clearly believed that, of all Joseph Smith's teachings, eternal progression was his most innovative idea, rich in possibility and potential. They have not been alone in this assessment of Joseph Smith's unique theology. Former Mormon and skeptic Fawn Brodie believed that Joseph Smith borrowed this concept through reading philosopher Thomas Dick,[2] but nevertheless conceded that Joseph's own notion of "the boundless opportunity for progression throughout eternity" was "the most challenging concept that Joseph Smith ever produced, and in a sense the most original."[3] More recently, Evangelical scholar Carl Mosser, when asked by BYU professor of philosophy David L. Paulsen to identify Joseph Smith's possible contributions to the Christian theological world, replied, "Too often, in my view, Christian theologians are content to reflect on how we are redeemed (the mechanics) and on what we are redeemed *from.* Smith's teachings about the eschatological potential of men and women challenges Christian theology to think more deliberately about what we are redeemed *for.*"[4]

While much of the appeal and significance of eternal progression in Mormon thought at the beginning of the twentieth century centered on Mormon intellectuals' fascination with the progressive science of their era, eternal progression in fact had a much broader, deeper, even existential appeal. These Mormon thinkers and writers viewed eternal progression in terms which, for them, instilled unique meaning and purpose into this life and the post-mortal eternities. A quest to infuse human existence with special significance and value underlay sweeping notions of unlocking the eternal laws of the universe and becoming gods. Key to their conception of eternal progression was a philosophy that described eternal progression in direct contrast to what LDS writers perceived as the meaningless, unsatisfying, and even nihilistic nature of the conventional Christian heaven.

At the heart of early expositions on eternal progression is the concept that eternal, godlike *activity* is what provides meaning and purpose to any and every stage of human existence. This understanding of an eternally progressive heaven was juxtaposed against what early twentieth-century LDS writers believed was the traditional model of the Christian

heaven, in which the human soul is forever statically immobile and eternally at rest. LDS writers wholeheartedly agreed with the assertion of Charles W. Eliot, former president of Harvard University and biographer of Henry James: "The idea of an eternity of rest is positively repulsive to any man or woman, primitive, barbarous, or civilized, who has had joy in his work."[5] For these Mormons, the only happy heaven is the one in which activity is eternalized, a heaven where the acquisition of new knowledge leads to higher and higher realms of meaningful existence.

It is not my intent in this paper to make an in-depth study of eternal progression throughout Mormon theological history. Instead, I will focus on common expositions of the doctrine during the critical decades following the Manifesto of 1890, which withdrew Church permission for new plural marriages, and the reordering of LDS theology that followed. This paper asserts two arguments: First, key Mormon writers in this period sometimes misrepresented the eschatological doctrines of other Christian churches—particularly Protestant churches—as a foil against which to describe and exalt Mormon notions of eternal activity and progress. And, second, although the idea of an afterlife of everlasting activity was not unique to Mormons, Mormonism nevertheless evoked its own novel conception of activity that was dissimilar to conventional Protestant ideas.

Mormon thinkers of this period understood the purpose of all activity—premortal, mortal, and postmortal—to be the achievement of human deification and also understood that the joy of eternal progress applies to all intelligences,[6] including God. Though Mormons and Protestants at this time held quite similar views of the family-centric, social nature of heaven, Mormons were additionally theologizing a cosmology of deification and the eternal mastery of existence, a cosmology ultimately discrete from more secularized Protestant beliefs of eternal family life, worship, and labor, beliefs that were essentially an extension and projection of earthly activities into the heavenly realm.

To provide a context for the development of early twentieth-century Mormon thought on eternal progression, I will begin with an overview of its roots by briefly examining the origins of eternal progression in Joseph Smith's thought and the expansion upon his ideas in the theology of Brigham Young. Many Mormons writing on eternal progression (and especially John A. Widtsoe and B. H. Roberts) expand upon Young's particular vision in their attempts to provide a rational basis for a theology of eternal activity. Widtsoe and Roberts develop a theology in which they

hope to show that the quest for higher realms of truth and being discloses the true meaning of human joy and meaningful existence. I will conclude with what I believe are some of the potential philosophical and theological implications of Roberts's and Widtsoe's views on eternal progression and how these might be viewed through a contemporary lens.

Eternal Progression in Early Mormon Thought

Eternal progression in Mormon thought was originally taught by Joseph Smith. His views on the progressive nature of the afterlife and the divine potential of humanity were not wholly original; other theological and philosophical traditions in Joseph Smith's time promulgated similar concepts, including most denominations of nineteenth-century New England Protestantism, remnants of neo-Platonist hermeticism,[7] and American transcendentalism.[8] However, Joseph Smith erased the ontological rift that separated divinity from humanity by including, within his philosophy, ideas of human deification, a plurality of gods, and the advancement and progression of all intelligent beings, including God. This conceptualization seems to be a genuinely unique amalgamation.[9] Unique or not, Joseph's most detailed explication of eternal progression, the King Follett Discourse, was revolutionary and even polarizing to its first hearers, many of whom praised it as proof of the Prophet's inspiration, while many others denigrated it as "a worse doctrine than taught by the Devil himself in the Garden of Eden."[10]

Though the seeds of eternal progression in Mormon thought were planted by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young nurtured them into a full-fledged forest of doctrinal exposition. Young seems to be, in fact, the first to use the phrase "eternal progression" to describe and embody several interrelated concepts promulgated by Joseph Smith concerning the nature and purpose of God and humankind.[11] In Young's system, eternal progression became an expansive vehicle for unlimited learning and advancement. For Young, the unlimited nature of God and man was key to his understanding of progression. He believed in an eternal chain of gods with no beginning and no end, a chain to which man was in the process of becoming connected in his quest to become divine. The unlimited nature of Godhood led Young to posit that God and man could increase in knowledge and power for eternity. He reasoned that limiting the capacity to attain knowledge would be to limit the universe itself, which would in turn limit humankind and God.[12] While such an idea about God's capac-

ity for unending knowledge acquisition may be considered controversial today, it was a key to Brigham Young's theology. Fundamental to his ideas of eternal progression was an existential engagement with the meaning of life itself. Eternal progression was a way of *being*, a means of considering oneself and one's activity in the world as infinitely (and eternally) valuable and meaningful. Young wanted to get at the heart of what motivates us to continue to propagate our own existence: "The first great principle that ought to occupy the attention of mankind, that should be understood by the child and the adult, and *which is the mainspring of all action* (whether people understand it or not), is the principle of improvement. The principle of increase, of exaltation, of adding to what we already possess, is the grand moving principle and cause of the actions of the children of men."[13]

Thus, the *capacity* to acquire knowledge (in addition to "increasing" in other valuables such as posterity, kingdoms, etc.) is a desirable end in and of itself because acquiring knowledge makes life meaningful and enjoyable and will continue to do so forever. For Brigham Young, this vision of the purpose of existence made salvation genuinely attractive, because it describes salvation in understandable, "this-worldly" terms. What moves and motivates us to action and improvement in earth life will likewise motivate our activity in the eternal worlds.

In endorsing this particular view of eternal progression, Young was implicitly giving voice to the anxiety of considering its reverse proposition—not progressing, or regressing, which is to experience "the second death." He explained: "The first death is the separation of the spirit from the body; the second death is . . . the dissolution of the organized particles which compose the spirit, and their return to their native element. . . . The one [choosing life] leads to endless increase and progression, the other [choosing death] to the destruction of the organized being, ending in its entire decomposition into the particles that compose the native elements."[14]

Contemplating an afterlife with no progression, Wilford Woodruff gives pointed expression to the despair that he saw as inherent in an existence in which progression is ultimately so limited: "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. It is just so with us."[15]

Eternal Progression in Early Twentieth-Century Mormon Thought

At least from the time of Brigham Young through the end of the nineteenth century, eternal progression was inextricably connected to plural marriage. To cite a single brief example, Susa Young Gates, a daughter of Brigham Young, in the pages of the *Young Woman's Journal*, declared, "[Plural marriage] is the law that crucifies the flesh that it may sanctify the Spirit; the law that marks the way to eternal progression."[16] The family was the vehicle for eternal progression. One progressed by entering into the patriarchal order of marriage, or celestial marriage, popularly called plural marriage. Progression was then measured by the "eternal" increase of wives and posterity in one's family kingdom, both here and in the eternities. Such enlargement of family was a holy act that mirrored God himself, who also progressed in like manner.

By the turn of the twentieth century and after, the Church, with increasing resolution, turned from plural marriage in the three decades following the Manifesto; the eternal family kingdom and its link to eternal progression disappeared almost entirely from official discourse. Mormonism sought to distance itself from its polygamous past and, through a variety of measures, integrate more fully into mainstream American society. Ironically, while Mormonism's Protestant counterparts were at the height of explicating their family-centric social heaven, the idea of eternal family in Mormonism, always previously situated within the framework of plural families, was drastically muted.

The principle of eternal progression, however, lived on under the influence of the scientific and philosophical rationalism that was beginning to take hold of the Western world. The philosophies of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, John Fiske, Henri Bergson,[17] and other influential thinkers exercised profound influence upon secular and religious society. Mormon intellectuals were among the many converts to contemporary scientific and philosophic thought. It was during this time that systematic expositions of Mormon theology began to appear, among them three important works by B. H. Roberts: *The Gospel: Exposition of First Principles* (1888), *The Seventies Course in Theology* (5 vols., 1907–12), and *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology* (1930); James E. Talmage's *Articles of Faith* (1899) and *The Vitality of Mormonism* (1919); BYU English professor Nels L. Nelson's *The Scientific Aspects of Mormonism* (1904); and John A. Widtsoe's *Joseph Smith As Scientist* (1908) and *A Rational Theology* (1915). These works, as well as many others, were attempts

by Mormon intellectuals to explain and defend their religion by incorporating contemporary ideas into their theologies.[18] Eternal progression was recast within this modern conceptual framework, and unsurprisingly it did not escape a naturalistic, rational interpretation.

Under the hands of academics like chemist and college president John A. Widtsoe and BYU English professor Nels L. Nelson—and heavily influenced by the social evolution theories of Herbert Spencer—eternal progression became the centerpiece of a Mormon teleological cosmology in which God, man, and all of creation are eternally evolving within this cosmology. The universe's clear purpose is the manufacturing of gods. In this universe, God becomes the Master of Science, the Supreme Intelligence who masters the eternal laws of the universe. Widtsoe offers what is probably the clearest, most concise definition of God as ultimate scientist in this way: "God undoubtedly exercised his will vigorously, and thus gained experience of the forces lying about him. As knowledge grew into greater knowledge, by persistent efforts of will, his recognition of universal laws became greater until he attained at last a conquest over the universe, which to our finite understanding seems absolutely complete. . . . His Godhood, however, is the product of simple obedience to the laws of the universe."[19]

The implication here for humankind is clear. As God learned to master and control the laws of the universe, so we, under His guidance, are to discover and obey these same laws; doing so will result in our own attainment of godhood. Widtsoe and other Mormon thinkers clearly believed that the ushering in of the modern era was both a sign of the onward progress of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and a forward leap toward the ultimate achievement of mastering the world and universe.

As one surveys the literature on eternal progression from this time, a pattern emerges that is common to almost all existential descriptions of the great hope, joy, and meaning Mormon authors found in this expansive doctrine. Familiar to all of these writings is a dualism of activity and inertia, eternal motion and everlasting fixity. A theology of activity lies at the heart of discussions on eternal progression. Consider the following, from an unknown author in the 1931 *Improvement Era*: "The idea of progress and the emotions arising out of discovery in the world of intellectual achievement are both lure and urge to mental activity, and when the idea is connected up with a belief in the endlessness of progress, it takes hold of the believer and holds him to the task of reaching higher levels and

viewing broader fields in a way that wearies not, but develops to the utmost."[20]

Apostle and agricultural scientist John A. Widtsoe similarly conceived of eternal progression as an exultant state of experiential and cognitive increase. He wrote, "What then is eternal progress? It is an eternity of active life, increasing in all good things, toward the likeness of the Lord. It is the highest conceivable form of growth." However, the totality of activity can only be possessed by those found in the highest heaven, the celestial kingdom: "One thing is known through the revelations of God. Those in the higher, the celestial glory, the one that we all hope to achieve, are in *full* activity . . . Not so in the lower glories."[21] He further declared, "If we seek, we shall forever add knowledge to knowledge. That which seems dark today, will be crystal clear tomorrow. Eternal progress means the unending elucidation of things not known or understood today."[22]

Although Mormons obviously found eternality of activity as the most essential and appealing component of a meaningful existence, they were far from alone in such a belief. Several theological traditions in Joseph Smith's time held quite detailed theologies of heavenly progression. Concepts of heavenly progress can also be found in the writings of early Church Father Origen all the way through the Protestant theology of the 1930s. Consider the following striking parallel between B. H. Roberts's concept of perfection and that of German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. Roberts writes: "There are no ultimates. Each succeeding wave of progress may attain higher, and ever higher degrees of excellence, *but never attain perfection*—the ideal recedes ever as it is approached, and hence progress is eternal, even for the highest existences."[23] Though he did not conceive of any form of eternal progression per se, in a striking anticipation of B. H. Roberts's thinking on the apparent deliciousness of almost, but not quite, attaining perfection, Leibniz wrote in 1704, "I feel that restless activity is an essential part of the happiness of creatures." Therefore, happiness "never consists in perfect possession. . . . [T]here must be a continuous and uninterrupted progress toward greater good."[24] Though the Scholastic, liturgical heaven of the changeless and static beatific vision would survive into the modern era with Catholicism and certain Protestant hymns such as "Jerusalem" and Longfellow's "Resignation,"[25] Protestantism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embraced a heaven of eternal motion and activity that fit squarely with Leibniz's conception. In fact, though they condemned one another on many points of theology, Evan-

gelicals and liberal Protestants agreed that activity and spiritual growth in heaven were certain. Methodist Leslie Weatherhead, for example, wrote in his 1936 *After Death:* "It is inconceivable to believe that the life after death is a life without continuous growth and progress."[26]

The emphasis on heavenly progress had surged among Christian writers in the decades just prior to Widtsoe's and Roberts's time. Inspired by the depiction of detailed eighteenth-century portrayals in art and literature of after-death reunions with loved ones, women fiction writers in the second half of the nineteenth century created domesticated literary visions of a heaven conducive to every ideal of home life. Within this comprehensive heavenly society, one could find husband, wife, children, siblings, parents, friends, pets, and even celebrities. By the end of the nineteenth century and continuing into the first three decades of the twentieth century, most Protestant ministers and theologians, as well as Spiritualists, were preaching the anthropocentric heaven of social community, where believers would mingle with family and friends and enjoy "productive work, spiritual development, and technological progress," in which, as German theologian Isaac A. Dorner put it, "the blessed will never be in want of an arena of satisfying activity."[27] The eternally changeless beatific vision of the God-focused theocentric heaven continued to be promoted among many (though not all) Catholic theologians and in Protestant hymnody, but theocentric notions of heaven remained a minority during the early twentieth century. A motion-oriented afterlife captured the imagination of nearly all of Protestantism and not a few Catholic theologians. Transcendental philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson had encapsulated well the utterly unimaginable idea of a static, changeless heaven when he wrote in 1839, "God invents, God advances. The world, the flesh, & the devil sit & rot."[28]

Mormon thinkers during this time sometimes failed to recognize the change in mainstream Christian eschatology. To promote what they apparently saw as Mormonism's unique vision of heaven and the purpose of life, they sometimes mischaracterized the vigorous Protestant heaven of sociality and activity that flourished during this period. For example, although B. H. Roberts allowed that "the creeds of men" possessed some truth, he found those creeds woefully unimaginative, failing to go far enough to comprehend the meaning of existence:

> What other conceivable purpose for existence in earth-life could there be for eternal intelligences than this attainment of "joy" arising from prog-

> ress? Man's existence for the "manifestation of God's glory," as taught by the creeds of men, is not equal to it. . . . It is written that "the glory of God is Intelligence" (D&C 93:36); and it must follow, as the day follows night, that with the enlargement, with the progress of intelligences, there must be a constantly increasing splendor in the manifestation of the glory of God. But in our doctrine, the manifestation of that glory may be said to be incidental. The primary purpose is not in that manifestation but in the "joy" arising from the progress of intelligences.[29]

Similarly, Nels L. Nelson offered perhaps the most scathing critique of what he saw as the almost laughable, meaningless nature of the Protestant afterlife:

> Here is the way in which a noted Presbyterian delivered himself on this theme: The question is often asked, "What shall we do when we get to heaven? Wherein shall consist our happiness?" I shall answer this question for myself. When I get to heaven, I shall spend the first five million years of my life in gazing upon the face of God; then if my wife is near I shall turn and look at her for five minutes. Then I shall gaze upon the glory of God again for a million million years; and when the longing of my eyes shall have been satisfied, and my soul is suffused with the beatific vision, I shall snatch up my harp and begin playing.

Comments Nelson scornfully, "What kind of being must God be, if we suppose him to get pleasure from having a billion billion . . . eyes glued upon Him from all sides for millions of years at a stretch? And then to have a certain quadrant of the enraptured gazers suddenly seized with harp-madness for other millions of years! Surely he will need the full measure of his infinite patience and long-suffering!"[30]

Mormon intellectuals, dissatisfied with what they perceived as the immobile and inert state of heaven in other Christian denominations, presented a straw-man depiction of the conventional Christian heaven which they then could effortlessly tear down. In reality, these Mormon authors were deconstructing the theocentric, immobile, and changeless heaven of Catholic neo-Scholasticism.[31] However, they mistakenly misrepresented Protestantism by superimposing their arguments (and sometimes ridicule) upon a portion of Christianity that was, in some ways at this time, even more drastically anthropocentric than Mormonism was.

Though these Mormon authors at times utilized obsolete theological data to characterize the doctrines of their Protestant counterparts, they were not totally unaware of competing contemporary views. Both Roberts and Widtsoe conceded that Mormons were not wholly alone in consider-

ing the eternal activity of immortal humanity in the universe. Roberts cites the ideas of Sir Oliver Lodge, whose theology is "far removed from modern Christian orthodoxy, though splendidly true": "The universe is not a 'being' but a 'becoming. . . . ' Monotony, in the sense of absolute immobility, is unthinkable, unreal, and cannot anywhere exist. . . . Such ideas, the ideas of development and progress, extend even up to God himself."[32]

Similarly, Widtsoe admitted, "Many men, the world over, not of our faith, now hold to the doctrine of eternal activity and progress. Note these words of Thomas Curtis Clark in the *Christian Century*: 'We serve no God whose work is done, / Who rests within His firmament: / Our God, His labors but begun, / Toils evermore, with powers unspent.'"[33] However, another good reason for their mischaracterization of other religions is that they sometimes simply did not do their homework. According to Sterling McMurrin, Roberts often totally ignored advances in religious and biblical studies or at least rarely commented on them in his writings.[34]

On the other hand, despite Mormon theologians' lack of awareness, there was much at stake in what they were attempting to describe by pitting the "creeds of men" against the restored gospel. Roberts and Widtsoe were concerned with what they saw as the nihilistic nature of the Christian heaven. A life of rest and happiness "gazing into the face of God" for eternity was completely unsatisfying. For Mormons, happiness and meaning in the life after death did not exist on a separate ontological plane radically distinct from that of mortality; on the contrary, happiness existed along the same ontological continuum as earth life. As Brigham Young had surmised half a century before, that which makes one happy and satisfied in this life is not very different from what will satisfy and appeal to one in the next life. Consequently, "eternally resting from labor" "glorifying God forever" and "staring into God's face" for eternity were impossible concepts to understand, inasmuch as there was no experiential basis for grasping them. They could see no motivation for desiring this type of heaven, and they were left with not only an incomprehensible heaven, but even a painful one. As Nels L. Nelson put it, "Think of the agony involved in an eternity of stagnated bliss, of monotonous, never-varying joy!"[35]

For Roberts and Widtsoe, the type of Christian heaven against which they were battling was a heaven completely empty of any rationally

conceivable value. By that term, I mean that Mormonism, because of its commitment to ontological monism, can posit that heaven and earth are ontologically the same. Thus, the only truly conceivable values are those of this world. Christianity, on the other hand, held that all real value exists in another, metaphysical realm. For Mormons this separate metaphysical realm does not exist; consequently, there is nothing of value in the Christian heaven and therefore it is truly meaningless. Though Mormons would not have known to employ the terminology, they were fighting against a kind of Christian nihilism, or the meaninglessness and worthlessness of a heaven that does not recognize or even remember any of the hard-fought prizes and accomplishments of mortal human achievement, where any and all progress and meaning gained in this life are annihilated. As James E. Faulconer, BYU professor of philosophy, has observed, "Mormons like Roberts could see traditional views of salvation as the bookend opposites of creation *ex nihilo*: we come from nothing; we become nothing."[36] Mormons used their outdated ideas of Protestant heaven as a foil against which they sought to illuminate and enhance their system of eternal progression and advancement.

Activity in Mormon and Protestant Thought

What was the nature of the "activity" that Roberts, Widtsoe, and others had in mind when they enthusiastically proclaimed their theologies of eternal progression? Justin Collings, a participant in the 2006 Joseph Smith Summer Seminar, quite aptly characterizes this theme, which was beginning to emerge in the Mormonism of the middle to late nineteenth century, as "eternal restlessness." He writes, "Mormons were an eminently busy people, a people who adopted the beehive as a community symbol and whose descendants still categorize each other as 'active' or 'inactive.' . . . Renouncing the conventional Christian yearning for eternal rest, Mormons longed for eternal restlessness."[37] Indeed, as religious anthropologist and interested Mormon observer Douglas Davies notes, "To be active is a key Mormon value. . . . 'Activity' is as distinctive an LDS noun as 'active' is an adjective describing involved Church members."[38] He theorizes an important connection between activity at the local level of Mormon life and the activity of the temple, both being locations where various types of "sacred work" take place, in contrast to simple sanctuaries of meditation and prayer alone. The sacred work of the temple in par-

ticular he labels, "sanctified activism." Thus, activity is institutionalized and ritualized at nearly every level of the Church.

It is through the lens of this "sanctified activism" that a clearer picture of the Mormon interpretation of being eternally active emerges. However, for purposes of this essay, I propose a definition of sanctified activism as activity that is entirely religious in nature—activity with a wholly theological purpose, e.g., gaining knowledge in order to master the elemental universe and save fallen beings, create and populate worlds, learn to become gods, etc., in other words, engaging in the type of activity that it is imagined God Himself engages in. This type of activity contrasts with the more secular activism of Protestant activity in the afterlife, which mirrors the everyday activity of human beings in a human society, e.g., working, playing, socializing, etc. Taking Carl Mosser's insightful inquiry of considering that *for* which we are to be saved, we may profitably ask the question: For what or in what way are Mormons to be eternally active? I will briefly consider Protestant formulations of activity after death to clarify and contextualize Mormon formulations of the same.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Protestant afterlife theology, though not unified in all details, is nevertheless saturated with the teaching of continued Christian service in heaven after death. Baptist preacher William Ulyat taught in 1901 that "heaven is a workshop," "and each of its residents have their appointments and daily avocations."[39] In heaven, secular activities involving social life, marriage, sexuality, and all types of labor-intensive and intellectual work continue in much the same manner as on earth, except that Christians are free from pain and suffering. They continue to advance from "perfection to perfection," though it is not clear in the literature what this means or how it is to be accomplished, nor is there any sense of this process as a vehicle for advancement toward any sort of distinctive, external goal.[40]

A close reading of Mormon concepts of activity reveals that Mormons like Roberts and Widtsoe were attempting to elucidate what was, in their view, a higher purpose to activity, which I have described as "sanctified activism." In what way or ways were Mormons active? Roberts did theorize (in step with Protestant theologians) that in the next life we will build and inhabit houses and buildings. However, contrary to any Protestant strand of thought from his time, he also anticipated participation in interplanetary travel and counsel with the Gods concerning the salvation of other intelligences.[41] Widtsoe stated that we will engage in build-

ing our kingdoms and increasing our posterity.[42] Other authors wrote that we will be creating worlds of our own.[43] For such Mormons, these are the activities of Deity, activities in which they imagine God himself engages. It is a conceptualization of heavenly activity that surpasses the more subdued, secular Protestant notions of activity and advancement.[44]

Mormons wanted to say that that which inspires and motivates God is also what inspires and motivates humans in the process of becoming gods. What, then, inspires and motivates the progression of God himself? Protestants, still steeped in traditional notions of God's utter ontological otherness, were not asking this question. For Mormons, however, the question was critical because God's progress and activity were also their own progress and activity. Thus, the following quotation from Roberts is significant: "And is it too bold a thought, that with this progress, even for the Mightiest, new thoughts, and new vistas may appear, inviting to new adventures and enterprises that will yield new experiences, advancement, and enlargement even for the Most High?"[45] The joy and meaning inherent in progression for human beings is not qualitatively different from that which satisfies God as well. Furthermore, when Roberts writes that "the ultimate of truth will always be like the horizon one pursues over the ocean—ever receding as one approaches it . . . never hoping to encompass it,"[46] he is saying that the moment God ceases to learn, the moment he no longer anticipates the next great adventure, is the moment that progress ceases and, with it, the possibility for joy. The same holds true for humankind. Here Roberts describes the world and the universe, as William James put it, as a "real adventure"[47] with real risks, real heights, and real depths, even for Gods. Similarly, Widtsoe's notion of "full activity" seems to partake of this understanding. Those in the celestial kingdom (those most nearly like God) can most nearly engage in the same type of activity in which God participates.

This view of sanctified activism collapsed the chasm between the godly and earthly realms of activity and allowed Mormons to religiously ground all their activity in this process of deification. This point is the major departure of Mormon theologies of activity from Protestant ones. Where Protestants are active in heaven in engaging in the same Christian work and service, the same modes of play and worship with which they were familiar in life, Mormons found meaning and joy through the extravagant proposition that eternal activity could and would result in deification. Consequently, the purpose of all activity in mortality and

postmortality is not happiness per se or even preparation for eternal rest within the family circle. Instead, its purpose is centered on training and instruction for becoming gods.[48]

The Roberts/Widtsoe Philosophy of Eternal Progress and Activity

Eternal progression for Mormon writers during this period (especially through the writings of Widtsoe and Roberts),[49] whether through an intense fascination with modern science and evolution, or through a detailed polemic against Christian nihilism, was a theology of activity, a response to the existential problem of the meaning of life. However, Mormonism has a long tradition of equating the meaning of existence with joy (or, at the very least, in declaring that joy is intimately connected to existential meaning and value), and Roberts and Widtsoe were no exception. B. H. Roberts often quoted the familiar, pithy Book of Mormon passage: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:20). But what was joy to Roberts? Certainly, joy was more connected to eternal progression and activity than to the eternal sociality of friends and family in the kingdom of God, though Roberts wholeheartedly embraced that aspect of immortality in the eternal realm.

In one of his more extensive passages on joy, he wrote, "The joy [here contemplated] is a joy that will be born of the consciousness of existence itself—that will revel in existence—in thoughts of realizations of existence's limitless possibilities. A joy born of the consciousness of the power of eternal increase. A joy arising from association with the Intelligences of innumerable heavens—the Gods of all eternities."[50] It is not totally clear what Roberts means here. Is he referring again to the "great eternal adventure" that the universe provides its inhabitants? Or perhaps the mere event of achieving godhood is what produces joy? It is also possible that Roberts has a notion similar to Hegel's unbounded absolute self-knowledge/consciousness, in which joy is equated with complete consciousness of self. If so, it seems that to know oneself is to understand that one's capacity for improvement is endless, a notion that seems to fit well with the rest of his philosophy.

The far-reaching nature of this joy prompts Roberts to boldly proclaim that the universe itself is "optimistic" in that, once we understand its nature and function properly, optimism becomes the appropriate response to it: "For to intelligence there is no end of progress; however great its present attainment, there is still a beyond to higher glory. . . . There are

no ultimates to progress for intelligences, there is always becoming, but no end. This constitutes the joy of existence—the possibility of eternal progress . . . all this makes the universe an optimistic universe."[51]

Similarly, John A. Widtsoe connects progress to joy:

> One may exist who is only static, who stands forever in the same place, who adds nothing, by his own effort, to himself or others. Under the law of the gospel, all who have dwelt on earth are entitled to eternal existence. But that does not lead to joy. One who is active, increasing, progressing, who accepts and obeys the gospel law, ever moves into higher zones of existence, and carries others along in his onward course. He receives the gift of eternal life, with its unending conquest, progress, development, and growth. He feels the quivering, thrilling response called joy.[52]

Not all philosophers, however, have been confident that a meaningful life—in this case, eternal progression as the vehicle for deriving meaning and value for existence—is a *sine qua non* for a joyful existence. Leo Tolstoy wrote that, for life to be meaningful, some activity pertaining to life must be worth doing; and it is worth doing only if it makes a permanent difference in the world.[53] However, although we can see evidence for some concrete notions of progress and activity after death in Mormon thought at this time, it is more the *fact* of activity taking place than any sort of particular through which activity is realized. In other words, the simple awareness or understanding that human beings have the capacity for self-directed spiritual and intellectual enlargement is more fundamentally important to the human experience of joy than any specific activity derivable from such a capacity. Philosopher Harry Frankfurt (b. 1929) takes up the same theme, theorizing that life becomes meaningful when we lose ourselves in some particular activity or experience. His idea is that concentration and engrossment in activity intuitively provide meaning to our existence, regardless of the specifics of the activity.[54] Thus, while what we do may be implicitly worth something, what is important is that there is work at all—that there is something, anything, that needs to be done. From the Roberts/Widtsoe point of view, one finds meaning in existence simply because one *can* work and advance, and can do so forever. Thus, John A. Widtsoe confidently writes, "It matters little what tasks men perform in life, if only they do them well and with all their strength. In the eternal plan they are given progressive value."[55]

However, others have argued, along the lines of German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), that our lives will always lack meaning

because we are never satisfied; either we have not obtained what we have sought; or once we have obtained it, we become bored and dissatisfied with it.[56] Nonetheless, this idea assumes that there is necessarily some object that we must obtain to give our lives meaning. However, it does not seem that there exists or could exist any such object in the universe, the attainment of which guarantees a meaningful existence. The Roberts/Widtsoe answer to this objection is that meaning, within the ever-expanding structure of eternal progression, is performative, not ultimately objective. Eternal progression is the exaltation of the ordinary man or woman, not defined and labeled according to his or her vocation or the "objects" of his or her possession, but given meaning and purpose through capacity to act. Hence, human beings, like God, have the potential for radical ontological transcendence, not simply in transcending the world as immortals but also in transcending the self as gods. Consequently, humans, like God, can be eternally "self-surpassing,"[57] and this essential characteristic of human and divine existence, in Roberts's and Widtsoe's view, is the very essence of a meaningful (and joyful) existence.

There is an essential element of adventure and novelty in the Roberts/Widtsoe cosmology, of which eternal progression serves as the dynamic vehicle and foundation. The idea that the universe can be fully explored, that both God and humankind can reach a limit of experience is wholly unsatisfying. Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), a profoundly innovative contemporary of both Widtsoe and Roberts, wrote, "Progress is always a transcendence of what is obvious."[58] Similarly, Roberts and Widtsoe insisted that reality should not and, indeed, thankfully, could not ever be fully described.[59] For Roberts and Widtsoe, an infinitely transcendent and eternally self-surpassing existence of adventure and new discovery was the essence of a celestial existence.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of their book, *Heaven: A History*, Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang observe that the idea of a progressive, social heaven has survived after the 1930s in only three ways: (1) in contemporary popular culture, (2) in glimpses of the afterlife in near-death experiences, and (3) in Latter-day Saint theology.[60] Protestant ideas of an active heaven were the product of a particular historical moment and did not endure. This cultural observation points to the unique adaptability of eternal progression in LDS theology, though contemporary discourse on eter-

nal progression is also quite distinct from that of the early twentieth century. With the controversial world of polygamy in the distant past, Latter-day Saints once again speak of eternal family, eternal marriage, and eternal progress in the same breath. Nevertheless, the doctrine continues to take on meanings suitable to its proprietors. Where Mormons once spoke of the joy of God's and humankind's unending progression in knowledge, they now speak of eternal families. Where they once discoursed on the eternal activity of progression as necessary for development into godhood, Mormons now speak of the "plan of salvation" or "eternal plan of happiness."[61]

In spite of such drastic changes in LDS doctrine concerning polygamy and priesthood restrictions, eternal progression is a doctrine that has nevertheless remained largely intact. Certainly its connection to eternal marriages and families is a key factor in its longevity, but I have argued that there is also something more—an existential component that provides a possible motivation for Latter-day Saint activity here and in the hereafter. For Mormons who embrace the faith, that component speaks to the possibility of the excitement and thrill of, as B.H. Roberts wrote, "yielding to new thoughts, new vistas, new adventures, new experiences."[62] Eternal progression in Mormon thought allows for the exaltation and qualitative self-transcendence of human beings that are not available in most other theologies. In the complex of denominations in the contemporary Christian universe, this doctrine of LDS theology uniquely echoes Catherine Albanese's description of religion for the Transcendentalists, that "the most salient characteristic of religious reality is that it moves."[63]

Notes

1. "The Grandest Principle of the Gospel: A Symposium," *The Contributor* 16 (1894–95): 610–14. Eight of the ten church leaders surveyed considered eternal progression as at least a candidate for the "grandest" gospel principle, though only six finally gave it that preeminence. The other respondents were Henry W. Naisbitt, T. B. Lewis, David McKenzie, S. W. Jenkinson, George G. Bywater, and Thomas Hull.

2. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2d. ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 172. See also Thomas Dick, *Philosophy of a Future State* (Brookfield, Mass.: E&G Merriam, 1830). Though Dick posited that the stars were home to "progressive beings" in various stages of evolution toward perfection (101), his philosophy (which was mostly a theory of metaphysical astronomy) was still quite

distinct from Joseph Smith's system of human beings progressing into individual deities after death.

3. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History,* 300.

4. Carl Mosser, email message to David L. Paulsen, February 2005; used with Paulsen's permission.

5. Charles W. Eliot, *Henry James*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin), 300, quoted in John A. Widtsoe, *Understandable Religion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1944), 35.

6. The scope of this paper is too narrow to adequately describe the notion of "intelligence(s)" in Mormon thought. This concept embodies complex philosophical, theological, historical, and even scientific dimensions. However, for the sake of brevity and clarity, I will use here the definition of B. H. Roberts, which is as precise as any. An "intelligence" in Mormon thought is (1) the individual, uncreated, self-conscious "essence" of each human person, which essence includes freedom of will and the potential for endless enlargement and expansion, and (2) intelligence "en masse" or the general "power" or "force" that emanates from and inheres in dynamic, complex, intelligent entities. Stan Larson, ed., *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology: The Masterwork of B. H. Roberts* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 282–83. Generally speaking, when the word "intelligence" is used in Mormon theological discourse, it is often synonymous with "spirit," as in the spirit of a human person. For more expanded treatments on this doctrine, see Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 59–78, and especially Truman G. Madsen, "Eternal Man," in *Five Classics by Truman G. Madsen* (Salt Lake City: Eagle Gate, 2001), 3–68, esp. 18–19. In my view, Madsen's exposition of Roberts's philosophy of "eternalism" (the core of which is the doctrine of intelligences) is the best available.

7. Scott Goodwin, "Joseph's Ladder: Principles of Eternal Progression in Three Theological Traditions," in *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows' Papers 1997–99* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 2000), 103–5. Goodwin argues that, though these traditions reject *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), they favor a model called creation *ex deo* (creation out of God) in which all things emanate from a single, divine essence. Joseph Smith, on the other hand, rejected creation out of nothing in favor of creation *ex materia*, or a creation out of previously existing materials, in which God is organizer rather than originator (104–5).

8. L. Mikel Vause, "Eternal Progression: The Higher Destiny," in *The*

Search for Harmony: Essays on Science and Mormonism, edited by Gene A. Sessions and Craig J. Oberg (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 278.

9. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling, a Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 457–58, on the subject of Joseph Smith's detailed cosmological narrative, writes, "No other nineteenth-century religious imagination filled time and space with stories like these."

10. Goodwin, "Joseph's Ladder," 101, quoted in Van Hale, "Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 211–12.

11. Eugene England, "Perfection and Progression: Two Complementary Ways to Talk about God," *BYU Studies* 29, no. 3 (1989): 35. See also Lisa R. Adams, "Eternal Progression," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:465–66.

12. Boyd Kirkland, "Eternal Progression and the Second Death in the Theology of Brigham Young," in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, edited by Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 175.

13. Brigham Young, February 6, 1853, *Journal of Discourses*, 2:90, emphasis mine, quoted in England, "Perfection and Progression," 35.

14. This statement in Kirkland, "Eternal Progression and the Second Death," quotes two Brigham Young addresses from the *Journal of Discourses*, 9:149, 1:349, 352. Young is here describing the ultimate fate of the sons of perdition, the definitive examples in his thought of those who will regress instead of progress. Though the sons of perdition will be included in the universal physical resurrection (D&C 76:17; Alma 11:42–42), it appears that their resurrected bodies are "devoid of glory" in that they do not participate in the celestial, terrestrial, or telestial glorified states immediately following the resurrection. It is therefore theoretically plausible under Young's system that the unglorified body of a son of perdition could "decompose into its native element," if one assumes that it is the glorified state of the body that staves off the effects of death and corruption. However, 1 Corinthians 15:22 and Alma 11:46, among other scriptures, assert immortality for all humans after death due to the resurrection. Alma says of the sons of perdition: "for they cannot be redeemed according to God's justice; *and they cannot die,* seeing there is no more corruption" (Alma 12:18; emphasis mine). Nevertheless, it is clear that the sons of perdition are the only individuals who will experience the "second death," which various scriptures define as a "spiritual death" (Alma 12:16; Hel. 14:18; D&C 29:41). The nature of the second death is not totally clear. The sons of perdition will be cast into the "lake of fire and brimstone" with the devil and his followers and are unique in that they cannot be redeemed

(D&C 76:36–38). In one popular exposition on the second death, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie surmised that the sons of perdition who experience the second death die to spiritual things, being cast out of God's presence forever. However, they cannot be utterly disorganized; they continue to live eternally as resurrected beings or unembodied spirits. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 756. Still, questions remain. Why can they not be redeemed? Is it because God knows that they will eternally reject Christ and His gospel and therefore does not grant them salvation, or is it because they physically and spiritually regress, as Brigham Young believed, into their native element and therefore dissolve as beings capable of repentance and transformation? I will only state here that, although Young's statement appears to be hypothetically plausible, the issue is murky enough to draw speculation from various authorities but no authoritative conclusions have been explicated.

15. Wilford Woodruff, December 6, 1857, *Journal of Discourses*, 6:20, quoted in England, "Perfection and Progression," 38.

16. Susa Young Gates, "The Editor's Department," *Young Woman's Journal* 2, no. 6 (1891): 284.

17. Particularly influential works from these thinkers include Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859; 5th ed., New York: D. Appleton, 1871); Herbert Spencer, *A System of Synthetic Philosophy*, 9 vols. (London: Williams and Northgate, 1862–93); John Fiske, *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy, Based on the Doctrine of Evolution, with Criticisms on the Positive Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1874); Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell (1911; rpt., New York: Dover, 1998).

18. Though I unfortunately do not have space to expand upon it here, there is also evidence that the American Progressive movement (fostered by the political ideologies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson) and the Social Gospel movement in American mainline Christianity—both of which exemplified a culture of exuberance that was typical of this time period—also influenced the LDS development of the idea of eternal and earthly progression. See Armand L. Mauss, "Assimilation and Ambivalence: The Mormon Reaction to Americanization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 30–67; Thomas G. Alexander, "Between Revivalism and the Social Gospel: The Latter-day Saint Social Advisory Committee, 1916–1922," *BYU Studies* 23 (Winter 1983): 19–39, and his *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

19. John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1937), 25.

20. "Mutual Messages: Provisions for the Doctrine of Eternal Progression," *Improvement Era* 35, no. 2 (December 1931): 661–65.

21. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations,* arranged by G. Homer Durham (1943; rpt., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 185; emphasis mine. Widtsoe seems to here imply that those in the lower kingdoms of glory lack in some degree the ability to act, in contrast to residents of higher kingdoms of glory whose capacity for activity is somehow enhanced.

22. Ibid., 33.

23. B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology. Third Year: The Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Claxton Press, 1910), 151; emphasis mine.

24. Gottfried Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais,* 2:21; in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe,* edited by Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962), 6th ser., 6:189, quoted in Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 2d ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 277.

25. McDannell and Lang, *Heaven,* 288. A frequently quoted stanza from "Jerusalem" reads: "Where congregations ne'er break, up, / And Sabbaths have no end." Similarly, Longfellow's "Resignation" reads: "She is not dead, the child of our affection, / but gone unto that school / where she no longer needs our poor protection, / And Christ himself doth rule."

26. Leslie Weatherhead, *After Death* (New York: Abingdon, 1936), 54, quoted in McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 276.

27. McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 283.

28. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, edited by William H. Gillman et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1969), 7:172, March 9, 1839, "God invents, God," quoted in McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 278.

29. Stan Larson, ed., *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology: The Masterwork of B. H. Roberts* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 302.

30. Nels L. Nelson, *The Scientific Aspects of Mormonism; Or: Religion in Terms of Life* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 217.

31. In addition to a straw-man representation of Protestant eschatology, Mormon authors were also committing the fallacy of composition, declaring that since one denomination—albeit the largest—of Christianity (Catholicism) advocated the changeless, beatific heaven, therefore the whole of the Christian tradition must also do likewise. Perhaps a partial reason for

this approach was the 1902 Roberts-Van Der Donckt debates, in which Roberts and the Catholic Reverend C. Van Der Donckt of Pocatello, Idaho, engaged in a series of debates concerning the nature of God in Catholic and Mormon thought. Nels Nelson actually references the debates in a chapter on his views of the afterlife by inserting Van Der Donckt's description of the beatific vision. Nelson, *Scientific Aspects of Mormonism*, 216. The debates were significant and influential enough to be published in the *Improvement Era* and later in a fuller, more expanded form in a book by Roberts. Blake T. Ostler, *The Attributes of God*, Vol. 1 of EXPLORING MORMON THOUGHT (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 93, for one, considers it Roberts's finest defense of the Mormon faith. Moreover, confusion on the part of Mormon authors may be even more understandable when one considers that virtually the entire Christian world for the most part agreed, following St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, on the nature of God as incorporeal, simple, timeless, impassible, etc., a fact highlighted by the Roberts-Van Der Donckt debates themselves. It was in their notions of heaven that Catholics and Protestants differed—and that only recently, a point perhaps too subtle and fine for Mormons to grasp at that time. For the text of the Roberts-Van Der Donckt debates, see *Improvement Era,* August 1902; for the expanded version, see Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1908).

32. Sir Oliver Lodge, *Science and Immortality* (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Co., 1908), 292, quoted in Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, 477.

33. Widtsoe, *Understandable Religion*, 38.

34. Sterling McMurrin, "Introduction: The Mormon Theology of B. H. Roberts," in Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, xxiv.

35. Nels L. Nelson, "Eternal Progression," *Young Woman's Journal* 10, no. 5 (May 1899): 219.

36. James Faulconer, email to Jacob Baker, July 20, 2007.

37. Justin Collings, "Longing for Eternal Restlessness: The Mormon Kingdom in the Spirit World," Paper presented at the 2006 Summer Seminar on Joseph Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, Brigham Young University, photocopy in my possession courtesy of Richard L. Bushman, seminar director.

38. Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation: Force, Grace, and Glory* (Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 76.

39. William Ulyat, quoted in McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 282–83.

40. However, in a sense, the anthropocentric and family-oriented heaven was not a theological option for Protestantism. Considering their Au-

gustinian and Thomistic understanding of God's nature as timeless, and therefore eternity as timeless (as opposed to the LDS interpretation of eternity as unending time), one couldn't work, have projects, or progress in any way. Such things seem impossible in a timeless realm. My thanks to James Faulconer for elucidating this point.

41. B. H. Roberts, "The Mormon Point of View in Education," *Improvement Era* 2, no. 2 (December 1898).

42. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations,* 185.

43. "Mutual Messages: Provisions for the Doctrine of Eternal Progression," *Improvement Era* 35, no. 2 (December 1931).

44. Mormon eschatology agreed with Protestant progressive eschatology on many points, but it was what Mormonism had to say about *God's* place in the progressive theological framework that radicalized and distinguished it. Consider the following LDS missionary story from 1914: "Elders who have been on missions will, no doubt, confirm the writer's missionary experience in teaching eternal progression. Many were fascinated by such an attitude towards life and growth. In fact, some intelligent, conservative people became enthusiastic over the richer and fuller life this doctrine held out. However, when carrying the principle to its ultimate conclusion, and applying it to God himself, intense opposition was encountered. . . . What! God not at the end of progress! The idea appeared unthinkable." William J. Snow, "'Mormonism' a Dynamic Force," *Improvement Era* 17, no. 6 (April 1914): 533.

45. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, 476.

46. Ibid., 16.

47. William James, *Pragmatism* (1907; rpt., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 121, quoted in Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 536.

48. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling,* 537, comments on Joseph Smith's theology on this topic, "They [the Mormons under Joseph Smith's leadership] subordinated themselves to the higher power in preparation for assuming that power themselves. The purpose of allegiance and obedience was not order and happiness but training. The subjects of the king were learning to become kings."

49. My thanks again to James Faulconer for an illuminating critique regarding the topics in this section.

50. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life,* 301.

51. Ibid., 91.

52. Widtsoe, *Understandable Religion,* 37–38.

53. Leo Tolstoy, *My Confession, My Religion: The Gospel in Brief* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1899).

54. Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," *Synthese* 53, no. 2 (November 1982): 259.

55. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology*, 22.

56. See R. Martin, "A Fast Car and a Good Woman," in *The Experience of Philosophy*, 2d ed., edited by D. Kolak and R. Martin (Belmont, Mass.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1993), 589–95. See also Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2007 ed., http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2007/entries/life-meaning (accessed February 2008).

57. Ostler, *Attributes of God*, 99.

58. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, 1929; corrected ed., David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 9.

59. See Anna Case-Winters, "System and Dynamism in Whitehead's Thought: The Category of the Ultimate and the Concept of God," in *Schleiermacher and Whitehead: Open Systems in Dialogue*, edited by Christine Helmer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 138.

60. McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 307–8. Additionally, Richard Bushman, in *Rough Stone Rolling*, 537, notes that some of its appeal may be in its "Americanness": "Mormons themselves have labeled the doctrine of eternal spirits 'eternal progression,' as if it meant rising ever higher in society, the essence of the American dream. It is the one teaching of Joseph Smith that Americans are most likely to admire."

61. For example, in the "Newsroom" section of the LDS Church's official website {www lds.org}, the phrase "eternal progression" links directly to a separate section of the site entitled, "Plan of Salvation." http://www.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=25ca9c137b69f010VgnVCM100000176f620aRCRD&vgnextchannel=3e0511154963d010VgnVCM1000004e94610aRCRD (accessed February 2008). Additionally, Apostle Joseph B. Wirthlin commented in a 1998 general conference address: "Right now, this very moment, is part of our eternal progression towards returning with our families to the presence of our Father in Heaven." Wirthlin, "The Time to Prepare," *Ensign*, May 1998, 14. LDS discourse on this subject (especially with its renewed emphasis on families and family life) has, in fact, moved a little closer to the contemporary Protestant mainstream in its language and focus. O. Kendall White Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

62. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, 476.

63. Catherine L. Albanese, *Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), 94, quoted in McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 278.