

Matter Made Graciously Present

Adam S. Miller. *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. 166 pp. Paper: \$18.00. ISBN 978-0823251513.

Reviewed by Benjamin Peters and John Durham Peters

Once philosophy was not even taught at BYU for fear of corrupting the youth and Mormonism has had a famously rocky relationship with theology. But as with Mormon Studies in general, we are in the midst of a flowering in Mormon philosophy and theology. Our moment is full of possibilities and reconciliations once never dreamed of. Who would have predicted that radical continental thinkers would figure so prominently for young Mormon thinkers? Or that Mormon ideas would draw such wide intellectual interest?

Adam Miller, a professor of philosophy at Collin College, is one of the leaders in this flowering, and *Speculative Grace* is stunning, abstract, and poetic, a book that troubles the waters, mostly to healing but also to muddy effect. In contrast to his previous book, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (2012), this book makes no explicit acknowledgement of Mormonism. This however has not kept him from announcing to the “blogger-nacle” that *Speculative Grace* is “the most rigorous, speculative, and systematic attempt at a professional take on Mormon philosophy, ever.” He has since shrunk this regrettably effusive claim by treating each word with such precision (e.g., noting that B.H. Roberts was not a professional philosopher) that the claim might end up applying to only this book! Miller says he hoped to stir people to read and disagree.¹ We both have since taken the bait and are glad to rise to his provocation, with our slightly different opinions.

In this slender volume, Miller promises and in many ways delivers a profound meditation on the intersection of an emergent strain of object-oriented philosophy with a theology of grace, a concept so often muddled with the remnants of the divine omni’s as to render it as unbelievable in doctrine as it remains essential in

daily life. Miller's figuring of grace as that which is unconditionally given in a quotidian world teeming with messy and diverse objects is a breath of fresh air on the topic. There is much of Mormon resonance for those with ears to hear.

The insights of *Speculative Grace* are administered in 41 bite-sized chapters that mix pithy thoughts with insight-inducing koans and enigmatic reversals. The book has four main aims. It (1) brings the Christian notion of grace into a non-theistic object-oriented philosophy compatible with science; (2) offers an extended rehearsal of the French sociologist of science Bruno Latour's experimental metaphysics conceived in the fresh terms of "resistant availability"; (3) extends that metaphysics as it applies to, in yet another reversal, the practical immanence of grace alongside the transcendence of science; and (4) meditates on how an object-oriented approach can refresh religious practice. The result is a worldview fit for scientist, theologian, and ordinary human alike looking to extend grace to all things, however unevenly, from God to the poor and needy to the smudge on this computer screen. This short book seeks no less than a reconciliation of religion and science as objective marvels within a concrete universe of things and a vision of a world infused at once with suffering and grace.

Sound abstract? It is. Condensed and Zen-like, the book does not flaunt philosophical vocabulary and is all but completely free of academic name-dropping. Miller's focus is Latour, even as other voices clamor unacknowledged for recognition in the background. One of us finds this focus admirably disciplined; the other thinks it ungrateful to the rich literary network in which this thing, the book called *Speculative Grace*, is embedded. The sentences are short and style is plain, although we expect the stratospheric abstraction of thought may leave some readers feeling unmoored. All this makes for flint-like prose that bursts with sparks but leaves the reader to provide the kindling and logs.

Miller's choice and treatment of Latour reveals how suggestive a thinker Latour is theologically, just as it reveals something about Miller's work. Latour is the "it" thinker of our moment, the superstar scholar everyone wants a piece of, and showing his theological chops is a valuable contribution—a topic Latour himself recently featured in his 2013 Gifford Lectures. But *Speculative Grace*

adopts a curiously reverential attitude toward Latour. To twist Miller's terms, the book is intensely available to Latour, constantly quoting, extending, and at times improving his work, but never resistant. A reclamation without a critique, speculation without skepticism, *Speculative Grace* treats its main subject so gracefully, so generously that it neglects its own warning call to heed the multiplicity of things, including literate things. As far as we can tell, never once does Miller question Latour's account of the partial, incomplete metaphysics that makes up life. His method of reading Latour is familiar in LDS circles, although practiced here at a very high level—the selection of proof-texts from scripture. It is an odd yet highly illuminating way to read such a mercurial thinker as Latour. Miller shows us all that Latour's ideas bring, but nothing that they lack. His readings are unremittingly charitable. Meet Elder Latour, a new general authority!

If we are policing professional boundaries, Latour is no more a professional philosopher than B. H. Roberts was, though he is deeply philosophical. (Perhaps in France, land of *philosophes*, this label is doled out more generously.) Latour is a master of slogans and headlines. He likes to tweak scientific pretensions with paradoxes and witticisms. As such, his greatest brilliance comes not in metaphysical generalizations (which, as critics have shown, can be flat out wrong at times) but in case studies. He is the great anthropologist of science who showed how microbes, jungle eco-systems, and failed urban transportation networks are “imbroglios,” tangled webs of making and knowing, of facts and feats. Latour's aphorisms such as “things are people too,” “technology is society made durable” and “ontology is flat” are probably best taken as rhetorical gambits rather than as metaphysical dicta. To say that ontology is flat, for instance, is a lovely way to annoy Cartesian philosophers and Durkheimian social theorists, but is probably not the richest way to describe the universe.

Miller knows that Latour's claims are local and provisional, and the point of Miller's reading is to build a metaphysics out of local and provisional materials. But *Speculative Grace* sits uneasily with Latour's performative method in two ways. First, Latour brims with and excels in case studies; Miller has none. The contrast is striking: the Latour essay closest at hand “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public” lists more exam-

ples in the first three pages (e.g., from the German Reich and Greenland's melting glaciers to Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Colin Powell's speech at the UN) than Miller manages in 160 pages. As far as we can tell, the only examples longer than a sentence in Miller are taken from Latour. Even with a generous allowance for the norms of professional philosophical writing, the shortage of examples risks undoing the argument. Darwin without the length of finch beaks is not Darwin at all. Here we have a book, virtually bereft of objects, advocating that everything must be understood as objects. Peculiar, the object-orientation of this book!

The examples that do make it into the writing affirm this point. Consider this list (a rhetorical fixture in all object-oriented writing): "my father's hammer, my neighbor's cheesecake recipe, my mother's preference for yellow, my brother's ideas about Spider-Man, my son's way of bounding down the stairs, my grandfather's curly hair" (152; just what, one wonders, does his brother think about Spider-Man?). Note how this list, compared to the shaggier ones of his object-oriented colleagues, luxuriates in local kinship relations. Also note that Miller does not follow this list or any other with annotation or discussion, save for a page on soil science (92–93; Latour's example). Collages like these push the scope of thought; they do not illustrate and concretize it. When he does use an example, it slips away so quickly that one senses it must have slipped through whatever mental sieve he has in place for filtering out examples from this meditation on objects (e.g., "rocks in a river" [65]). In its paucity of concrete examples *Speculative Grace* swims against the Mormon grain. Joke: Imagine if you can a Mormon thinker without object lessons! On the other hand, we suppose the book is meant as one big object lesson, as a meditation on the mute gospels that are the many things constitutive of Zion.

Second, it is obvious when you read Latour or hear him speak is that he is ever willing to play the brilliant buffoon to make a point. He is an inveterate scholar-trickster, as self-mocking of his own craft as Miller was in *Rube Goldberg Machines*. Latour once quipped that there are four things wrong with the term "actor-network theory," the intellectual brand he helped make famous: actor, network, theory, and the hyphen. Latour is playful to a fault.

(Indeed he would be the first to deny his being an authority of anything general.) If the two were in a room, Miller would be the only one not joking.

Both authors, at least, share the trait of being hard to pin down. Your reviewers split on how to take Miller's abstraction. One of us finds it one more beautiful contortion in a long line of preposterous stunts that philosophers have undertaken. Philosophy is often the task of seeing how long you can hold your breath—how long you can sustain a position that at first seems in stark defiance of reality, but turns out to offer much perspective by incongruity. There is no philosophy without the willingness to put the whole world in jeopardy. The other one of us, while sympathetic, worries that the abstract argumentation threatens to sidestep Miller's overarching project, taken as the search for a philosophical method for understanding grace and suffering. If grace and suffering might be understood as that which is undeserved and particular in life, then how can understanding advance without any undeserved particulars in the argument? Without fresh examples, his insights do not risk being tested; without critical context, his book cannot put them to work. After what amounts to the book's high mark in original examples (five pithy sentences on dating the earth's age.[111]), Miller quotes Latour that a good text should make the reader call for more details; by that standard, *Speculative Grace* is an extraordinarily good text!

In object-oriented philosophy (Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, etc.), Immanuel Kant typically plays the bad guy for having diverted philosophy away from substance and things. The technicalities need not detain us here, but the same philosophers might also recall that Kant also made critique the chief task of philosophy, opening up a florid tradition of critical thought in modern philosophy. We fear that the object-oriented philosophy offered by Miller and others arrives without the benefit of a sufficiently critical outlook. Leaving its social and political implications unexplored leaves the floodgates open for unpleasant waters to pour in. Where the context is unclear, one has to read the metaphors.

And Miller's metaphors wax political, even if the stakes are never clear (Bryant makes a similar point in the introduction). Consider this nearly neoliberal moment: "In a metaphysical de-

mocracy,” writes Miller, “every object gets a vote” (103). If only all things operated in a parliament! Too often his world of things sounds like a marketplace scrum. In pushing his counter-intuitive insights, Miller not only does not take lessons from democracy among people, with its mess of special interests, rational voter apathy, senatorial wrangling, and billion dollar campaigns, but the commonsensical raggedness of things vanishes from view as well. We wish all things were free to speak in their own voices and haggle out their mutual relations, yet the world is not a big flat network of irreducible, co-existent, full-authorized agents; indeed, the Atonement authorizes certain agents to act, but to act within a world of hierarchies, asymmetries, and injustices which no actor-network can democratize metaphysically. Locks, passports, and strait gates are things too. Not all things are created equal. Infrastructure matters. Grand keys and narrow claims govern the Prophet Joseph’s universe.

Miller can also sound techno-libertarian: his point that the “pluriverse lacks any formatting that is not produced locally and provisionally by the multitude itself” (16) sounds like the idealized world of the internet enthusiast. The vogue of Latour’s thought—with its self-organizing, tangled networks and self-conscious riffs on object-oriented programming—clearly owes much to changing technological conditions, of which at least Latour is acutely aware. It is all too easy in an era of iPads and smart phones to think of things as intelligent, alive, personal, and networked. Indeed, in several passages of Miller’s book you could replace “things” with “Apple products” without losing anything. This is not to say that Miller is boosting free-market capitalism or some techno-futurist wifi-enabled silicon transcendence, only that he offers nothing—no examples, no context, no criticism to the contrary—to keep such powerful discourses from coloring his text.

Nor does the work seek out or serve friendly conversations. That matter is vibrantly alive, capable of graceful stewardships is, for example, wonderfully pertinent to environmental debate, and yet not a word is said in this book. (He has written elsewhere on these themes in George Handley’s elegant work.) This is the gamble of Miller’s professionalism: that a philosopher need not worry

about society, politics, and historical context. We are not convinced he has won the bet.

Still, the flipside of our criticism finds *Speculative Grace* perhaps most eloquent in what it does not say or in what it only hints at. In the end this is a book of apophasis, of not saying. Its finest service to Mormon thought comes through what it can generate rather than what it has said.

Latour, a philosophically out-of-the-closet pragmatist, points Miller toward rediscovering the deep, unacknowledged affinities between Mormon theology and the insights of early American pragmatism such as William James and Charles Sanders Peirce: life is an evolutionary adventure, metaphysics is an empirical inquiry, and science rests upon the hazard of faith in the community of interpretation.

Mormon theology following that generation (Roberts, Talmage, Widtsoe, another soil scientist) centered on the relation of science and religion, and *Speculative Grace* is a worthy heir of that noble tradition, though of course with different methods and motives. Miller upends much either-or thinking that has shipwrecked many inquirers over the past century. He presents an experimental religion that is just as fierce a schoolmaster of our relation to reality as science ever was. His line that “the work of ‘saying’ the truth is indistinguishable from the work of ‘making’ the real” (71) should be the definitive word on what Mormons call testimony. Religion is a discipline of transformation rather than information, and we err in measuring its experiential worth by epistemic standards. Religion is not about new knowledge, but about the old truths that stare us in the face so hard that we stop seeing them. Religion is both epistemologically indifferent and abundantly true. Although it may be too concrete for Miller’s tastes, some of *Speculative Grace’s* words on science and religion deserve to be carved in granite.

This review began in conversation as the two of us were cleaning out a garage over the summer, so perhaps there is no surprise that it has dwelled on dusty, old things and mechanics. We were up to our elbows in “things,” the heroes of the object-oriented philosophy Adam Miller champions, and they weren’t always pleasant! They were often lonely, mucky, obsolete, derelict, dispensable. But we also found stashes of old cassettes and older family

photos—forgotten gems of memory and markers of kinship. In the mess, we uncovered truths that Miller teaches: that religion “practices not only prayer but family history” (152) and that things, like people, live in communities of relation. Grace can break out in local squalls in any place, whether a manger or a garage, and even God himself depends on it. We owe gratitude to Adam Miller for making such matters so graciously present.

Note

1. Blair Hodges, ed., “Ask the Scholar: Adam S. Miller on Grace, Faith, Theology, Boredom, and Other Matters,” May 20, 2013, *Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Blog*, accessed July 16, 2013, www.maxwellinstituteblog.org/ask-the-scholar-adam-s-miller-on-grace-faith-theology-boredom-and-other-matters.

The ISPP Way and the Navajo Way

Robert S. McPherson, Jim Dandy, and Sarah E. Burak. *Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life: The Autobiography and Teachings of Jim Dandy*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012. 292 pp. Paper: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-1-60781-194-7.

Reviewed by Patricia Karamesines

Months after we moved to Blanding, Utah, an LDS Navajo neighbor asked if my ten-year-old daughter would like to play a role in the Voices of San Juan Pageant, a local, outdoor LDS production then staged every year. I'd never seen the pageant but said I thought that she'd like taking part. Then my neighbor told me my girl would be playing a Navajo toiling among other Navajos in a scene portraying the Long Walk. The suggestion that my very white child assume the role of a Navajo in this reenactment of one of the most tragic events in Navajo history startled me so deeply that I laughed out loud. My neighbor laughed, too. But she still wanted my daughter in the role.

My daughter happily accepted the chance to play Indian and performed for three nights. I attended on the final night to see exactly how she fit into the pageant, becoming even more unset-