

## **Pre-Mortal Existence and the Problem of Suffering: Terryl Givens and the Heterodox Traditions**

Terryl L. Givens. *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 400 pp. Hardback: \$99; also available in paperback: \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0195313901.

*Reviewed by James McLachlan*

Terryl Givens's work has, with good reason, become quite popular in Mormon circles over the past few years. Since *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (1997), he has become the most prolific and perhaps most important scholar writing about Mormon culture and theology today. He is difficult to categorize. He doesn't quite fit the traditional roles of historian, literary critic, or theologian. He was trained in English literature at the University of North Carolina and teaches it at the University of Richmond, where he is Bostwick Professor of English; his early work was on the theory of mimesis. But the key to understanding his approach is his early graduate studies at Cornell where he studied Western Intellectual History. He is less a theologian or historian than an historian of ideas in the tradition of Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873–1962) and his classic text *The Great Chain of Being* (1936). *When Souls Had Wings* is perhaps the crowning example of this way of thinking. In this book, Givens places the Mormon belief in the preexistence of the soul within a Western context, leaning heavily on the Platonic tradition in which the preexisting human soul falls into time from timeless eternity, and where God, in His perfection, is exempt from the trials of change and evolution. This paper is not a critique of what Givens has accomplished; rather, it is an exploration of other avenues of thought that add to our understanding of non-orthodox Christian conceptions of the preexistence. Heterodox thinkers such as Jacob Boehme, F. W. J. Schelling, and Nicolas Berdyaev offered alternative, non-Platonic versions of pre-mortal existence that have important implications

for thinking about the problem of suffering and perhaps thinking about LDS doctrine. It is here where my disagreements with Givens's account emerge. I think this heterodox tradition offers important alternate resources for Mormon theology, while Givens folds them into the Platonic mainstream.

### **When Souls Had Wings**

*When Souls Had Wings* traces the idea of pre-existence from ancient Mesopotamia to the present. It suffers from the flattening of context and hasty journey through the past that all “history of ideas” books do. Indeed, Mormons who purchase it may be disappointed when they turn to the explicit discussion of Joseph Smith's and the Latter-day Saints' contributions to the idea of pre-mortal existence and discover it covers a scant six pages (212–18) in a book of over 300 pages—but they shouldn't be. Rather, the book reveals that their heterodox doctrine of pre-mortal existence has a long history.

The first chapter begins with a discussion of Ancient Near Eastern traditions: the ancient Mesopotamian story of the gods' creation of a race of clay slaves who, when imbued with divine element (taken from the slain god We), become humans. The final chapter concludes with a consideration of neo-Darwinism as a materialist incarnation of the ideas of pre-mortal existence (306–17). This story ties the first (pre-Platonist) chapter and the initial discussion of ideas about the pre-mortal existence of humans to the materialist, post-Platonist, neo-Darwinian forms, neatly bookending the discussion. This structure also privileges the inherently Platonic nature underlying the multiple versions of pre-mortal existence that Givens discusses. The Platonic foundation spread via Middle Eastern conceptions of pre-mortal existence until it gradually diminished in the twentieth century. It also is tied to the idea there is some portion of the eternal divine in humans—a theme that runs throughout the history of the concept of pre-mortal existence. Givens's central point is that belief in pre-mortal existence repeatedly resurfaces throughout the Western traditions (be they secular, pagan, Jewish, or Christian) despite the adamant opposition of Christian orthodoxy.

Chapter 2, “Classical Varieties,” deals with Plato’s theory of forms and creation *ex materia*, in which a demiurge or demigod assembled the preexisting material chaos of the receptacle by molding it to take on the order of eternal ideals.<sup>1</sup> This Platonic version of pre-mortal existence returns again and again in history: in Christianity with Origen, in the Cambridge Platonists, and in several of the Romantics.

For Givens, the Middle Eastern and Greek traditions run parallel to each other: in the first few chapters of the book, they often interact, but are still somewhat distinct. Chapters 3–5 discuss this complex relationship. In chapter 3, for example, the Middle Eastern and classical Greek traditions converge in the work of the Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–50 CE), who claimed that Moses had conceived of preexisting matter before Plato and used Genesis 1 to prove his point (41). Givens also cites Philo’s un-Platonic positive fall into the body. Philo claimed that the unembodied soul was incomplete if bereft of physical form, yet true to the Platonic vision the completion of the soul’s journey was ultimately found in the return to the non-physical (42–47).

The Jewish traditions that culminate in the Pseudepigrapha and New Testament, however, are less Platonic. In John 9, another of the recurring themes in the history of the idea of pre-mortal existence emerges: that pre-mortal existence may be used as an answer for the problem of suffering. The tension between Middle Eastern and Greek traditions develops in chapter 4, entitled “Neo-Platonism and the Church Fathers.” Neoplatonism offered a temptingly pantheistic view in which all souls are divine and thus grounded in the One. Its founder, Plotinus (205–270 CE), was a powerful philosophical influence on a whole set of Christian thinkers ranging from Origen, who championed pre-mortal existence, to Augustine, who championed its expulsion from the doctrine of the Western Church. Givens reveals the complexity of early Christian arguments on pre-existence by showing how they were intertwined with Platonism as well as with Middle Eastern sources. Several evangelical thinkers in *The New Mormon Challenge* and elsewhere refer to the pre-existence, the eternity of element, and creation *ex materia* as proof that Mormons are more Greek

than Judeo-Christian.<sup>2</sup> And indeed, Givens shows how intermeshed the Greek and Middle Eastern traditions become in the history of early Christianity. Origen, a champion of the various Christian versions of the pre-existence, is plainly a Platonist—but then so is Augustine, the subject of chapter 5, “Augustine and the Formation of Orthodoxy,” who banished the notion of pre-existence from traditional Christianity by using Platonic notions of divine perfection to emphasize God’s self-sufficiency. The emergence of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* assured God’s ontological separation from creation and demands a beginning of time and space (322), something we will consider more fully a bit later.

The final seven chapters of the book demonstrate that the power of the doctrine of pre-mortal existence lies in its capacity to answer questions of suffering and justice. The champions of preexistence that emerge in these chapters include the Cambridge Platonists, Henry Moore and Anne Conway, the German Romantic theologians F. W. J. Schelling and Julius Müller, American Romantic Edward Beecher, and Russian religious existentialist Nicholas Berdyaev. It is an impressive assemblage that hopefully will encourage LDS scholars to continue work to elucidate a rich and often unexamined tradition.

The few pages that Givens devotes to Mormonism are brief but quite good. He notes that the traditional objection to the Platonic version of pre-existence—or to any other idea that might posit the actual independent existence of the pre-mortal entities—is that offered by the liberal Protestant church historian and theologian Adolf Von Harnack. Such ideas pose a threat to God’s sovereignty; “The primary idea is not to ennoble the creature, but to bring to light the wisdom and power of God” (213). But as Givens notes, Joseph Smith “made a career of promulgating ideas that were outrageous affronts to Christian orthodoxies—and his radical critique of conventional notions of God’s sovereignty like the one defended by Harnack was no exception” (213). Givens then quotes Doctrine and Covenants 93:29–30 and comments on its “cryptic philosophical brevity and hermetic undertones” (213); he also points out Smith’s understanding that “Personal Beings alone have the source of their existence in free self-determination” (215).

Givens argues that Smith is one of the few Christian thinkers who did not derive his idea of pre-existence from Plato. There have been previous efforts to show Smith's relation to non-Platonic versions of pre-existence: John L. Brooke attempted to link him to Hermeticism and alchemy, Harold Bloom to Jewish theurgy (216). Givens notes that for Plato, the fall is a fall into physicality; for Smith the reverse is true: only the absolutely evil are pure spirit and have no body.

Givens's most interesting comments concern the King Follett Discourse and the ambiguity in the text that has caused perennial arguments about whether human beings are eternal individuals in relation to God or were "born" through God's organization of a spiritual "substance":

On that occasion he remarked that he desired "to reason more on the spirit of man" and asserted that "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." That little indefinite article "a" before spirit is a crucial and contested item, for the question not clearly resolved in Smith's spiritual anthropology has to do with the relationship between the terms intelligence and spirit. (217)

Givens notes that "from the Middle Ages through Shakespeare and Milton and into the nineteenth century, 'intelligence' had the meaning of an incorporeal or spirit being" (217), and that B. H. Roberts was persuaded that "the two terms were synonymous. God did not fashion or beget 'intelligence' into individual spirits" (217). But, he writes, this view has not been persuasive to Mormon leaders who have often maintained that God fashioned "intelligences" out of an eternal substance, "intelligence." For example, James Talmage called a spirit "an organized intelligence," Orson Whitney called God "the Begetter of [the human] spirit in the eternal worlds," and Bruce R. McConkie claimed, "We were born as the spirit children of God the Father. Through that birth process spirit element was organized into intelligent entities."<sup>3</sup>

While Givens highlights just how radically heterodox Mormon traditions of pre-mortal existence are in comparison to the mainstream of Christian Platonism, he underestimates the divergence

from that tradition that began with Jacob Boehme. Boehme abandoned traditional notions of perfection. Where Plato saw the world as the dim material reflection of timeless perfect eternity, Boehme, Schelling, and Berdyaev saw a God creating Him/Herself in relation to the world. While the Platonic thinkers Philo, Thomas Traherne, Henry Moore, and Anne Conway told a positive story of the fall and saw the perfection of humanity through its pilgrimage in the world, Boehme, Schelling, and Berdyaev made the radical move of including God as a participant in this pilgrimage. Their distinction between a notion of eternal, changeless divine and an evolutionary idea of divine perfection can be focused in the question “Is God/The Divine with the world greater than God/the Divine alone?” The way we think about this question is consequential in many aspects of religious thought, and particularly in regard to questions about evil and suffering.

### **The Problem of Evil**

Strange! that you should not have suspected years ago—centuries, ages, eons, ago!—for you have existed, companionless, through all the eternities. Strange, indeed, that you should not have suspected that your universe and its contents were only dreams, visions, fiction! Strange, because they are so frankly and hysterically insane—like all dreams: a God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice and invented hell—mouths mercy and invented hell—mouths Golden Rules, and forgiveness multiplied by seventy times seven, and invented hell; who mouths morals to other people and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man’s acts upon man,

instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor, abused slave to worship him!<sup>4</sup>

The quotation above, taken from the closing lines of *The Mysterious Stranger*, indicates the depth of Mark Twain's rebellion against his Calvinist upbringing and its God, an omnipotent creator of heaven and earth "who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones." Twain's sentiment is not uncommon in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. Two common examples used in introductory discussions of the problem of evil are Ivan's decision to return his admission ticket to God in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Rieux's objections to Paneloux's sermon on suffering in Albert Camus's *The Plague*. (One mistake often made in introductory philosophy of religion courses is to cite these literary examples and then move to particular explications of the logical problem of evil, such as J. L. Mackie's or H. J. McClosky's, and then move onto Alvin Plantinga, William Hasker, and Peter Van Ingen's defenses of traditional theism while overlooking the fact that Ivan and Rieux are not concerned with the logical problem of evil.) Ivan Karamazov says he accepts the existence of God, even accepts the logical proof of his goodness, but still wishes to return his ticket to existence.<sup>5</sup> Rieux contends that in practice, no one can believe in an omnipotent God, and that if he believed in such a God "he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him."<sup>6</sup>

The point Dostoevsky and Camus make through Ivan and Rieux is that God needs to be involved in "the same humiliating adventure as mankind's, its ineffectual power being the equivalent of our ineffectual condition."<sup>7</sup> Camus's description of the rebel's desired relationship with God echoes William James's insistence that God "be no gentleman. . . . His menial services are needed in the dust of our human trials, even more than his dignity is needed in the empyrean."<sup>8</sup> While Augustine held that creaturely suffering is but the dark speck in a landscape—the contrast that forms the greater beauty of the whole work of art that is God's creation—Dostoevsky, Camus, and James suggested that to forsake

the suffering individuals for the beauty of the whole is a betrayal of those who must sit in that dark part of the picture.

The idea that creation is a masterwork painted by the great artist God has deep roots in Western religious traditions. The origins of the idea that evil can be explained in terms of an aesthetic contrast lie in Platonic thought, which envisions a divine perfection beyond the suffering and changeable nature of this world in an eternity where “moth doth not corrupt.” The underlying aesthetic ideal of Platonic perfection is present every time someone utters, “it’s all part of God’s plan,” when faced with tragedy—this response reflects an implicitly held belief in an unseen yet wholly complete picture or map in which the disturbingly illogical events cohere in order to create meaning. Even thinkers as divergent as Origen and Augustine conceived of such a divine perfection devoid of change or relation. This horizon of Platonic perfection oriented Origen’s ideas of the pre-existence of souls and universal salvation in God. It is also present in Augustine’s denial of both of these ideas, appearing instead in his affirmation of predestination and original sin.

### **Platonism, Pre-existence, and the Problem of Theodicy**

Pre-existence has often been used as an explanation for the problem of evil and suffering. For example, the Hindu theories of karma explain why some of our brothers and sisters sit in the dark part of the picture. The concept of reincarnation is used in *The Laws of Manu* to instruct us that if a person of the highest caste, a Brahman, were to fall “from his duty” he would suffer through a shameful and degrading reincarnation.<sup>9</sup> Early Christians also used pre-existence to justify gross inequality in the distribution of joy and pain in the world since the Fall. Within Mormonism, B. H. Roberts proposed the unofficial but unfortunately tenacious notion that the inequality we find in this mortal existence is a result of personal valiance, or the lack of it, in the pre-existence.<sup>10</sup> Mormons have used this unofficial explanation of the problem of evil to justify the denial of priesthood to Blacks as well as other kinds of racial and social inequality.<sup>11</sup> In the third century, Origen provided the clearest Christian doctrine of pre-mortal existence. Origen took



the Platonic philosophical traditions already Christianized during the previous two centuries and elucidated a Christian Neoplatonic vision of God's creation that included the eternity of souls in God, the *ex nihilo* creation of the world, the fall from perfect unity, and the eventual return to harmony with the One God.

Neoplatonism continued to develop throughout the history of early Christianity, and as it did so it often utilized the logic of the pre-existence of souls to explain injustices. Consider this quotation from Aeneas of Gaza (d. 518 CE) that Givens provides:

If we deny the preexistence of souls, how is it possible for the wicked to prosper and for the righteous ones to live in idle circumstances? How can one accept the fact that people are born blind or that some die immediately after they are born, while others reach a very old age.<sup>12</sup>

In Aeneas's day, however, the doctrine of pre-existence was in retreat. After many years of considering the problem of suffering, Augustine came to an aesthetic solution by asserting that after a long struggle the faithful will receive a vision of the beauty of the whole of creation that will answer all questions about the seeming injustices of this world:

To us is promised a vision of beauty—the beauty of whose imitation all other things are beautiful, and by comparison which all other things are unsightly” whosoever will have glimpsed this beauty—and he will see it, who lives well, prays well, studies well—how will it ever trouble him why one man, desiring to have children, has them not, while another man casts out his own offspring as being unduly numerous; why one man hates children before they are born, and another man loves them after birth, or how it is not absurd that nothing will come to pass which is not with God—and therefore it is inevitable that all things come into being in accordance with order—and nevertheless God is not petitioned in vain?<sup>13</sup>

According to Augustine, if we study and pray well, we will have a vision of beauty that will answer the problem of theodicy. In short, not only our concerns about the horrible suffering of creatures

but also those about the terrible and unjust distribution of such suffering will vanish, swallowed up in the vision of God.

Augustine's aesthetic solution to the problem of suffering is based on a Christian Platonist view of being and its ultimate perfection. Plato's notion of perfection is presented in his discourse on love and beauty in *The Symposium*:

But what if a man had eyes to see the true beauty—the divine beauty, I mean pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life—thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities for he has hold not of an image but of a reality, and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.<sup>14</sup>

Here is eternity with no risk and no attachment to a particular, finite person. Plato's desire is for the eternal absolute purity beyond individuals, not "clogged with the pollutions of mortality." One loves nothing but the ideal untouched by the world and the world is only real in so far as it participates in the ideal. Here people do not love another as individuals, but for the eternal that is within them. We escape the pollutions of mortality and of change in the immaculate beauty of changeless eternity.

This Platonic conception of the ideal as the real is at the heart of Augustine's aesthetic solution to the problem of evil. God, from eternity, sees the entire temporal spatial unity: the light and the darkness together complete the beauty of the composition. As Plotinus wrote, "We are like people ignorant of painting who complain that the colours are not beautiful everywhere in the picture: but the Artist has laid on the appropriate tint to every spot."<sup>15</sup> Like Plato and Plotinus, for Augustine the existence darkness in the picture only enhances the perfection of the whole. Suffering is an illusion in this world of shadows. He writes that this contrast, brought about in part by the disparate wills of creatures, enhances the beauty of the whole: "I no longer desired a better world, because my thoughts

ranged over all, and with sounder judgment I reflected that the things above were better than those below, yet that all creation together was better than the higher things alone.”<sup>16</sup> This is the Christian version of the famous Great Chain of Being, in which the whole harmonizes all its parts.

This vision of beauty—which includes the suffering of billions of creatures of all sorts—is the kind of solution to the problem of evil that Mark Twain finds insane in *The Mysterious Stranger*, that causes Ivan Karamazov to desire to turn in his admission ticket to the play of life, and against which Doctor Rieux rebels. It is intimately related to Augustine’s championing of predestination, for the omnipotent and omniscient God who creates all things *ex nihilo* also sees, from eternity, the whole as one great masterwork.<sup>17</sup>

### **Heterodox Personalism: Boehme, Schelling, Berdyaev, and Non-Platonist Pre-Existence**

Mormons have a soft spot for Plato’s *Timaeus*. Givens quotes from it: “He who framed this whole universe . . . was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible.”<sup>18</sup> In the King Follett Discourse, Joseph Smith also asserted that God organized the universe because he wanted others to be able to “advance like Himself.” A closer look at the quotation from Plato helps us not only to understand its resonances with the King Follett Discourse but also to see how Plato’s and Smith’s ideas are ultimately distinct.

Though Augustine’s theisms reflect Plato, the reverse is not true. In Plato, we have a creation from chaos rather than creation *ex nihilo*. A demiurge—distinct from an omnipotent deity—creates the world by getting the receptacle of chaos to accept ideal forms. However, this creation is still, at root, a fall. The plurality of beings lacks the perfection of the blissful forms: beings accept form and are not the eternal forms themselves. They are born, mature, die, and decay; God/the Divine is no greater with the world than God alone. Even when the creature is improved by

the journey s/he returns to the state of perfection in God, and God's perfection is not altered.

I think Givens misses an opportunity here. He sees the most important influence on Boehme as Neoplatonism.<sup>19</sup> But Boehme cannot be melted neatly into the Platonic fold on questions of pre-existence, and to try to do so is to miss an important development in the history of philosophy that did not come into full fruition until Schelling, and whose implications are still being worked out in contemporary philosophy. This is not to say that Givens completely misunderstands Boehme, but rather that he underestimates the significance of Boehme's radical departure from the Neoplatonic tradition.

Givens quotes Berdyaev's studies on Boehme, which appeared as the introduction to the 1930s French edition of Boehme's monumental commentary on the Book of Genesis, *Mysterium Magnum*. In this introduction, Berdyaev interprets Boehme's seminal doctrine of the *Ungrund* as the pre-ontological abyss: it is prior being, yes, but it is not some sort of perfection at the base of the universe. Rather, *Ungrund* is a chaos and, as primordial freedom, the source of the possibility of both good and evil.<sup>20</sup>

Boehme understands the primordial abyss to include the source of being through primordial freedom. What Givens seems to misunderstand or underestimate is how this concept breaks with Neoplatonism, which sees the original unity as Being itself, absolute and perfect. For Boehme, the abyss is the absolute (the One), but the chaos of freedom is not yet being. Both Platonism and Neoplatonism in all their forms (including Christianity) seek to return to the perfection of pre-existing Being. For Boehme, on the other hand, the abyss is only the chaotic freedom that is prior to creation: the desire for creation, the desire of no-thing to become something. This understanding is already radically distinct from Christian Neoplatonism, but Boehme adds to this a second and even more radical element: this kind of chaos, this non-rational given, is also in God. Thus God, too, must develop and evolve.

For Boehme, the absolute God of Christian Neoplatonism is nothing. Without creation, there is no social determination of God—there is nothing to say about him, and no one to say it.

Such perfection is the perfection of complete vagueness: perfectly boring, perfectly empty. This boring *Ungrund* is, of course, also bliss. “God, in Himself is neither being nor becoming, He is absolutely nothing, He is not even kind or cruel, not good or evil.”<sup>21</sup> As such, the abyss lacks foundation; it is fundamentally unreasonable.<sup>22</sup> Situating the beginning in pure undetermined will gives Boehme’s thinking a voluntaristic character that was new in Western thought. This novelty was taken up at the beginning of the nineteenth century by German Romantics and idealists, in particular F. W. J. Schelling.

This idea of a pre-rational chaos at the base of everything, even God, is also critical to the Mormon understanding of freedom. For example, the discussion of the source of suffering and joy in the opposition of all things from 2 Nephi 2 can be read as reflecting a movement from the unity of the primal chaos before God’s creative acts through the alienated, conflict-oriented multiplicity of this world, and finally on to a freely-chosen conscious unity in multiplicity (a sociality of love) in both this world and the world to come.<sup>23</sup> The problem with the eternal bliss of the Platonic One is that though it may be unified, it is dead. For Mormons, as for Boehme, joy is found in the relation with others, a sociality that only arrives after the fall (2 Nephi 2:25, Doctrine and Covenants 130:1–2).<sup>24</sup>

Givens misses this connection between Boehme and Schelling. That other great historian of ideas, Arthur O. Lovejoy, does not. In his conclusion to *The Great Chain of Being*, Lovejoy claims that Schelling presented an evolutionary theology that finally turned the Platonic scheme of the universe upside down.<sup>25</sup> In this view, even God is affected by time and relation. This notion militates against the “devolutionist” metaphysics of Plato and Plotinus that was Christianized by Origen and Augustine.<sup>26</sup>

Lovejoy places this difference in the pantheism controversy fought out by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Schelling in 1812 when Jacobi, Schelling’s one-time inspiration, became his sharp adversary. Jacobi reacted against Schelling’s evolutionary ideal, arguing that the creator was perfect and could not evolve.<sup>27</sup> This move produced an impassioned and angry response from

Schelling, who questioned why, if the more perfected being pre-existed eternally as pure act and not as potential, it would have created a world with suffering in the first place.<sup>28</sup> Schelling then argued that God is not now what God was at the beginning: God as the Omega is more than God as Alpha, or God plus the world is greater than God alone.<sup>29</sup>

Schelling's thought followed that of Boehme with regards to God's personhood. He goes so far as to say that we must think of God in anthropomorphic terms. This divine anthropomorphism is a crucial difference between Boehme and Schelling on the one hand and the Platonists like Origen on the other. Boehme and Schelling see an evolution in God and, even more radically, see this evolution as an advance away from the primal One, the absolute unity. The key here, again, is the concept of God as a person.<sup>30</sup> To be a person is to be in some sense finite, to be limited by and related to another. Thus God must be related other beings like Him/Her. Schelling saw this relational finitude as an improvement over the Platonic unity of oneness, and made this movement from the egoistic bliss of the vague to plurality and love into a general metaphysical principle. "But the groundless divides itself into the two equally eternal beginnings only in order that the two which could not be in it as groundless at the same time or there be one, should become one through love; that is, it divides itself only that there may be life and love and personal existence."<sup>31</sup> God can only reveal Her/Himself in creatures who resemble Her/Him: free, self-activating beings for whose existence there is no reason save God, but who are as God is.<sup>32</sup> Thus things once created are alive in themselves; Schelling claims they have the divinity in them. Beyond that, Schelling's claims here re-categorize God's self revelation in terms of a socially-grounded communication. "He speaks, and they are there" demonstrates the idea that to speak is to speak to another. God, thus, requires humanity.<sup>33</sup>

Schelling's divine anthropomorphism extends the pre-existential potentiality and chaos to God as a person. There is real indeterminacy and particularity to God. Decision only manifests itself in historically embedded actions. Acts can only

be concretely experienced and cannot be reduced to philosophical concepts. Schelling called this element of capriciousness at the base of things “the irreducible remainder,” which grounds rationality and creativity but cannot itself be rationalized.<sup>34</sup> For Schelling, then, pre-existence is foundational to our very being. It cannot be explained conceptually; it is our ability to choose and it can never be completely eliminated without eliminating all life, striving, and joy.

While there are areas left unexplored in Givens’s treatment of Schelling, he does give ample room to the twentieth-century Russian theologian and philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev, whom he describes as “the man leading the charge to rehabilitate Origen in the twentieth-century setting” (278). Givens ties Berdyaev to the Platonic tradition of pre-existence as elucidated by Origen because Berdyaev interprets freedom as prior to time. Berdyaev calls this structure “existential time.” “Existential time” is still time. It is the time of decision, the tempest at the soul of being that we find in the concept of decision held by both Immanuel Kant and Schelling. Givens quotes Berdyaev to this effect, noting that existential time “depends upon intensity of experience, upon suffering and joy. . . . [It] is evidence of the fact that time is in man and not man in time, and that time depends on changes in man. . . . In existential time, which is akin to eternity, there is no distinction between the future and the past.”<sup>35</sup> This language is difficult, but it is important to note that there are differences between Berdyaev’s formulation and Platonic eternity. The contradictions of freedom are present in existential time in the *Ungrund* as the unruly “irreducible remainder” of freedom that cannot be eliminated from being. This non-rational given is eternal.

Givens notes that Berdyaev plays out the implications for pre-existence in a way that few theistic thinkers would want to follow.<sup>36</sup> For Berdyaev there is no ontological difference between human beings and God as there are in traditional Christian theology; all of reality is contained in the primal unity of the *Ungrund*. Berdyaev, like others in this tradition, involves God in the difficulties and struggles of the world itself. Freedom (or choice) grounds being, rather than the reverse. Conceptually, we can see the totality of

life with all of its choices as subsumed in one great choice, which is itself the meaning of the whole.

### **Pre-existence as Choice**

What kind of picture of God do these options give us? If God is involved in moral struggle, should we necessarily be suspicious, afraid that he may “break bad” at some future point à la Walter White, shifting from mild chemistry teacher to evil meth dealer? Strangely enough, it is Schelling’s and Berdyaev’s responses to this question that provide a potential response to the old argument among Mormons concerning whether or not “intelligence” signifies eternal individuals or a primal substance that God organizes into His/Her children.

Givens points out that one of the odd aspects of Kant’s theory of our disposition for good or evil is that “it has not been acquired in time. . . . Yet this disposition itself must have been adopted by free choice, for otherwise it could not be imputed.”<sup>37</sup> How could a free choice made outside time sum up the meaning of one’s life? Schelling and Berdyaev make similar statements: the meaning of our existence is a choice taken outside history in what Berdyaev calls “existential” as opposed to “historical” time. It is important to note that all of these thinkers oppose the Augustinian doctrine of pre-destination. In some ways, this all sounds similar to B. H. Roberts’s assertion that pre-existence explains the problem of evil here as a consequence of actions and choices made prior to our arrival in this world, but this also would be a misunderstanding. The American personalist philosopher and committed Kantian, George Holmes Howison, spoke about the doctrine of pre-existence explicitly. Howison taught philosophy at the University of California at the turn of the twentieth century. He claimed that his 1901 magnum opus, *The Limits of Evolution*, was misunderstood by a reviewer for the *New York Times*. In an appendix entitled “The System Not the Theory of Preexistence,” Howison attempted to dodge the charge that his description of reality as a sort of divine democracy between eternal persons (us) and the ideal eternal person (God) did not presuppose pre-existence. The *Times*



reviewer's "mistake" is quite understandable given statements such as the following, which describes Howison's idea of God as a social multiplicity: "These many minds form the eternal 'unconditionally real' world. They constitute the 'City of God.'"<sup>38</sup> Howison claimed that such eternal persons signify the logical priority of choice (or freedom) in the atemporal creation of the self.<sup>39</sup> But what does he mean by this? One way to think about it is as a prioritization of freedom that places choice outside the causal stream of historical time. In this model, our life and all our choices come down to one great choice between relating to the other (existence) and opposing the other through narcissism (solitude). In the terminology of Mormon doctrine, the first was Christ's choice and second was Lucifer's. Thus the pre-mortal existence under this idea is a primal indifference: we need to actively choose in order to be. This notion of a determining, atemporal choice emerges repeatedly in Kant's idea of chosen predisposition, in Schelling's choice for good and evil, in Kierkegaard's "existential choice," Berdyaev's "existential time," and in Martin Buber's nicely phrased "choice at the point of our being."<sup>40</sup>

In his study of Schelling, Slavoj Žižek explains this choice is for human persons, as well as God, to disengage themselves from primal indifference.

Man's act of decision, his step from the pure potentiality essentiality of a will which wants nothing to an actual will, is therefore a *repetition* of God's act: in a primordial act, God Himself had to "choose Himself." His eternal character—to contract existence, to reveal Himself. In the same sense in which history is man's ordeal—the terrain in which humanity has to probe its creativity, to actualize its potential—nature itself is God's ordeal, the terrain in which *He* has to disclose Himself, to put His creativity to the test.<sup>41</sup>

The innocence of the pre-existent state is also a moment of complete boredom: it is the meaningless changelessness of an eternity without a decision.<sup>42</sup> Thus we have a possible reading of Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21, which says that blessings are dependent on that law in which the blessing is predicated. At its

root, the fundamental law of Christianity is that we should love the other. All choices are part of this choice, which was made at the atemporal point of our being that determines the meaning of our lives. Such a reading makes sense for a section that begins by talking about sociality as the highest human activity.

Here, then, is a possible synthesis of the two LDS understandings of preexistence. Everything that “is,” that preexists, has its foundation in freedom or creativity. God calls us to higher degrees of perfection, eventually to personhood, and finally to Godhood. We are not persons from eternity but become such in relation to our responsiveness to God’s call, just as God becomes personal in relation to us.

If Charles Harrell is correct in his claim that Joseph Smith only used the term “organization of intelligences” to indicate social organization and not an organization of intelligence into intelligences, we could understand that we only become organized into intelligences through the social relation—through sociality with the Other.<sup>43</sup> We answer the Other’s call. This fundamental social relation would make some sense of both Brigham Young’s and John A. Widtsoe’s claims that it is the isolation of the sons of perdition that leads to dissolution:

They will be decomposed, both soul and body, and return to their native element. I do not say that they will be annihilated; but they will be disorganized, and will be as it they had never been; while we live and retain our identity and contend against those principles which tend to death or dissolution.<sup>44</sup>

The concept of pre-existence may provide a response for the problems of evil and suffering, but it ultimately fails to solve the Platonic fall from the unity of perfect harmony and to which we wish to return in part due to the static nature of such totalizing unity. We live in a universe that is open, chaotic, and free. Such freedom is intrinsically linked to tragedy—both human choice and the chaotic nature of reality produce the ongoing potential for suffering and evil. But the eschatological possibility of overcoming the chaos is real. Through real relation, sociality, and

love, Zion may come to be. The Kingdom of God is ultimately something *we* build.

### Notes

1. For example, the idea of there being something of the pre-mortal existence in the form of divine councils which appears in the Hebrew Bible resurfaces in Jewish midrash in the middle ages and the Renaissance (139, 216). The notion of the divine in the human celebrates human potential, human freedom, and human responsibility. But the idea is not without negative themes, including both the tendency in Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas of pre-existence toward pantheism and the consequent orthodox reaction against pre-mortal existence that seeks to protect absolute power of God.

2. See Paul Copen and William Lane Craig, “Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo*” and Jim W. Adams, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith? God, Creation, and Humanity in the Old Testament” in Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge* (Zondervan, 2002), 95–152 and 152–92.

3. James E. Talmage, *Vitality of Mormonism* (Boston: Gorham, 1919), 241; Orson F. Whitney, “Man’s Origin and Destiny,” *Contributor* 3, no. 9 (June 1882); Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 386–87. Givens also quotes Charles Harrell’s study of the development of the doctrine of preexistence in early Mormonism. Harrell shows that Smith used the term organization only in terms of social organization and not an organization of intelligence into intelligences. Charles Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of the Preexistence 1830–1844,” *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 75–96.

4. Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger* in *The Portable Mark Twain* (New York: Random House, 1974), 743–44.

5. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazon*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volkhonsky (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990), 245.

6. Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 116–18.

7. Albert Camus *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 100–3.

8. William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 35.

9. For example, he could become “an Ulkamukha Preta (comet mouth ghost), who “feeds on what has been vomited.” A Kshatriya would become a “Kataputana (false stinking ghost), who eats impure substances and corpses.” A Vaisya would become “Maitrakshagyotika Preta (sees by an eye in its anus),

who feeds on pus,” and a fallen Sudra would in the next life be transformed into “Kailasaka (Preta who feeds on moths).” (Laws of Manu 12:71–72). Therefore, if you were ever to meet a pus-eating ghost that sees out its anus, you would know that he was responsible for his plight because of his actions in a previous life.

10. Roberts believed that this explanation would solve the problem “that has perplexed many noble minds in their effort to reconcile the varied circumstances under which men have lived with the justice and mercy of god.” B. H. Roberts, “Religious Faiths,” *Improvement Era* 1, no. 11 (Sept. 1898): 827–28, cited in Givens, 213.

11. Mark E. Peterson, “Race Problems—As They Affect the Church” (address delivered at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, August 27, 1954), <http://www.mormondocs.org/2012/05/race-problems-as-they-affect-church.html> (accessed August 7, 2014). Roberts himself used this concept to justify priesthood denial to Blacks: “Through their indifference or lack of integrity to righteousness, [blacks] rendered themselves unworthy of the Priesthood and its powers.” B. H. Roberts, *Contributor* 6, 296–97.

12. Givens tell us that Aneas was himself an opponent of the view

13. Augustine, *De Ordine*, 51.

14. Plato, *The Symposium* in *The Works of Plato*. Benjamin Jowett, translator (New York: The Dial Press, 1936), 342–343.

15. Plotinus, *The Enneads: Third Ennead: Second Tractate: Section 11*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plotenn/enn197.htm> (accessed August 7, 2014).

16. Augustine sees this as a great harmony that brings together light, dark, high and low elements.

To thee there is no such thing as evil, and even in thy whole creation taken as a whole, there is not; because there is nothing from beyond it that can burst in and destroy the order which thou hast appointed for it. But in the parts of creation, some things, because they do not harmonize with others, are considered evil. Yet, those same things harmonize with others and are good, and in themselves are good. . . . I no longer desired a better world, because my thoughts ranged over all, and with sounder judgment I reflected that the things above were better than those below, yet that all creation together was better than the higher things alone

Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7:13.

17. Givens cites Phillip Schaff, who argues that the concept of original sin is no true alternative to preexistence but only disguises it as “a generic pre-existence and apostasy of all men in Adam” occurring as “a transcendental act of freedom lying beyond our temporal consciousness.” Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1910), 3:831. Cited in Givens, 122.

18. Plato, *Timaeus*, 29e, quoted in Givens, 322. Here is the full passage from the King Follett Discourse: “The first principles of man are self-existent with God. God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits of glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.” Joseph Fielding Smith, editor *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1938), 311.

19. Givens, 145.

20. “The mysterious teaching of Boehme about the *Ungrund*, about the abyss, without foundation, dark and irrational, prior to being, is an attempt to provide and answer to the basic question of all questions, the question concerning the origin of the world and the arising of evil. The whole teaching of Boehme about the *Ungrund* is so interwoven with the teaching concerning freedom that it is impossible to separate them, for this is all part and parcel of the same teaching. And I am inclined to interpret the *Ungrund* as a primordial freedom . . . indeterminate even by God.” Nicholas Berdyaev, “Deux études sur Jacob Boehme” in Jacob Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, Tome I (Paris: Aubier, 1945), 39. Cited in Givens, p. 146

21. Alexandre Koyre, *Le Philosophie de Jacob Böhme* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 320.

22. Jacob Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum: Part II or An Exposition of the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, translated by John Sparrow (1623); facsimile edition (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2002) 60: 38, 664.

23. But it is clearly the case that the plurality of the world, with all its conflict, is superior to the serenity of the One.

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my firstborn in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility. Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the

end of its creation. Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God. . . . And after Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit they were driven out of the garden of Eden, to till the earth. . . . And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end. And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. . . . Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (2 Nephi 2:11:25)

24. As Mark Twain wrote in his *Diaries of Adam and Eve*, the primal couple lost Eden in the fall but found each other, and where the beloved is “there was Eden.” Mark Twain, *The Diaries of Adam and Eve* (New York: Dover Books), 28.

25. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 325.

26. *Ibid.*, 32.

27. *Ibid.*, 321.

28. *Ibid.*, 322. “. . . is difficult for many reasons, but first of all for the very simple one that, if it were in actual possession of the highest perfection [or completeness], it would have had no reason (*Grund*) for the creation and production of so many other things, through which it—being incapable of attaining a higher degree of perfection—could only fall to a lower one.”

29. *Ibid.*, 323. “I posit God as the first and the last, as the Alpha and the Omega; but as Alpha he is not what he is as Omega, and in so far as he is only the one—God ‘in an eminent sense’—he can not be the other God, in the same sense, or, in strictness, be called God. For in that case, let it be expressly said, the unevolved (*unentfaltete*) God, *Deus implicitus*, would already be what as Omega, the *Deus explicitus* is.”

30. Schelling recognized this difference when he set Boehme off from the rest of the Western esoteric tradition:

One must, of course, distinguish Jacob Boehme, in whom everything is still pure and original, from another class of mystics, in whom everything is already corrupt; the well known Saint Martin particularly belongs in this class: one no longer hears in him, as one could in J. Boehme,

the person who has been originally stirred but only the mouthpiece or secretary of alien ideas, which have, moreover, been prepared for purposes of a different kind; what in Jacob Boehme is still living, is dead in him, only, so to speak, the cadaver, the embalmed corpse, the mummy, of something originally living, of the kind that is displayed in secret societies which simultaneously pursue alchemical, magical, theurgic purposes.

F. W. J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, translated by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 183.

31. F. W. J. Schelling, *Of Human Freedom*, translated by James Gutmann (Chicago: Open Court, 1936) 88–89; F. W. J. Schelling, *Shellings Werke*, edited by Manfred Schroter (Munich: Beck, 1927), 7:408.

32. Schelling, *Of Human Freedom* 18–19; Schelling, *Shellings Werke* 7:346.

33. Schelling already approached this position in his early work. For example, as Pirandello does in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, he likens God to a playwright who is not just outside his work but in it:

But now if the playwright *were to exist* independently of his drama, we should be merely the actors who speak the lines he has written, If he *does not exist* independently of us, but reveals and discloses himself successively only, through the very play of our own freedom, so that without this freedom even he *would not be*, the we are collaborators of the whole and have ourselves invented the particular roles we play.

F. W. J. Schelling, *The System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, translated by Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 210, *Werke* 3:602.

34. Schelling writes of the irreducible remainder:

The world as we now behold it, is all rule, order and form but the unruly lies ever in the depth as though it might again break through, and order and form nowhere appear to have been original, but it seems as though what had initially be unruly had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible basis of the reality of things, the irreducible remainder which cannot be resolved into reason by the greatest exertion but always remains in the depths. Out of this which is unreasonable, reason in the true sense is born.

Schelling, *Of Human Freedom* 34; Schelling, *Shellings Werke* 7:359–60.

35. Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End: An Essay in Eschatological Metaphysics*. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1938), 206–7. Cited in Givens, 280.

36. One of the ironies of Berdyaev's biography was that after he escaped the Soviet Union and came to Paris in the 1920s he was considered a spokesman of orthodoxy by some important French Catholics such as Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier, who were founders of French Catholic Personalism. The problem with this was that Berdyaev was a heretic. The Russian émigré community in Paris saw him as such; in fact he was almost excommunicated in Russia before the events of the 1917 revolution intervened. See Donald Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet: A Life of Nicolas Berdyaev* (San Francisco: Harper and Brothers, 1960).

37. Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason*, translated by T. M. Greene (Chicago: Open Court, 1934), 20; quoted in Givens, 202.

38. George Holmes Howison, *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays Illustrating the Metaphysical Theory of Personal Idealism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1904), xi-xii.

39. *Ibid.*, 412–13.

40. Marin Buber, *Good and Evil* (New York: Pearson, 1980), 112.

41. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 21.

42. Žižek illustrates this idea in Schelling with an example from pop culture, Harold Ramis's film *Groundhog Day*. In the film, weatherman Phil Connors (played by Bill Murray) finds himself thrown into eternity: he wakes up day after day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, and it's always February 2nd, Groundhog Day. After thinking that he might be a god and in a heaven where his is unrelated to everyone else, because they are only in time and their lives are meaningless from the point of view of eternity, Phil eventually grows bored: he realizes that he is actually in a hell in which nothing matters. He only escapes this hell and restarts time again when he commits to the people around him, particularly—this is Hollywood, after all—to his producer Rita (played by Andie McDowell). In real relationships, both beings in the relationship are affected by the other. Žižek writes, "The 'Schellingian' dimension of the film resides in its anti-Platonic depreciation of eternity and immortality: as long as the hero knows that he is immortal, caught in the 'eternal return of the same'—that the same day will dawn again and again—his life bears the mark of the 'unbearable lightness of being', of an insipid and shallow game in which events have a kind of ethereal pseudo-existence; he falls back into temporal reality only and precisely when his attachment to the girl grows into



true love. Eternity is a false, insipid game: an authentic encounter with the Other in which ‘things are for real’ necessarily entails a return to temporal reality.” Ibid., 53.

43. Charles Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of the Preexistence 1830–1844,” *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 85–86.

44. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1860), 7:57. John A. Widtsoe, “Who Are the Sons of Perdition?” in *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 212–14; John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 79.

## Shifting Attitudes: Nauvoo Polygamy

Merina Smith. *Revelation, Resistance and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830–1853*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2013. 280 pp. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0874219173.

*Reviewed by Kathryn M. Daynes*

Merina Smith’s book continues the fascination with Nauvoo polygamy. Other authors have considered such topics as Joseph Smith and his wives, the experience of those entering polygamy in Nauvoo (as well as the numbers and names of those who did so), the theology underpinning plural marriage, and much more. The major question Smith deals with is how Latter-day Saints “were persuaded to shift their understanding of marriage not only to accommodate polygamy, but to regard it, at least officially, as the ideal form of marriage” (2). Larry Foster has dealt with this question<sup>1</sup>, though Smith explores it in more depth and frames her answer with theology rather than theory.

Smith’s is a chronological approach. She divides nineteenth-century polygamy into five phases: 1) development, 1830–1841; 2) introduction, 1841–1844; 3) aftermath of Joseph Smith’s death, 1844–1852; 4) the Utah period, 1852–1890, and 5) after the 1890 Manifesto. With more than half of the chapters focusing on the