MORMONISM AND THE PROBLEM OF HETERODOXY

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According to the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter, "the LDS church" or "LDS Mormonism"[1]), Joseph Smith's motivation to start a new religious movement began with a particularly difficult epistemological problem. In his history, Smith writes,

> Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, "Lo, here!" and others, "Lo, there!" Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist.
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> [. . .]

1. Although I will focus on the LDS tradition (i.e., The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), I will sometimes mention two other Mormon denominations: namely, Community of Christ (formerly The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) and The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS). These three institutions disagree about who counts as an authority to speak for the Joseph Smith tradition. For a thorough discussion of these and other schisms within Mormonism, see Newell Bringhurst and John Hamer, eds., *Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2007). I will use "Mormon" and its cognates to refer to all the various Mormon sects and I will use "LDS" to refer to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Latter-day Saints" refers to the members of the latter organization.

> What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it? (JS–H 5, 10)

Clearly, Smith is concerned with which of the above-mentioned denominations, if any, is correct. This is the concrete problem. But this concrete problem is also an instance of a more general *epistemological* and *semantic* problem concerning the nature and status of religious belief. To see this, first note that Smith mentions only Christian denominations and doesn't mention Islam, Hinduism, etc. Given the time and location, Smith would have known about these religions, but none of them would have been a *live option* for him, to use William James's famous phrase.[2] It seems apparent that Smith had already decided that Christianity was correct and his problem was to figure out which denomination had the correct interpretation of Christianity. So, Smith's concrete problem is not best understood as an instance of the problem of *inter*religious diversity (i.e., the existence of disagreement between distinct religious traditions). Instead, Smith's concrete problem is better understood as an instance of a problem concerning *intra*-religious diversity, or what I will herein call "the problem of heterodoxy."

Whereas the problem of interreligious diversity deals with how one should respond to the fact that there exists disagreement among religious traditions, the problem of heterodoxy deals with how one should respond to the fact that there exist different interpretations of the same religious tradition. That is, the problem of heterodoxy asks not "which religion is true?" but "which interpretation of *X* is the correct interpretation?" where "*X*" is replaced with the name of one of the religious traditions in question (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc.). I submit that the latter, and not the former, is Smith's question.

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2. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy,* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

The problem of heterodoxy is an under-appreciated problem in the epistemology of religion. Usually, when philosophers deal with epistemological issues relating to religious disagreement, they focus on disagreement *among* traditions and not *within* traditions. This is a serious lacuna in the philosophical literature, since (as I will argue below) the problem of heterodoxy is more fundamental. Moreover, since Smith put this problem at the center of his explanation of the need for a restoration of Christianity, it is important to explore to what extent Smith offered a plausible response to the problem. In this paper, I will offer a reconstruction of LDS Mormonism's theology as a response to the problem of heterodoxy. However, in the end, I argue that the response fails to solve the problem and provides a basis for the ecclesiastical authoritarianism manifested in the present-day Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Interreligious Disagreement vs. Heterodoxy

As mentioned above, it is clear that there are two types of religious disagreement: *external* and *internal*. External religious disagreement occurs when two people from different faiths disagree. For example, Buddhists claim that everything is impermanent and Christians claim that God and the soul are eternal. It appears that the beliefs of Christians and Buddhists cannot both be true. This type of religious disagreement has been the focus of the discussion of religious diversity in contemporary philosophy of religion.[3] By contrast, internal religious disagreement is usually ignored or mentioned merely in passing.[4] Internal religious disagreement occurs when two people from the same

3. For example, see Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

4. William Christian mentions the problem of heterodoxy in passing but doesn't give a thorough treatment of the problem in his *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines: A Study in the Logic of Dialogue among Religions* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

faith disagree on some matter pertaining to the faith. There are two types of such disagreements. First, there are disagreements about what the doctrines of the faith are. Second, there are disagreements about how to interpret the doctrines. I'll call the first *doctrinal disagreements* and the second *interpretative disagreements*. An example of a doctrinal disagreement between Protestants and Catholics is over whether the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is Christian doctrine. An example of an interpretative disagreement would be between Social Trinitarians and Latin Trinitarians over the doctrine of the trinity. These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In this paper, I will focus on interpretative disagreements.

The existence of interpretative disagreements suggests that we need to distinguish between the language used to express beliefs and the beliefs themselves. Indeed, the existence of interpretative disagreements indicates that two believers might utter the same sentence and yet mean something quite different. So, I will refer to these utterances or written expressions as *doxastic expressions*. For example, most Latter-day Saints would be happy to utter "God has a body," but they often mean radically different things by this expression. The expression is the same, but the belief is different. This gives us the illusion that Latter-day Saints believe the same thing, when, in fact, they don't. As Arne Næss puts it, Latter-day Saints are in *pseudo-agreement*.[5]

External and internal religious disagreements pose different philosophical problems. External disagreements raise an *epistemological* question: which belief is true (if any) and how do we know? Internal (interpretative) disagreements raise a *semantic* question: what *are* the beliefs of the faith? The first is an epistemological question because it requires that we figure out how to adjudicate between incompatible claims. The second is a semantic question because it requires that we determine the meaning of the doxastic expressions of the language. In other words, external dis-

5. Arne Næss, *Interpretation and Preciseness* (Oslo: I Kommisjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1953), 123–24.

agreements threaten the epistemic status of one's belief whereas internal disagreements threaten the very identity or content of one's belief. This is the first reason that the problem of heterodoxy is more fundamental than the problem of interreligious disagreement.

Moreover, the problem of heterodoxy is logically prior to the traditional problem of external religious disagreement. Indeed, every external religious disagreement depends on how the respective religious faiths are interpreted. On some interpretations, they do indeed disagree and, on other interpretations, they do not disagree. For example, Latter-day Saints could accept Social Trinitarianism but not Latin Trinitarianism. So, whether Latter-day Saints and creedal Christians disagree on this matter depends on what the right interpretation of Christianity is. So, the problem of heterodoxy must be solved first.

Smith's Solution

The LDS understanding of the apostasy and the restoration, as based on the account of the first vision in *Joseph Smith's History of the Church*, is presented as an answer to the problem of heterodoxy. That is, Smith—according to the current LDS understanding—was not concerned with which major religious tradition (e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, etc.) was correct. He already *knew* that Christianity was correct. He was concerned, instead, with which interpretation of Christianity was the correct one and which Christian organization represented God's will.

Of course, the first source to go to in trying to determine which version of Christianity is correct is the Bible. And Smith did look to the Bible for an answer to his question. But instead of finding a direct answer in the Bible, he found out *how to get an answer* to his question (a "meta-answer") in James 1:5: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be

given to him." In fact, Smith seemed to recognize that the Bible couldn't really answer his question. He says,

> [T]he teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. (JS–H 1:12)

So, he understands that the Bible itself can't settle the issue. But James 1:5 does say that there are other ways to find answers to such questions, namely by asking God. Perhaps there are other interpretations of this passage, but that is clearly how Joseph Smith understood it, since that is, in effect, what he did.

Given that the First Vision[6] is the response that Smith received to his question, not only is the First Vision the medium whereby the problem of heterodoxy is answered, it *constitutes* an instance of the type of event that is central to the answer as well. To be sure, the answer to the question about which church is true is "none." But the answer to the more general problem of heterodoxy is that we need revelation. And the First Vision itself is an instance of the kind of revelation required. In other words, Smith's answer to his quandary was that there should be communication between God and humanity.

Latter-day Saints believe that the traditional Christian churches had all deviated from the truth and that, as a result, God was no longer in contact with humanity. They call this *the great apostasy* or, more simply, *the apostasy*.[7] Joseph Smith initiated a new dispensation in which God would be in communication with humanity through his prophets. This seems to answer the problem of heterodoxy because God can settle disputes about how to interpret Christianity by speaking to his prophets. In other words, the only way to preserve orthodoxy would be to re-initialize

6. For more on the First Vision see James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (1966): 29–46.

7. James Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1983).

contact between God and humankind (i.e., the Restoration) and have that contact continue into the future (i.e., continuing revelation).

Let us be clear about what is implied by this approach to the problem of heterodoxy. Recall that the problem of heterodoxy is the problem of how to determine which interpretation of a particular faith tradition is correct, given competing interpretations. In particular, members of the same faith might accept the same doxastic expressions (e.g., "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God") and yet interpret those expressions differently. One major factor that leads to the problem of heterodoxy is that the religious leader in question is dead, and so if a question about what he or she meant by a certain doxastic expression arises, we cannot ask him or her.[8] The first aspect of Smith's solution to the problem is simple: Jesus is not really dead and so, in effect, we *can* ask him.[9] And we can use this method to settle all disputes about the content of the faith.

Of course, even if they do believe that Jesus lives, not all Christians believe that you can ask Jesus directly what he meant by a given expression in the New Testament (assuming that he did, in fact, utter some of what appears in the New Testament). So, some Christians must have a different answer to the problem of heterodoxy. One reasonable answer would be to go with the interpretation that best fits with the whole body of data associated with Jesus: the extant texts, the historical background, linguistic analysis, archaeological evidence, etc. However, given the state of scriptural interpretation in the nineteenth century, it would also seem plausible that more than one interpretation could fit with the relevant data. This observation seems even more accurate in light of contemporary biblical scholarship. In other words, it is plau-

8. Although, even if the religious leader is not dead, there could be disputes about whether she is interpreting her earlier statements accurately. We can, after all, misinterpret what we have said in the past.

9. It is true that, for Mormons, one should pray to Heavenly Father rather than to the Son. But this doesn't make a philosophical difference.

sible that the publicly available evidence concerning what Jesus taught *underdetermines* the best interpretation of Jesus' teachings. Surely, several different approaches to Jesus' teachings are compatible with all the evidence that we can accumulate.

If the available evidence concerning what Jesus taught doesn't favor a unique interpretation of those teachings, then this *intersubjective* approach to solving the problem of heterodoxy (in the particular case of Christianity) doesn't work. Indeed, taking this approach would lead to skepticism, given the assumption that the correct interpretation is underdetermined by the available evidence. Moreover, as cited above, we know that Smith had considered different interpretations of the texts in an attempt to figure out who was correct. These considerations didn't satisfy him and it seems rightly so. For Smith, then, the problem is not solved by the intersubjective approach. Instead, Smith turned to revelation as the answer, and it is important to see that using revelation to solve the problem of heterodoxy contrasts with the intersubjective approach insofar as it appeals to content that is not intersubjective, but rather private or subjective.

To make this clear, it is helpful to be explicit about the distinction between intersubjective and subjective evidence. Intersubjective evidence is evidence for *every*body if it is evidence for *any*body. A mathematical proof is a proof for you as well as for me, once we both understand it. Subjective evidence, by contrast, is *non-transferrable* to use van Inwagen's term.[10] If I have subjective evidence, there is no procedure that I could follow that would be sufficient for making that very same evidence available to you. An example of subjective evidence is memory. I recall that the bird I saw on my hike yesterday was a finch. Since I didn't take a photo and am basing my claim on memory, I can't show you my evidence. If you believe me, it is because you trust me.

10. Peter van Inwagen, "We're Right. They're Wrong," in *Disagreement*, edited by Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

The LDS concept of revelation is essentially the same as the concept of religious experience discussed in recent philosophy of religion.[11] As such, revelation is subjective evidence. This is obviously true of most religious experiences, including what Latter-day Saints call the witness of the Holy Ghost. Of course, someone might claim that Joseph Smith's First Vision was a publicly available experience of the Father and the Son—that is, if anyone else had been present in the Sacred Grove on that day, such a person would have seen and heard exactly what Smith saw and heard. But granting that an eavesdropper would have seen personages floating above Smith, it is not clear that such an eavesdropper would have seen the Father and the Son. Indeed, perhaps such an eavesdropper would have seen two demons or two extra-terrestrials. That is, even if a religious experience is simultaneously an ordinary perceptual experience, the religious content goes beyond the publicly available content.[12]

Given that Smith's solution to the problem of heterodoxy invokes subjective content and evidence, it avoids the underdetermination problem faced by the intersubjective approach considered above. Despite there being more than one interpretation of the faith that fits with the

11. William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

12. A reviewer for this journal raised the following point: some claim that the experience of the Holy Ghost is fundamentally practical rather than cognitive and that, hence—given that the practical is intersubjective—the Holy Ghost is intersubjective. My response is that we can grant that the experience of the Holy Ghost is embedded in religious practices and that it has no meaning independent of those practices. In that sense it *is* intersubjective. For example, it is agreed that the experience of the Spirit is calming and warming. But the doxastic content conveyed by these religious experiences is not intersubjective, since people disagree about this. And it's the doxastic content of religious experience that matters at this point in the argument. The response that there is no doxastic content in such religious experiences would undercut the argument being considered. It is, of course, not entirely irrelevant here that some people engage in the practices and never experience the Holy Ghost at all.

intersubjective evidence, it might seem that there would be only one that fits with one's own subjective evidence. Since Smith's solution to the problem of heterodoxy involves reference to subjective experiences that cannot be transferred to others, I will refer to this view as *interpretative gnosticism*. To repeat, interpretative gnosticism is the view that one can settle the question as to which interpretation of a religious tradition is correct by subjective religious experiences.

Also, since we are discussing the epistemology of religious belief, it makes sense to point out that Smith's solution to the problem of heterodoxy has similarities with the approach called *reformed epistemology*.[13] Advocates of reformed epistemology argue that certain religious beliefs are properly basic. This is because it is assumed that they are created by a reliable belief-forming process, even if the believer is not in a position to say why it is reliable. Religious experience fits into this category, according to reformed epistemologists. If it is from God, then it is reliable and can be trusted. Of course, people do have contrary basic beliefs on occasion. When they do, the question of justification might arise, and the reformed epistemologist would have to admit that her justification is non-transferrable. I will say more about this below.

Problems

Despite being initially plausible, there are complications with Smith's approach to the problem of heterodoxy. The first one arises from the fact that the content of religious experience is subjective. To be sure, there are such things as subjective justifications for beliefs (memory is the example given above). But Smith's use of religious experience as an answer to the problem of heterodoxy is not just an attempt to justify a particular belief over other competing beliefs; it is an attempt *to determine the propositional content that goes with certain doxastic expressions*. This

13. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

move from the epistemological to the semantic changes the game. Indeed, given that Smith's solution employs a subjective religious experience to determine the proper content of a doxastic expression, then it seems clear that Smith's solution involves an appeal to subjective content to determine the correct meaning for certain expressions in a language. In other words, Smith's solution assumes that there is a *private* language.

Many philosophers of language have argued that a private language is impossible. It is not clear that there is a common core to these various private language arguments. Ludwig Wittgenstein's argument (or arguments) is the most famous, but its interpretation is a matter of great contention.[14] I want to avoid the controversies associated with interpreting Wittgenstein since I am afraid that my interpretation of him would be considered heterodox by many of his disciples. So, instead, I will explain Neurath's private language argument.

Neurath's private language argument is stated in several places, but can be found in its fullest form in his article entitled "Protocol Sentences."[15] Protocol sentences in this context can be understood as expressions that make basic observations about objects in the experiential environment. He writes,

> If Robinson wants to join what is in his protocol of yesterday with what is in his protocol today, that is, if he wants to make use of a language at all, he must make use of the "inter-subjective" language. The Robinson of yesterday and the Robinson of today stand in precisely the same relation in which Robinson stands to Friday . . . If, under certain circumstances, one calls Robinson's protocol language of yesterday and today the same language then, under the same conditions, one can call Robinson's and Friday's the same language. [. . .]

14. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: MacMillan, 1953).

15. Otto Nerath, "Protocol Statements," in *Philosophical Papers, 1913–1946*, translated and edited by Robert S. Cohen and Marie Neurath (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1983), 91–99.

> In other words, every language as such is "inter-subjective"; it must be possible to incorporate the protocols of one moment into the protocols of the next moment, just as the protocols of A can be incorporated into the protocols of B.[16]

It seems that Neurath argues as follows. His first assumption is that a language requires constancy of use over time. I believe that this is the point of Neurath's talk of "incorporation" of one moment's protocols into those of the next moment. And constancy of use implies that sometimes the expression is used correctly and other times incorrectly (if every use were correct then there would be no constancy of use). But then to check correct usage, Robinson stands to his earlier self the way he stands to Friday. If this is the case, then the only way that he can check the correctness of his own usage is similar to the way he checks Friday's. So, any language is intersubjective.

There is a problem with this argument as it stands. The problem is that Robinson is connected to his earlier self in a way that he is not connected to Friday—namely by memory. Robinson remembers his own earlier usage of the expression in question—call it *E*. Moreover, Robinson also remembers the mental state *M* that accompanied his previous usage of *E*. But to decide whether to use *E* in this new case, Robinson must interpret his own past usage of *E* and the fact that his usage was determined by *M* at that time doesn't determine whether *E* should be used now. So, even if subjective content can determine correct usage at one time, once that content has passed, there is still an issue about how to interpret the expression.

Neurath's considerations lead to a problem for Smith's interpretative gnosticism. As soon as the religious experience that is intended to fix the content of the faith has passed, then the question of how to interpret that experience arises again. Suppose, for example, that Smith receives a revelation that *F* is the right interpretation of the doxastic expression *E*.

16. Ibid., 96.

By supposition, he knows what he means by the words in *F* at the time because he has a private mental state that determines their meaning. But as soon as that mental state is gone, the question of how to interpret those words arises again.

Given Smith's approach, this problem can only be solved by having another religious experience. And so, it would seem that interpretative gnosticism leads to the conclusion that one must be in a constant state of receiving revelation from God so as to fix the content of one's beliefs. So, this objection to interpretative gnosticism leads to the necessity of having continuous revelation. At any moment when a question arises about how to interpret a doxastic expression, one must appeal to religious experience. Thus, we can see that it is reasonable that the doctrine of continuing revelation accompanies the doctrine of the Restoration in LDS theology.[17]

Another problem with Smith's approach arises from its subjectivism. The problem is that someone besides Smith might have an experience that confers a belief that disagrees with Smith's conclusions about the proper interpretation of the doxastic expressions in question. If a fourteen-year-old boy with very little education and no training in theology can settle theological questions by asking God, then anyone should be able to do so. But, of course, this opens a Pandora's box. One person could receive a revelation that determines the content of belief *E* to be *F* and another could have a revelation that determines the content of *E* to be *G*, where *F* and *G* are not only distinct, but also incompatible.

Notice that this leads us right back to the problem of heterodoxy. So, it would seem that interpretative gnosticism doesn't really solve the problem after all. Similarly, reformed epistemology must also appeal to interpretative gnosticism in order to solve the problem of heterodoxy.

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17. For more on the LDS doctrine of continuing revelation see Henry B. Eyring, "Continuing Revelation," General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 2014: https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/10/continuing-revelation.

Reformed epistemologists such as Plantinga believe that they have a special epistemic status that others don't possess. Speaking of the Christian believer's reaction to non-believers, Plantinga writes,

> She may agree that she as those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their belief, and even that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar, or relevantly similar. But she must still think that there is an important epistemic difference: she thinks that somehow the other person has made a mistake, or has a blind spot, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way less epistemically fortunate.[18]

First, it is important to note that Plantinga is discussing external religious disagreement rather than internal religious disagreement. Given this, he believes that if the Christian God really exists and is the cause of his religious belief, then he has important knowledge that people from other religious traditions lack. He believes that his tradition possesses a path to knowledge that is not available in the other traditions. Even if the believers of those traditions have some kind of religious experience as well, it would not be sufficiently similar to the experiences of Plantinga's own tradition to be taken seriously. It seems that Latter-day Saints can say the same thing as Plantinga. For the purposes of argument, let me grant that this move works as a response to the problem of external religious disagreement. Even so, it is clear that this response does not work once you try to apply it to the problem of heterodoxy. Heterodox Latter-day Saints can claim that the Holy Ghost witnesses to them that orthodox Latter-day Saints are wrong. One cannot dismiss this heterodox claim on the grounds that it is formed in the wrong way. It is one thing to say to outsiders that they are missing something important (as Plantinga does) and quite another thing to say this to one's fellow religionists.

18. Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, edited by Phillip Quinn and Kevin Meeker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 182.

LDS doctrine has an answer to this problem as well. The answer is to privilege the religious experiences of some over others. This leads to a hierarchy, where those at the top have the power to interpret the faith for everyone else. This would help explain LDS Mormonism's focus on the central role of priesthood authority in the Restoration.[19]

If you grant all the assumptions that are made in Smith's solution to the problem of heterodoxy, the solution *seems* to work. And since reformed epistemologists (who are, as the name suggests, usually Protestants) don't accept the kind of authority that is required for this solution, I believe that the LDS solution is more initially promising than the reformed approach. We might call the LDS approach "restored epistemology," which amounts to reformed epistemology plus (what we might call) "epistemic authoritarianism," namely the view that the religious experiences of some trump the religious experiences of others.

Despite its initial plausibility, I believe that restored epistemology fails as well. One of the assumptions here is that the religious experiences of some *trump* the religious experience of others. This assumption of epistemic authoritarianism is itself problematic from an epistemological point of view. The problem is that there cannot be any good reason for accepting the claim that the religious experiences of some trump the religious experiences of others. To see this, let's consider the following scenario:

> Josephine lives in a town with three "Mormon" churches: the LDS Church, the Community of Christ and the FLDS church. Josephine considers herself a Christian but she wonders which denomination is truly Christian. Moreover, given where she lives, she has learned a little about Joseph Smith, has read the Book of Mormon and wonders about Smith's claim to having restored Christianity. But in her investigation of Smith's restoration movement, she has discovered that these Mormon

19. For more on the concept of authority in Mormonism, see Mario S. De Pillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (1966): 68–88.

> denominations disagree about how to interpret Smith's restoration. She wants to discover what Smith really taught in order to assess his claims to having restored Christianity. So, how can she know what Smith really claimed, given the wildly different interpretations of his teachings?

Clearly, Josephine's quandary is formulated to be analogous to the situation in which Joseph Smith found himself. If Smith's quandary were similar to Josephine's, and Smith's restoration was an answer to this quandary, then Smith's answer should work for Josephine as well. What is she to do? Restored epistemology tells her to go with whatever the authorities say when it comes to matters of internal disagreement. But which authorities should she listen to? LDS, FLDS, or Community of Christ?

The LDS approach is that she should attempt to have her own religious experience in order to figure out which Mormon denomination truly represents Smith's approach. So, let's imagine that Josephine does this and concludes that the Community of Christ gets it right. Now, it seems clear that there are plenty of LDS Mormons and FLDS Mormons that would claim that her experience conflicts with their authorities and that, hence, they can dismiss her experiences as being incorrect. She can't use her own religious experience to adjudicate the issue of whether she should trust the leadership of one denomination over the others, since those that adhere to the other denominations are in the same situation as she is with respect to the denomination that she chooses. Indeed, if she gets it wrong, then she is actually violating the epistemic authoritarianism of Smith's approach. Perhaps she can just privilege her own religious experience over everyone else's. This would solve the problem of disagreement with the authorities of the other denominations; but this would be to take the *reformed* approach rather than the *restored* approach to the epistemic quandary. Of course, it is obvious that Josephine's quandary cannot be resolved by an appeal to the authorities of one of the denominations since that is the very question at issue. Finally, there doesn't seem to be

any intersubjective way of settling the dispute about who is interpreting Smith most faithfully.

But without a subjective or intersubjective justification for believing in the epistemic authority of the LDS (the Community of Christ, the FLDS, etc.) leadership, there is no justification for this assumption. If you are an outsider, to accept one version of Mormonism you must trust its authorities without any substantial reason to do so. But now, notice that everyone starts out as an outsider; even if one is born into the LDS Church, one must still be converted.[20] Therefore, it follows that even life-long Latter-day Saints themselves have no real basis for trusting their leaders. Restored epistemology amounts to epistemic "boot-strapping" and thus fails.

LDS Mormonism's epistemic authoritarianism requires that I trust another's religious experience more than my own, and it requires that I do this without any independent check on this person's testimony. Indeed, there are cases in which it is rational for me to trust another's testimony more than my own. For example, I should trust my doctor's diagnosis of my medical condition more than my own diagnosis, or the scientific community's nearly unanimous verdict on anthropogenic climate change over my own judgment about it. But these are cases where there is an objective way to determine who the *experts* are, and I am not one of them. In a way, religious authorities count as experts, of course. But there are different groups claiming to be the experts on Mormon doctrine. They each deny the expertise of the other groups, and the only way to determine who the real experts are would be to settle the problem of heterodoxy in the first place (namely to know which denomination gets it right). So, unless we have a solution to the problem of religious experts (i.e., an objective criterion for determining who they are), we don't have a solution to the problem of heterodoxy; and unless we have a solution to the problem of heterodoxy, we don't

20. See Grace Jorgensen, "Every Member a Convert," *Ensign,* Apr. 1980, https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/04/every-member-a-convert?lang=eng.

have a solution to the problem of experts. The upshot, I believe, is that we are not in a position for it to be rational for us to defer to experts on matters of religious belief. It would be irrational to do so. And so, it would be irrational for us to accept the orthodox LDS solution to the problem of heterodoxy.

The A-theological Approach

Perhaps there is an alternative approach to the problem of heterodoxy available to Latter-day Saints. One debate within the LDS intellectual community deals with the role of theology in the faith. Some LDS theologians, such as David Paulsen and Blake Ostler, have taken an approach to Mormon theology that does not differ methodologically from theologies in traditional Christian circles.[21] However, other LDS thinkers, such as Brian D. Birch, James Faulconer, and Adam S. Miller, eschew systematic theology entirely or, at least, claim that it plays no substantive role in the faith.[22] Here's Miller on the role of theology:

> Theology is a diversion. It is not serious like doctrine, respectable like history, or helpful like therapy. Theology is gratuitous. It works by way of detours. Doing theology is like building a comically circuitous Rube Goldberg Machine: you spend your time tinkering together an unnecessarily complicated, impractical, and ingenious apparatus for doing things that are, in themselves, simple.[23]

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21. See Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God, Volume 1* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001).

22. Brian Birch summarizes previous LDS *a-theological* approaches in "Faith Seeking Understanding: Mormon Atheology and the Challenge of Fideism," in *Mormonism at the Crossroads of Philosophy and Theology: Essays in Honor of David L. Paulsen*, edited by Jacob T. Baker (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 47–68.

23. Adam S. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), xiii.

So, Miller takes theology to be superfluous. Faulconer goes farther and argues that (systematic) theology is *dangerous*:

> [T]he absence of official rational explanations or descriptions of beliefs and practices, and the presence of differing and inconsistent explanations for and descriptions of belief within the membership of the church, suggests that we have little if any official systematic, rational, or dogmatic theology. (I use those three terms, systematic theology, rational theology, and dogmatic theology, as synonyms.) We are "a-theological"—which means that we are without a church-sanctioned, church-approved, or even church encouraged systematic theology—and that is as it should be because systematic theology is dangerous.[24]

Following Faulconer, I will call this the *a-theological* approach.[25] If we take this approach, we might tell a different story about the apostasy, restoration, and continuing revelation. LDS a-theologians might argue that the apostasy arises not from interpreting the doctrines the wrong way but from interpreting them at all. Perhaps the problem isn't having the wrong theology, but doing theology at all. Doing theology leads to disagreement and, eventually, schism, thus dividing the Christian community over trivial issues. Furthermore, LDS a-theologians could argue that the restoration is a return to the basic doctrines plus an imperative to stick to these alone. Indeed, in the above quotation, Miller contrasts "doctrine" with "theology," considering the former "serious" and the latter superfluous.

The first problem with this approach arises from this concept of "doctrine" that Miller uses. What is doctrine? Perhaps, given the definitions offered above, doctrine consists of a set of basic doxastic expressions that every adherent affirms. Of course, it is not entirely clear that such a set wouldn't be very small. Nevertheless, it is plausible that there are

24. James E. Faulconer, "Rethinking Theology: The Shadow of the Apocalypse," *FARMS Review* 19, no.1 (2007): 179.

25. "A-theological" means *without theology* and not *without God*.

some very basic doxastic expressions that every Latter-day Saint would affirm, such as "God exists," "God loves his children," etc. But there are a lot of other doxastic expressions that some Latter-day Saints would affirm and others would not (e.g., "marriage in the celestial kingdom will be plural marriage"). Certainly, these disagreements make a big difference to the nature of the belief held by the adherents of the faith. And very often these disagreements hinge on how the basic doxastic expressions (i.e., the "doctrines") are interpreted. But then, one might define theology as *the interpretation of the basic doxastic expressions of the faith*. If so, then it follows that doing theology would be necessary for adjudicating the disputes about doctrines other than the basic doxastic expressions that everyone agrees about. In other words, to use the terminology introduced above, even if the a-theological approach solves the problem of internal interpretative disagreements, it doesn't solve the problem of internal doctrinal disagreements.

The LDS a-theologian might respond by claiming that anything above and beyond the set of basic doxastic expressions (i.e., the "doctrine") is not part of the faith. Instead, one should keep those disputes out of the community entirely. An example of this approach is seen in the LDS approach to the theory of evolution, in which the Church neither endorses nor denies evolution.[26]

This extra-doctrinal agnosticism comes at a price. One of the important features of religious belief is supposed to be that it gives us a good guide on how to live morally. But the moral implications of LDS doctrine are a matter of dispute among Latter-day Saints. For example, although the majority believes that it was right for the LDS church to campaign against gay marriage, there are heterodox Latter-day Saints who reject this.[27] The different views on this issue depend on the interpretation of

26. See William Evenson and Duane Jeffries, eds., *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006).

27. For a heterodox approach to homosexuality in LDS Mormonism see Taylor Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal*

LDS doctrine. And so, extra-doctrinal agnosticism has the problem of undercutting one of the main functions of religious belief. Religious belief is supposed to have consequences for our practical and moral lives. Of course, most would argue that religious belief doesn't merely reduce to beliefs about morality,[28] but few would argue that religious belief doesn't have moral implications. The problem with the a-theological approach to Mormonism is that it disconnects the doctrine from moral practice. Without an interpretation of the basic doxastic expressions, it is not clear what they imply with respect to morality, and once we begin to interpret what the basic doxastic expressions mean, then we are doing theology in the sense addressed in this paper.

The a-theologian might respond by insisting it is only systematic theology that is being rejected. Indeed, note that in the above quotation from Faulconer, he doesn't castigate all theology, but only systematic, rational, or dogmatic theology. So, there might be some other kind of non-systematic, non-rational, and non-dogmatic way of doing theology that would suffice to bridge the gap between the basic doxastic expressions and moral imperatives. Perhaps Faulconer has something like narrative theology in mind. Yet, if this is all there is to the a-theologians' point, it seems that the problem of heterodoxy is not avoided by a-theology. Presumably, even non-systematic theologians can disagree with each other about how to interpret the basic doxastic expressions. So, if this is all there is to Mormon a-theology, it doesn't help with the problem of heterodoxy.

A final attempt to save the a-theological solution to the problem of heterodoxy might be to argue that I have separated questions about belief from questions about practice and that they cannot be so separated. This is a common point to make if you are an a-theologian, but I

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of Mormon Thought 44, no. 4 (2011): 106–41.

28. Cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity,* translated by George Elliot (New York: Harper Row, 1957); R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

don't think the charge sticks in my case. Indeed, I have emphasized the need to get the beliefs right due to the fact that they have implications for what we should do. This is not to separate belief from practice, but quite the opposite.

Perhaps the problem is that I have prioritized belief over practice and practice is actually more fundamental. So, let's suppose that practice determines belief and not the other way around (I grant this only for the sake of argument). How does this help with the fact that the religious tradition is doxastically indeterminate? Presumably, what matters is that the practices are *not* indeterminate. But this helps only if the practices can then help us adjudicate between the different doxastic interpretations, and it seems obvious to me that they cannot; there are different sets of beliefs that are consistent with any given set of religious practices.

Perhaps, instead, only orthopraxis matters; maybe orthodoxy is beside the point. That is, you can believe whatever you like as long as you engage in pious behavior. However, this approach would be to *separate* belief from practice and this was rejected above. Surely, the fact that LDS theology includes the claim that gender is eternal matters to how the LDS church behaves. Moreover, even if practice could be so separated from belief, there might be divergences in practice and, then, the problem of heterodoxy (heteropraxy?) arises again.

Conclusion

Many Latter-day Saints discuss "Mormon doctrine" as if it involves a set of transcendent propositions. They distinguish between what Mormons actually believe from *doctrine*. That is, they use the concept of doctrine in a normative way. This language presupposes a determinate set of propositions that are the *true* doctrines of Mormonism. They believe that part of the restoration of the gospel is the identification of these doctrines. The problem of heterodoxy leads us to wonder whether we can know what that determinate set is. Latter-day Saints believe that

Smith's restoration does indeed solve this problem and that anyone who wonders which Christian denomination is correct can follow Smith's example. But I have argued that Smith's approach is problematic since it asks us to trust religious authorities without any reason to do so.