

Steven L. Peck is one of Mormonism's best living writers, but he is also one of our most formidable and comprehensive intellects. His interests are as wide-ranging as his experiences, which lead to great satisfaction for his readers and, I suspect, great frustration for his publishers and booksellers. In an age when we expect books (and their authors) to conform to genres and categories, Peck gives us fluid intellectual borders and a genre-busting literary style. It is no accident that both collections contain the word "wandering" in the title; no word better describes Peck as a writer or as a thinker. In both his fiction and his non-fiction, he moves through ideas, topics, and styles at a dizzying pace. By their very nature, retrospective collections like *Wandering Realities* and *Evolving Faith* must try to capture the movements of a peripatetic mind. Both do so admirably, and I recommend them enthusiastically and without qualification.



[A Conversation Begins](#)

Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill. *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 218 pp. Hardcover: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-0190265922.

Reviewed by Joseph Gile

There has never been any official theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic and LDS Churches, but Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill have opened an unofficial one in *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation*. The key to appreciating their efforts is located in the subtitle—and what a conversation it is! Stephen Webb is the Catholic here and Alonzo Gaskill the Mormon, with the two authors discussing such theological issues as authority, grace, Mary, revelation, ritual,

matter, Jesus, heaven, history, and the soul in short chapters devoted to each topic. The two theologians take turns opening each chapter, allowing the other to respond, with a chance for a follow-up rebuttal. Even when Webb and Gaskill challenge each other, the conversation never becomes polemical. These are two well-informed friends who respond to each other in a most respectful way. The tone is always generous and mutually sympathetic, though Protestant readers may be put off by the recurring distinctions made with their theological tradition. The book opens with both authors explaining why each left behind his previous religious affiliation. Webb explains how he came to the conclusion that the Protestant Reformation is now “over,” which led him to embrace the Catholic Church, and Gaskill explains why he left Eastern Orthodoxy to become a Mormon. The opening chapter, however, is more than engaging spiritual odyssey; Webb and Gaskill both show how their personal religious journeys were driven by their perceptions of religious authority. What could have been a rather abstract treatment instead becomes quite personal and concrete. This interweaving of honest, personal, religious searching with serious theological issues in a conversational format carries through in all the subsequent chapters. As an example of this conversational deliberation, consider the specifics of chapter 4 on revelation and the Bible. Like other Christian denominations, Catholicism considers the canon of scripture closed after the Apostolic Age, with Mormonism obviously holding to a more expansive canon that includes the revelations to Joseph Smith. Webb tries to bridge this gap by using the category of private revelation, which is Catholic doctrine, but not quite in the way Webb presents it. Catholic theology considers public revelation as the original words and deeds of God in the Old Testament and Jesus Christ in the New Testament; private revelation is the Catholic belief that God does continue speaking with us, with the important proviso that private revelation does not reveal any new truth about God or our salvation. It is Catholic teaching that God has said everything there is to say in his son (*Dei verbum*, sec. 4; cf. 1 Timothy 6:14

and Titus 2:13), though Webb never mentions this. Instead, Webb tries to draw Catholics and Mormons closer together by contrasting them both with Protestant thought when he writes, "Protestants did not necessarily deny that God acts in miraculous ways outside of the events recorded in the Bible, but they did insist that these miracles do not tell us anything about God that we cannot already find in the Bible" (64). This, however, is not just a Protestant position. It is also the position of contemporary Roman Catholic theology, which likewise does not believe that private revelation can provide any new information about God. Webb further blurs the distinction between public and private revelation when he writes that "[p]ublic revelation is not complete, however, in the sense that God is done speaking to us" (66). The language here is not well chosen. Catholic theology does consider public revelation complete with the end of the Apostolic Age; it is private revelation that is ongoing, but that distinction is lost here.

Instead of using the concept of public and private revelation, it would have been clearer for Webb to invoke the contrasting categories of original and dependent revelation developed by Gerald O'Collins SJ in his *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*. According to O'Collins, all private revelation is entirely dependent upon original biblical revelation. Private, dependent revelation is meant to help actualize original (public) biblical revelation in the hearts and minds of subsequent generations after the conclusion of biblical revelation, but private, dependent revelation can never provide any additional truths about God or about salvation. Obviously, Mormonism disagrees. In the next section of chapter 4, Gaskill continues to blur the distinction between public and private revelation, writing that "God has inspired with private revelation many sincere individuals who ultimately preserved public revelations, such as the Bible, the doctrine that Jesus is the Christ, teachings regarding baptism and the Eucharist, and so on" (71).

This confusion of the concepts of public and private revelation carries over into their discussion of the biblical canon. Webb considers the

revelations of Joseph Smith “true and authentic” private revelations (70). Gaskill takes issue with Webb’s use of terminology, since Mormonism considers Joseph Smith’s revelations public, not private, ones from God (71). This, of course, is why Mormonism rejects closing the biblical canon with the end of the Apostolic Age. Gaskill notes that “[f]or Mormons, the idea of a ‘closed canon’ of ‘public revelation’ implies man has some power to limit God’s ability to reveal normatively—simply because man (not God) says ‘all public revelation has been given’” (72). Webb responds to this in the next section of chapter 4. In one of his strongest reactions in the entire book, Webb considers the Mormon position here to be “puzzling” (76). Mormonism may protest against closing the biblical canon of public revelation with the last apostle, but Webb asks, is their canon really all that open? Webb next briefly explores where a truly open canon without any creedal leads, i.e., to “ecclesial chaos” (76). Gaskill responds in the final section of the chapter, accepting these critiques from Webb by noting that “Stephen’s assessment of the Mormon position on scripture, revelation, and creeds is largely accurate and would probably frustrate most Latter-day Saints. Although I know he is not being critical, he does bring up a few points that could be leveled as criticisms against us” (78).

From all of the above, one can see both the strengths and weaknesses of the approach of *Catholic and Mormon*. These are two knowledgeable friends conversing about key theological teachings in their respective churches. They are not holding a debate; they never try to “win”; they are not trying to resolve matters definitively; they are able to respectfully critique and accept criticism concerning their respective churches. Since this is not formal interreligious dialogue where every point is defined, explored, and finally resolved, some points are raised by one author in a section but not addressed by the other in a subsequent one. That’s because it’s a conversation. And, as with any lengthy, wide-ranging conversation, sometimes they get carried away, as Webb does when he claims that, with respect to the Virgin Mary, “Catholics and Mormons

both have a goddess problem” (50). Some facts are simply not checked (given the explosive growth in Africa, did more people truly leave the Catholic Church than enter it after Vatican II as Gaskill claims?); some assumptions are left unchallenged (did the prominent role of Mary truly help facilitate many pagan conversions as Webb claims?). Some of the exchanges do offer novel, fascinating comparisons, such as the role of St. Peter in both denominations; some comments are quite provocative, as when Webb suggests that Mormonism can show Catholics “how to become post-Thomistic without losing their theological way” (102). All in all, this is a fascinating, lively, sometimes controversial, but very robust, theological conversation. A more formal, official interreligious dialogue would be much more restricted in topic, more detailed in its consideration, more careful in its use of language. It would also probably be much less stimulating to read.