

STEPHEN WEBB: IN MEMORIAM

Mathew N. Schmalz

When I heard the news that Stephen Webb had passed away on March 5, 2016, I mourned the loss.¹

I never met Stephen Webb. Although we both attended the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, he was several years ahead of me in the program. I did not know his wife or his children, nor was I close to the many people who called him friend, colleague, and mentor. Instead, I knew Stephen Webb through his scholarship: a scholarship that reflected his complex spiritual and intellectual journey from Evangelical Christianity to Roman Catholicism. Stephen Webb's scholarly output was enormous—always of high caliber and, more than occasionally, provocative in the best sense: Stephen Webb always made people think. He wrote about Christian obligations to animals; probed the spiritual dimensions of Bob Dylan's music; and argued for an understanding of providential place of the United States in God's plan for humankind.² For me, however, Stephen Webb as a scholar remained, first and foremost, one of the few Catholic academics who appreciated Mormonism's intellectual complexity.

While I wish I had known Stephen Webb more fully as a person, I nonetheless admired how his scholarly work built bridges and created

1. Stephen Howe Webb, *Indianapolis Star* Mar. 9, 2016: A7; See also Samuel D. Rocha, "The Excess of Stephen Webb," *First Things*, Mar. 16, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/03/the-excess-of-stephen-h-webb>.

2. Stephen Webb, *Good Eating: The Bible, Diet and the Proper Love of Animals* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press/Baker, 2001); Stephen Webb, *Dylan Redeemed: From Highway 61 to Saved* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Stephen Webb, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

shared spaces for Catholics and Latter-day Saints to more fully understand, and appreciate, each other. His tragic and unexpected loss is most keenly felt by his friends and family; but it is also felt by those who never knew him but were inspired to travel along the scholarly path he blazed that allowed Catholics and Mormons to tarry in discussions with each other as fellow Christians. In this short essay, I cannot memorialize Stephen Webb in all his richness as a person. But I can share what I learned about Mormon/Catholic dialogue from him and introduce his work to those who may not have had the opportunity to engage it. In so doing, I hope that all of us can appreciate the depth of his work and the promise it holds not just for Catholics and Mormons, but for all Christians, who long to see God face-to-face.

Stephen Webb was a materialist—not of the Marxist, atheist kind—but of a peculiarly and authentically Christian kind. He explored early Christian understandings of materiality of the universe, and the materiality of God, in his 2012 monograph *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter*. In his broad ranging discussion, Webb surveys Christian understandings of God as immaterial and presents a contending and contrary argument that materiality is part of God’s perfection. He argues for a “heavenly flesh Christology” that understands humans and God as sharing in the same materiality: humans really are made in the image of God.

This position, so complementary to Joseph Smith’s revelation that “all spirit is matter” (D&C 131:7), is open to a number of criticisms from the Christian Christological and metaphysical tradition. In a rather critical review of Webb’s monograph, Eastern University philosophy professor William Cary notes how Mormon conceptions of deification through eternal progression devalue the uniqueness of “Christ’s flesh” and thus, unwittingly perhaps, devalue the salvific significance of Christ Himself.³ Webb opposes what is often called “apophatic” or “negative” theology

3. William Cary, “Material God: A Review of *Jesus Christ, Eternal God*,” *First Things*, May 2012, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/05/material-god>.

that focuses on what God is not. Such a distrust of the apophatic, Cary implies, robs God of transcendence: from a materialist perspective either God is everything or God is dependent on what He is not—positions that both obfuscate considerations of what makes God’s “Being” distinctive. Simply put: an exclusively material God is no god at all.

Perhaps in response to such criticisms, Webb extended and deepened his consideration of Mormon metaphysics in *Mormon Christianity*, published by Oxford University Press in 2013.⁴ Against perceptions of Mormon philosophical materialism as simplistic or superficial, Webb shows how Mormon theology resolves crucial theological questions—while in the process raising other theological problems that LDS tradition must seriously confront. But before advancing the core of his scholarly argument in *Mormon Christianity*, Webb admits to a severe case of “Mormon envy.”⁵ Webb’s description of this syndrome is salutary because it applies to so many Gentiles throughout academia who have been drawn to Mormonism’s distinctive history, its sense of community, and its seemingly relentless optimism. But Webb’s “Mormon envy” is primarily intellectual—after all, for Mormons, matter does, indeed, matter.

Mormon Christianity’s intellectual trajectory is given orientation by Webb’s consideration of Greek thinkers who placed metaphysics at the center of their philosophical systems: Plato who in spite of his privileging of the immaterial realm, sought “to bridge the gulf between spirit and matter” and Plotinus who “taught that life begins with the One and involves a descent into the material world.”⁶ But most compelling for Webb are the neo-Platonists—figures such as Imbalichus and Marsilio Fincino—who turned to “magic” and “ritual” to conceptualize and forge

4. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Kindle Edition.

5. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, chapter 1.

6. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 64, location 990; 66, location 1034.

a closer relationship between humans and the divine.⁷ While he makes it clear that Joseph Smith was certainly no neo-Platonist, Webb nonetheless observes that Smith affirmed the “gifted character of rituals and the correlation between closeness to God and moral transformation.”⁸ That Joseph Smith dabbled in folk magic and divination suggests not puzzlement, but more than a hint of divine providence.

Materiality and spirituality, with human and divine embodiment as their correlates, connect Catholicism and Mormonism in unexpected ways that allow both to complement and correct each other. Webb centers his reflections on the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation that articulates how Christ is sacramentally present—body, soul, and divinity—under the external appearances of bread and wine when they are consecrated by the priest during the Catholic mass. Webb quite rightly points out the difficulty that many Catholics have with the Mormon practices of partaking of the sacrament as water, not wine, in a way that does not seem similar to reverential reception of communion in a Catholic context.⁹ But Webb encourages both Catholics and Mormons to look beyond superficial differences in ritualization to appreciate how both Catholicism and Mormonism believe that transubstantiation, in the sense of the joining of the material and spiritual, lies at the center of the human experience of the divine. Accordingly, Catholicism can teach Mormonism how this joining of the material and spiritual is fundamentally Christological in character.¹⁰ For its part, Mormonism can help Catholicism avoid a kind of hyper-ritualization in which the focus on transubstantiation during the Catholic mass effectively prevents a broader appreciation of how the material and the spiritual come together in the totality of God’s creation.¹¹

7. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 68, loc. 1059.

8. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 72, loc. 1123.

9. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 78, loc. 1215.

10. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 167, loc. 2526.

11. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 81, loc. 1254.

Webb is not beyond criticizing what he regards as Mormonism's "excesses." He is no proponent of polygamy and argues that Brigham Young, in particular, was guilty of theological overreach. In Webb's view, Mormonism still needs to contend with its conception of God as "master of matter" and how that relates to eternal law, as well as resolve the very real tension in the affirmation that matter is both chaotic and good.¹² Most fundamentally, Mormonism needs to consider much more carefully how divinization works when matter is considered to be eternal and "thus, relatively speaking, unchanging" while humans themselves, as material beings, undergo substantial changes.¹³

Such "aporias" notwithstanding, Webb does argue that Mormonism untangles some crucial theological questions that conventional Christianity still finds challenging. The first question concerns why Christ's body experienced very little corruption or putrefaction while entombed. Since Mormons believe we have spiritual bodies in addition to physical bodies (though both are material), Webb contends that it is plausible that Christ's flesh was of a significantly higher order than normal human flesh, even though it still was material.¹⁴ The second question Mormonism helps answer concerns the process of transubstantiation. Webb appears to argue that Catholic theology reached an impasse with regard to the specific mechanisms of transubstantiation and finally rested with an understanding of God's omnipotence in which anything and everything is within God's power to accomplish—no matter how contradictory it might seem.¹⁵ By contrast, Mormonism's robust and sophisticated materialism allows an unlikely partnership with quantum physics that does not confine matter—and what it can become—within the parameters of classical physics. Through this discussion, Mormon metaphysics becomes a complement and corrective to classical Catholic

12. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 210, loc. 3196.

13. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 210, loc. 3181.

14. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 194, loc. 2943.

15. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 200, loc. 3010.

metaphysical theories associated with the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and his retrieval and appropriation of Aristoteleanism. But perhaps more provocatively, Webb shows us how Mormonism has a firm intellectual foundation that would allow LDS philosophers to join physicists and other academics on the cutting edge of contemporary investigations about what matter is, what it can be, and why it matters.

I think it's fair to say that many Catholic theologians and philosophers would find Webb's discussion interesting, but also highly idiosyncratic and perhaps even lacking in rigor. Webb takes Mormon thought seriously and what emerges is a far more complex, and nuanced appreciation of the LDS tradition. But in his enthusiasm to pursue interesting and unexpected connections between Catholicism and Mormonism, Webb seems to oversimplify not only Catholic thinking about subjects like transubstantiation but also contemporary scientific thought that demands a mastery of mathematics and technical language not often gained by scholars whose primary training has been in divinity schools, not laboratories. But *Mormon Christianity* is all about breaking down boundaries. Webb provides a philosophical bridge or plumb line that connects Christian understandings of materiality and immateriality so that the boundary between Catholicism and Mormonism itself becomes permeable. Likewise, in Webb's intellectual excursions, religious reflection and scientific inquiry assume co-equal roles as disciplines that have something important to say—and discover—about the world and human life, in all their complexity.

A fine example of the dialogue of Stephen Webb's commitment to Mormon/Catholic dialogue can be found in *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation*, a series of discussions between Webb and BYU professor of religion, Alonzo L. Gaskill.¹⁶ While intellectually substantive throughout, *Catholic and Mormon* also preserves an almost informal style of back and forth that makes it profitable reading even to those who

16. Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Kindle Edition

might be intimidated by Webb and Gaskill's deep knowledge of Christian philosophy and theology. Together, Webb and Gaskill discuss the role of authority in the Catholic and Mormon traditions, and comment upon other salient issues such as revelation, ritual, soul, and, of course, matter. Both scholars have a robust understanding of how Mormonism and Catholicism can contribute not only to contemporary discussions concerning ethics or personal growth, but also to investigations that probe how and why the world works—or does not work—as it does. Both Webb and Gaskill resist attempts to place religion in a conceptual box in which it remains master of an increasingly circumscribed intellectual domain. Given this intent, perhaps a more provocative, and slightly more accurate, title of their discussion could have been *Mormonism and Catholicism Unbound*. Indeed, as careful scholars and skilled interlocutors, Stephen Webb and Alzono Gaskill show us that when Catholics and Mormons take their traditions seriously, a broader horizon emerges that reclaims religion as an overarching frame for human inquiry and intellectual exploration.

It is difficult to choose which section of Mormon and Catholic is the most thought provoking. But Webb and Gaskill's discussion of "Mary" drew me in the most fully, precisely because I both agreed and disagreed with their approach so strongly. Catholicism and Mormonism have strong things to say about gender: for both traditions, family and marriage are central, and the distinctions between men and women are considered to be inscribed in God's plan for creation. Both Webb and Gaskill draw attention to the central role of what could be called the divine feminine or "the goddess problem" in both Mormonism and Catholicism—although neither Mary or Heavenly Mother are "divine" in the conventional or theological sense for Catholics and Mormons, respectively.¹⁷ Through Webb and Gaskill's back and forth, seemingly idiosyncratic or even embarrassing Catholic and Mormon understandings of Mary—from

17. Webb and Gaskill *Catholic and Mormon*, 50. Kindle Edition.

the Catholic belief that Mary was “assumed body and soul into heaven,” to the Mormon understanding that Mary and Heavenly Father quite intimately joined together—can be seen as ways to affirm the “feminine side to the divine,” the significance of the human body, and the importance of women as women.¹⁸ But also noticeable in their discussion is a failure to reference the voices of Mormon and Catholic women as well as an apparent unwillingness to seriously engage issues of patriarchy, for it is also true that the lived experience of Mormonism and Catholicism can raise challenges and cause pain for women in a way that seems to belie the irenic and positive view of femininity or womanhood in both traditions.

In surveying Stephen Webb’s discourse about and with Mormonism, I am reminded—to inartfully reference 1 Nephi 1:1—that while I was “taught somewhat in the learning of” Christian traditions of metaphysical inquiry, philosophy could never take me to the places I wanted to go spiritually and intellectually. I am not convinced that Catholic or Mormon thought—separately or together—can do all that Webb believed they could do, especially when set alongside contemporary speculation in the sciences. While I see Catholicism and Mormonism as surprisingly complementary in many respects and, like Stephen Webb, have a serious case of “Mormon envy,” I am more concerned with how Catholics and Mormons can share their experiences of Jesus so that we can more fully understand God’s presence in the world and join together to make that world a better place. But even as I struggled with some of its more extravagant speculations, Stephen Webb’s work allowed me to see that one cannot ignore the intellectual and theological aspects of Catholicism and Mormonism when thinking about possibilities for substantive dialogue and cooperation. Indeed, Webb would argue that my reluctance to push Catholicism and Mormonism’s metaphysical claims is the sign of someone who has given up the fight against both modernity and post-modernity—the sign of someone who is resigned

18. Webb and Gaskill *Catholic and Mormon*, 55; 60. Kindle Edition.

to religion's truncated place in contemporary culture. He would also surely press the point that in order for Catholics and Mormonism to come together to make the world a better place, there needs to be a clear and fulsome intellectual understanding of what the world actually is, and why it is important.

Two weeks before his death, *First Things* published what came to be Stephen Webb's last essay for a broad scholarly audience. In "God of the Depressed," Webb writes about how difficult it is for Christians to speak of depression, and why it is a "befuddling" malady that church leaders and theologians reference as infrequently as they do hell.¹⁹ Webb concludes his reflections by recalling the experience of Christ fasting in the wilderness and the "hiddenness" of much of Jesus' ministry:

He also spent many years hidden from public view, his mission kept secret, his life so obscure that the Gospels tell us nothing about them. He had a long time of waiting, and he knew what awaited him. It is this time of hiddenness, I think, that most captures the depressant's emotional state. The depressed wait for the long nights to end and the anguish to subside. The depressed, like Jesus during his so-called lost years, are hidden from sight, waiting for their lives to begin.²⁰

"God of the Depressed" is insightful and moving. And it also reveals what I think was a fundamental tension in Stephen Webb's scholarly work. For him, a metaphysic of materiality was not simply an intellectually pleasurable puzzle, but a necessary foundation on which to ground the Christian expectation that we will see God face to face. It is striking then that his discussions of materiality are usually advanced through almost immaterial academic abstractions—from considerations of Monophysitism to the Higgs Boson particle. Although he never refers to himself or to his own experiences in "God of the Depressed," reading between the lines of academic prose, it is clear that the powerful intellectual

19. Stephen H. Webb, "God of the Depressed," *First Things*, Feb. 19, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/02/god-of-the-depressed>.

20. Ibid.

content of his scholarly work proceeded from a spirituality that knew, understood, and felt God's presence—as well as God's apparent absence.

When Stephen Webb looked at Mormons, he saw people “too happy to be Christian.”²¹ He drew upon William James' well known typology to argue that Mormonism was a religion of “healthy-mindedness,” emphasizing optimism and joy, as opposed to a religion of the “sick soul,” like Catholicism, that emphasizes original sin and suffering.²² Indeed, Mormonism, to an outside observer or to a newly baptized Latter-day Saint, might indeed seem to be a religion of the healthy minded: all is eternal progression, the family endures forever, and God is close. But I wish Stephen Webb had considered the testimonies and imaginings of those who reveal the complex and sometimes conflicted core of LDS experience: Kristin Haglund and her courageous discussions of Mormon feminism and her own struggles with depression; Christopher Bigelow and the members of *The Sugar Beet* who reveal a transgressive side to the Mormon psyche; Dan Wotherspoon, whose *Mormon Matters* podcast embraces an unflinching realism and openness to self-investigation.²³ Their voices affirm time and time again that Mormons, too, feel the heaviness of life and reach out for the touch of a “God who weeps.”²⁴

Mormonism may be about eternal optimism in a healthy-minded sense, but it is also about labor, about work that extends beyond the vale of death. Mormonism is about a God who “cannot, will not, allow

21. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 49, loc. 759.

22. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 43, loc. 694.

23. See “Episode 25: An Interview with Kristine Haglund,” *Feminist Mormon Housewives Podcast* (Dec. 10, 2012) <http://feministmormonhousewivespodcast.org/episode-24-an-interview-with-kristine-haglund/>; Christopher Bigelow, *Kindred Spirits* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Press, 2007); Paul Allen, *The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer: Latter-day News, Advice, and Opinion* (Pince Nez Press, 2006); *Mormon Matters: A Weekly Podcast Exploring Mormon Culture and Current Events* <http://www.mormonmatters.org/>.

24. See Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012).

moral or ethical imperfection in any degree whatsoever to dwell in his presence” as Stephen E. Robinson writes in his otherwise quite optimistic book, *Believing Christ*.²⁵ This moral or ethical perfectionism can exact a heavy price as exemplified in the despair and self-harm that shapes the tortured life of Frank Windham, the fictional protagonist of Levi Peterson’s *The Backslider*.²⁶ While Joseph Smith sought to comfort his fellow Mormons in the King Follett discourse by speaking of the “everlasting burnings of exaltation,” one cannot help but think that fire causes excruciating pain as it consumes and cleanses.²⁷

Perhaps Stephen Webb’s emphasis on materiality was a response to the experience of divine absence: a way of affirming how there is substance in what appears to be empty. Those of us who suffer—or have suffered—from depression feel an internal emptiness, a “sick-soul” sense of personal nothingness that resists even the most sustained and “healthy-minded” efforts of support and persuasion. But through the work of Stephen Webb, Catholics and Mormons who fall into the abyss of depression may be able to realize that Jesus does have a real, tangible, presence alongside them. I wish I had known Stephen Webb and I wish that his life had been longer. But when Catholics and Mormons together reflect on the fullness of his short life and all it contained, we can more fully appreciate and understand how and why God did share Stephen Webb’s tears as He now surely shares ours.

25. Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1992), loc. 121, Kindle Edition.

26. Levi Peterson, *The Backslider* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986/2012), Kindle Edition.

27. Joseph Smith, “The King Follett Sermon,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1971, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng>.