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EDITOR'S NOTE

In 2008, the editorial board of Element issued a call for student submissions with the offer of modest awards for winning articles. The primary objective of the project has been to promote the academic study of Mormon theology and philosophy among the younger generation of scholars. We were delighted with the quality of submissions and are pleased to publish this issue as a collection of exemplary student work. All submissions were blind reviewed by the SMPT Executive Committee.

The winning article was Deidre Green's "Got Compassion: A Critique of Blake Ostler's Theory of Atonement." Ms. Green is a doctoral student at Claremont Graduate University in the Women's Studies in Religion program. She received her Master of Arts in Religion at Yale Divinity School 2007 and is pursuing research in feminist theology and related areas. Congratulations are due to all of the student contributors for their outstanding work.

Got Compassion?
A Critique of Blake Ostler's
Theory of Atonement

by Deidre Green

I n the second volume in his series on Mormon thought, Blake Ostler proposes a "compassion theory" of atonement. The dynamic of the atonement, he argues, effects intimacy and reconciliation by engendering compassion, which Ostler describes as "a life shared in union where we are moved by our love for each other."[1] Compassion is said to be mutual—humans share in Christ's suffering and he in theirs "that we might share also in the unsurpassable joy of each other's lives."[2] However, from the perspective of feminist theology, the central place of violence and suffering in his account raises important concerns. While the compassion theory resonates with feminist thought in its emphasis on mutuality and solidarity, it also magnifies themes long criticized by feminist theologians.[3] It also renders problematic the positive adaptation of the atonement expressed in much of Mormon thought, which has tended away from themes of paternal violence. Ostler's account, however, re-emphasizes suffering in divine-human relations in ways that fall back into traditional theological problems with atonement. This paper will examine these issues from both LDS and feminist theological perspectives.

I. OSTLER'S COMPASSION THEORY

Blake Ostler emphasizes the importance of mutuality and reciprocity that is fostered in divine-human relations through Christ's atonement. He states: "The compassion theory that is inspired by LDS scriptures . . . focuses not merely on how we are reconciled to God but also on how he is reconciled to us."[4] He sets out to explicate his theory by asserting that the purpose of the atonement is to "bring about the bowels of mercy" so that "God is moved with compassion for us and we are moved with gratitude to trust him by opening our hearts to him."[5] This understanding of a mutual, reciprocal relation between humans and deity is both true to Latter-day Saint thought and serves as motivation for humans to enter into redemptive relation with God. It can also situate itself comfortably among feminist theologies. What is positive in Ostler's theory, however, is overshadowed by his solution to the problems of double punishment and absolute foreknowledge. Ostler describes the problem of double punishment as punishment for the same sin being suffered by both the individual sinner and Christ; on Ostler's view this problem is entailed by an understanding of atonement in which Christ has already suffered for all sins whether or not each individual repents. The problem of absolute foreknowledge operates in his theory because real human freedom circumscribes God's ability to know the future, and therefore God cannot know ahead of time which sins agents will repent of and which they will not. While double punishment and absolute foreknowledge have been theologically problematic positions, Ostler's response to these issues creates further challenges from feminist and LDS perspectives. While LDS thought maintains the atonement as a central aspect of its theology, it downplays the violence, death, and sadomasochism of more traditional views of atonement in favor of an emphasis on life, joy, and resurrection. Ostler's theory, however, brings the problem of suffering back to the fore.

On the issue of Christ taking on vicarious punishment for human sin, Ostler aligns himself with Dennis Potter's work, which attempts to demonstrate that a penal substitution theory of atonement is unjust. The key passage for Potter is Alma 34:11-12.

> Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another. Now, if a man murdereth, behold will our law, which is just, take the life of his brother? I say unto you, Nay. But the law requireth the life of him who hath murdered; therefore

there can be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world.

The implication is that because the life of one who murders is required to satisfy justice, "infinite atonement" must not refer to Christ paying for our sins. Potter argues that LDS scripture calls for the life of one who murders—scripture does not say that the law "requires the life of the one who murders *or the life an infinite God.*"[6] According to Potter's innocence principle, which states that an innocent person cannot suffer punishment for a guilty person, God cannot justly allow Christ to pay for the sins of human persons.

Ostler agrees with Potter, critiquing penal substitution theory on the grounds that it ironically punishes the only person who does not merit punishment, and allows those who who are deserving to get off "scot-free." Penal substitution theory "assumes that the humans who deserve to be punished escape it while the only person in the history of the world who does not deserve punishment is punished in our place."[7] Ostler clearly affirms that an innocent Christ taking punishment for sin in the stead of culpable human beings is unequivocally unjust.[8] Ostler cannot tolerate this lack of justice in his theory of atonement and therefore asserts: "The compassion theory of atonement holds that Christ does not suffer as a substitute for us or as one who becomes guilty and receives deserved punishment in our place."[9] Without a substitutionary theory of atonement, it cannot be said that Christ takes our sin upon him.

It is a concern that both Ostler and Potter discuss only retributive justice reminiscent of Deuteronomy 19:21: "And thine eye shall not pity; *but* life *shall go* for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." They equivocate between this notion of justice operative in Alma 34 and our modern sensibilities about legal justice. They fail to consider that much legal prescription is less about retribution and more about preempting recidivism. For example, Megan's law is not just as retribution, but is (arguably) just on the grounds that there is a high rate of recidivism among pedophiles. Further, their discussion does not account for contemporary debate over whether the death penalty serves as a fitting punishment for those who rape children. Recidivism may or may not come into play in atonement and soteriology; however, while Ostler and Potter take cue from Amulek in speaking about retributive justice, it is problematic to simply adapt his discussion to contemporary ideas of justice without acknowledging this distinction.

Ostler elaborates the point that it is not sin, not moral culpability, for which Christ suffers. Rather, Christ receives into himself the pain we are

willing to release through repentance:

> The compassion theory of the Atonement does not assert that our sins are transferred to Christ in the sense that our moral culpability becomes his. Rather, the pain that arises from our sinful conduct and ways of being in the world is transferred to Christ. . . . [T]he transfer is real, but it is *not* a transfer of moral culpability *which is personal by its very nature.*[10]

It is clear that Christ takes our pain upon him, rather than our guilt. It remains unclear, however, that moral culpability is "personal by its very nature" in a way that the pain arising from sinful conduct is not. Ostler claims: "the notion of transferring the pain for our sins is essential to the LDS claim of atonement."[11] What is the "pain for our sins" other than guilt? In an LDS view Christ suffers for pains *other than* pains for our sins, and transfer of these pains need not imply a transfer of moral culpability.[12] The "pain for our sins," however, seems to be precisely pointing toward the issue of guilt which implies moral culpability. Nevertheless, Ostler affirms that what is transferred to Christ "is not guilt or culpability but the pain for sin that we would otherwise suffer. . . . When we repent, what we have been holding back and refused to give is shared in union with Christ."[13] Once persons repent, they no longer need to carry their pain alone, but can release it and share it with Christ.

II. THE COMPASSION THEORY
AND DOUBLE PUNISHMENT

If penal substitution presents problems for a contemporary concept of justice, the problem of double punishment does so to an even greater degree. For Ostler, "it would be unjust if suffering were doubled so that I suffer for my sins and Christ suffers as a result of my sins also."[14] In order to avoid this problem, he limits the suffering of Christ. Rather than suffering for all sin, Christ only suffers as a consequence of the sins *for which individuals repent.* Conversely, individuals must suffer for any of their own sins of which they do not repent. This dynamic is necessitated by the notion of justice on which Ostler relies. While double punishment significantly challenges the concept of justice, it could prove efficacious in motivating persons to repent. Since Ostler's theory focuses on compassion, it might allow for the possibility that when a person believes that Christ

has already suffered for her sins, she may be motivated to repent by the desire not to allow that previous suffering to go in vain. Ostler's solution, presented in order to preserve justice, fails to recognize how the concept of double punishment could serve as impetus for repentance for a compassionate person.

To avoid double punishment, Ostler depicts a transference of suffering from the human individual to Christ that occurs perpetually in the act of repentance. He explains:

> If we refuse to let go of our past histories and the pain that arises from our sins, we will continue to experience that pain. If we let go of that pain; however, then Christ experiences the very pain that we release, but we no longer have to.[15]

Christ is not punished for our sins, nor does he vicariously take on our guilt; rather, he "suffers the *pain* of our sins that we will feel if we don't repent."[16] Christ does not necessarily suffer for all sins, but he will suffer for each and every sin one commits *when* one repents of it.

In order to accommodate a denial of absolute foreknowledge, Ostler must deny that Christ's suffering is totalized in Gethsemane and on the cross. Because Christ can only suffer for the sins of which one repents, and cannot have prior knowledge of individual acts of repentance, suffering for all sin could not take place in Gethsemane or on the cross. As a result, Ostler reinterprets what the concept of "infinite atonement" might mean. He redefines this concept to mean that "there is no limit or merciful threshold to the amount and degree of Christ's suffering for our sins." Ostler continues that Christ's suffering is "magnified and literally unlimited."[17] In order to preserve justice and a robust notion of agency, he depicts Christ's suffering as indefinite both in duration and amount.

In the compassion theory, not only is Christ's suffering unlimited, it occurs in response to the repentance of human agents *in real time* to evade the related problems of absolute foreknowledge and backward causation.[18] Ostler argues that a person's repentance in the here and now cannot cause Christ pain in the past; he deals with this problem by asserting that Christ's atonement is "not merely something that occurs in a single moment."[19] Instead of the single event of suffering which traditional Christianity and Mormonism propose, in Ostler's theory "atonement becomes God's way of being in the world."[20] Given that Ostler equivocates between suffering and atonement, it would seem that Christ's suffering characterizes his

perpetual way of being:

> Atonement . . . is therefore the way that Christ seeks to relate to us at all times and in all places. Atonement is God's way of being with us. Atonement defines the way that God loves us. Atonement is the way that divine persons relate to one another. In fact, atonement is the basis of divine life and partaking of the divine nature.[21]

It is difficult to understand why divine, maximally powerful beings would seek at all times to relate to human beings through a transference of suffering. Yet Ostler deems this a "key concept" of his compassion theory. Christ's suffering is not limited to Gethsemane and the cross, culminating in a triumphant resurrection; rather, "atonement is God's way of being in relationship with the world" and as such is not limited to Christ's suffering in Gethsemane and the cross. What transpired in Gethsemane and on the cross, for Ostler, is an initial step in reconciliation between humans and the divine. This first move is followed by a perpetual, perhaps infinite, experience of human pain. Because Christ's entire existence is characterized as reconciliation and love, Christ's suffering is ongoing and indefinite so that the atonement is the way that God always relates to human beings "in every moment."[22] What is problematic above and beyond the fact that Christ's suffering is perpetual, is that it is a result not of human sin per se, but of human repentance. In the act of doing precisely what God has commanded humans to do—and precisely what prophets have implored them to do—they cause God pain. Since obedience to God is understood as an act of love, this entails that love for God results in the infliction of pain upon God.

There is a better way around the problem of God's limited foreknowledge by relying on LDS scripture. In Doctrine and Covenants 122, God allays Joseph Smith's fears regarding his enemies by explaining that they are limited in the amount of harm they can do to him: "Hold on thy way, and the priesthood shall remain with thee; for their bounds are set, they cannot pass. Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not what man can do" (v. 9). God affirms that Smith's opponents can only sin against him within bounds set—or at least acknowledged—by the Lord. That God actively limits human agency is stated elsewhere in the LDS canon, which teaches that personal righteousness prevents harm from others.[23] Joseph Smith surmised of his own experience: "I suspect that my Heavenly Father has decreed that the Missourians shall not get me into their power."[24] A final example comes from a revelation promising that the translation of the Book

of Mormon would not be stymied by opposing forces: "no power shall be able to take it away out of your hands, for it is the work of God" (D&C 8:8). While for Ostler a negation of absolute foreknowledge precludes an infinite atonement being wrought at a particular historical moment, in order to be true to LDS scripture, he must allow the possibility that there is an upper limit to the amount of sin that individuals can commit. If this is so, then there is some maximal level of collective sin of which God is aware and for which Christ could have atoned at a particular moment in the past.

Ostler does not acknowledge this possibility, but tacitly concedes the apparent egregiousness of his formulation of pain and suffering in the atonement by equivocating about the temporal duration of Christ's suffering. Is it truly ongoing or was it finished in Gethsemane and on the cross? Consider the following passage:

> This view of atonement presupposes that the pain Christ feels in Gethsemane is occasioned by sharing our experience—by being united with us in shared life. LDS scriptures claim that Christ literally feels our pain because the real energy of pain for sins that he takes into himself is carried by him to the cross where it is extinguished in the death of Christ's flesh on the cross.[25]

Here, Ostler appears inconsistent in order to preserve a more humane way of dealing with atonement. That the pain for sins is extinguished in the death of Christ's flesh on the cross is contrary to the idea that there is no absolute foreknowledge, no backward causation, and that atonement is perpetual. Ostler claims that it is "the energy of sin" that died with Christ's mortal body.[26] He further explains that "in this moment of joining the pain of the flesh and mortal existence with the divine knowledge that includes experience of every human experience, Christ *became aware* of the fullness of human pain" so that Christ's "compassion and love are completed and culminate on the cross."[27] Christ is not in fact experiencing all human suffering but is "aware" of it because he is privy to "divine knowledge." Ostler's theory simultaneously allows agents to choose whether or not to transfer their pains to Christ and claims that these pains are extinguished in Christ's flesh on the cross. Ostler may be speaking metaphorically here, but, if so, the metaphor is misleading as it attempts to locate Christ's suffering in the historical past. Further, it calls into question the necessity of Christ's mortal suffering if part of this suffering is the result of "divine knowledge" rather than mortal experience.

Also troublesome is the claim that human persons inflict pain on Christ by

failing to live the law of love. "We all make Christ suffer with unbearable pain because we fail to live the law of love."[28] Christ suffers when we sin, i.e. fail to live the law of love, yet Christ does not suffer until we repent, i.e. succeed in living the law of love by working toward reconciliation and obedience to Christ who proclaims, "if ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15) and, "ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14). It seems that obeying the commandment to repent should manifest love not through *transference of suffering*, but through *mutual joy*. Ostler points to this, but only ultimately after suffering. Repentance ought to be motivated by the alleviation of not only our own suffering, but that of God and Christ as well. Otherwise repentance is a matter of forfeiting self-inflicted pain in order to inflict pain on another. It is not clear how such behavior—or even the desire for such behavior—could be construed as Christ-like or compassionate.

Ostler deals with the problem of inflicting pain on Christ by explaining that after Christ experiences the pain, he "processes" it, rather than holding on to it indefinitely. He affirms that a major concept of his compassion theory is that "the painful energy of sin that we release through repentance causes real pain when Christ receives it into his life through the union of his life with our life in us."[29] The energy of our sin is transferred from our flesh to Christ's and he "'processes' that pain through the light of his love. He feels the pain of the sins that we have committed because the life-energy that we share with him is painful."[30] Ostler makes this phenomenon appear relatively innocuous; Christ feels the pain and then processes it. This works such that, for Ostler, "the Atonement is God's act of granting his light to us as a sheer gift in every moment."[31] But if LDS scriptures are accurate, this suffering is immense; and if Ostler's theory is accurate, this suffering is caused by human agents in the very act of attempting to repent and be reconciled to God, an action that should work to demonstrate their love for God.

Ostler maintains that reciprocal reconciliation is at the heart of the compassion theory of atonement. The atonement "not only reconciles us to God, but also reconciles God to us." Reconciliation results from human choice to be in relation with God and from God's choice to be in relation with humans. "In the Atonement [Christ] not only becomes what we are, but he also brings us to be what he is. Atonement thus unites us and reconciles our alienation that we have freely chosen."[32] It is not clear why human agents would be motivated to become what Christ is if this means perpetual suffering that occurs as a result of others' desires for intimacy and reconciliation. Nor is it clear that human agents do, or can, become like Christ by inflicting pain on another being, namely Christ himself.

Ostler maintains, however, that his theory of atonement can incite persons to repent. For Ostler, witnessing the suffering Christ ought to move us with compassion to be in relation with him. His argument would make more sense if that relation allowed us to alleviate—not cause—divine suffering in both an immediate and ultimate sense. Instead, Ostler states:

> When we truly realize that God himself has become what we are and that he loves us so much that he is willing to be in relationship with us even though it causes him extensive and intense suffering, we can be persuaded by his compassion for us to soften our hearts and open up to receive him. His compassion for us begets our compassion for him. When we open to him, we move beyond empathetic love to compassionate love wherein we live our lives in each other because we share the union of life.[33]

It does seem that from one aspect of the LDS perspective, Christ suffers in order to experience solidarity with human beings and that human individuals at times experience suffering for the purpose of empathizing with the suffering Christ. This points to the fact that suffering is a natural part of both human and divine realities and that it simply cannot be avoided. Scripture states that Christ "descended below all things, …that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth" (D&C 88:5-6). In order to be intimately related to creation, Christ "descended below all things." The familiar text of Alma 7 echoes this point: "And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind…that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people" (v.11-12). Conversely, LDS scripture is clear that human beings ought not to expect to endure less than Christ did. "The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?" (D&C 122:8). Experiencing suffering helps individuals appreciate what Christ did for them and allows them to relate their own sufferings to his.

The economy of suffering that Ostler depicts seems more fitting when viewed in this light. Suffering is inherent in both divine and mundane spheres. Human suffering can be transferred to Christ who then experiences it before converting it into light. Ostler claims that "the atonement is God's response to the problem of evil."[34] The economy of suffering that Ostler portrays can only be a response to the problem of evil if he works within a finitist theology, as does Potter.[35] This view seems to suit Ostler who claims that God is constrained to feel our pain: "God *cannot* forgive us and enter into union with us without taking our lives into his and in so doing feel the pain that

we have released through repentance."[36] Ostler claims that God's constraint in this matter is not placed upon him by justice, but by "the nature of loving forgiveness."[37] A view of loving forgiveness in which the transference of pain is necessary is problematic in itself; further, Ostler's theory seems to stand in opposition to important passages of LDS scripture on this point. Ostler does not offer textual support for this assertion, most likely because in the LDS canon God describes divine forgiveness in volitional terms.

Ostler's theory contradicts other aspects of LDS scripture. Ostler reiterates that we suffer for the sins of which we do not repent. "Christ suffers for us, because of us, and with us . . . only those who repent and thereby let go of the past escape suffering; otherwise, if we refuse to repent, we will suffer for our own sins."[38] While this complements Ostler's understanding of justice, it does not sit well with LDS scripture on experiential knowledge of suffering. Doctrine and Covenants 19 states:

> Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest…your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; But if they would not they must suffer even as I. (v.15-17)

The canon, to which Ostler wants to give primacy, states that Christ has already suffered for our sins and that we will suffer for them *in futurity* if we do not repent of them while in mortality. Scripture is clear that this is a suffering we have *not yet experienced* and that we *cannot yet comprehend.* Yet Ostler claims that Christ feels our pain through our volitional transference. "LDS scriptures claim that this transfer is real and not merely metaphorical. He feels the pain of our sins that we release through repentance."[39] Ostler is correct that the transfer is real, but not that it happens in real-time in the act of repentance. Moreover, section 19 implies that God does not consider double punishment unjust.

Ostler makes the transference of pain in repentance all the more violent by stating "The *key* concept of the compassion theory of atonement is that the release of the energy of life effected through repentance is symbolized in blood sacrifice."[40] Again, Ostler confuses the temporal order of events in order to make his position less grotesque and morally problematic. "The gift of his life to us is represented in the life-blood spilled in Gethsemane and on the cross. He has *already* given his gift. However, he *now* asks for our lives to be given back to him, represented by giving him our hearts."[41] Giving Christ

our hearts equates to giving Christ our pain. "The 'life energy' of our sins that we release is transferred to him, and it causes pain when Christ accepts it into his life."[42] It should be clear at this point that even Ostler is discomfited by the atonement theory he presents. This is not without good reason since his "compassion theory" 1) fails to engender compassion that does not entail a sort of emotional sadism, 2) does not make moral or logical sense without equivocation, and 3) does not remain true to the Latter-day Saint canon. Further, it undoes Mormonism's positive move away from emphasizing the violence of atonement. Discussion of this final point will be facilitated through a comparison with feminist theology.

III. THE COMPASSION THEORY AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Feminists have critiqued the fascination with death and suffering present in patriarchal religions. Carol Christ, for example, summarizes the work of Valerie Saiving and Grace Jantzen, who each identify the emphasis of Western male philosophers and theologians upon death and immortality, elucidating that their emphasis came about because they "despised 'natality,' birth and life."[43] Saiving articulates that the life/death dualism is the source of all other dualisms, including that of male/female. Christ picks up where Saiving leaves off in explaining the etiology of this fundamental dualism: "Though Saiving does not say so explicitly, this can be true only if the fear of death is a consequence of a rejection of life in the body, life that comes through the body of the mother."[44] This is consistent with Christ's position that the theological mistakes of traditional Christianity all have their root in the rejection, denial, and suppression of the female body.[45] Focus on death and suffering bears clear consequences for women whose bodies are those most closely associated with natality.

Compassion theory focuses away from Jesus' death event and concentrates on a pattern of ongoing empathic suffering in solidarity – that is, it focuses on Jesus' post-mortal life as an ongoing participation in human life. It holds to a perpetual string of events of less intense suffering. In other words, it presents a "necrophilic" worldview – that is, focusing on death and suffering – rather than one of natality – focusing on the miracle of birth, human possibility, and freedom.[46] This effectively works to reinforce the violent ground of patriarchal religion, against which Jantzen warns. "If we do not change the ground . . . we are reinforcing it; and if . . . that ground is necrophilic, then reinforcing it has deadly consequences."[47] Ostler's theory of atonement proves

more problematic than traditional views by perpetuating divine suffering and thereby encouraging humans' self-imposed suffering.

While this aspect of Ostler's work is at odds with feminism, his positive focus on overcoming alienation, divine empathy with human suffering, and the perpetual transfer of human pathos to deity resonates with various feminist perspectives on Christology. One overlap is with Ivone Gebara's work to decenter Christ's suffering. Gebara, while not denying the intense suffering of Christ, wishes to decenter Christ's suffering in order to acknowledge the suffering of all persons. Gebara claims that when "the centrality of the cross" is "absolutized on a theoretical and practical level, [it] becomes a way to exclude other sufferings."[48] While the compassion theory maintains that Christ is the arch-sufferer, it decenters the suffering of Gethsemane and the cross. According to Ostler, the scriptures focus on Gethsemane and the cross simply because there "we see the temporal instance of atonement in its fullness manifested in Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection . . . though it is only one experience of atoning pain among others that Christ experienced."[49] Further, on this view, individuals can choose to spare Christ's suffering by suffering for their own sins: "if we don't repent, we will suffer for our own sins."[50] While Ostler is inconsistent about this, logically his view allows for the possibility that human individuals suffer in a way that is comparable to Christ's. This approach can aid recognition of everyday human sufferings by decentering the experience of Gethsemane and the cross, and making Christ's pain more directly relevant to mundane, quotidian experience through Ostler's temporal transference model. Further, recognizing that human suffering is already comparable to Christ's can discourage any human inclination to seek out unnecessary and superfluous suffering and sacrifice.

While suffering is an intrinsic part of human and divine lives and therefore ought to be recognized, it need not characterize human and divine *relations*. Feminists employ a hermeneutic of suspicion to religious rhetoric that overemphasizes the goodness of suffering since it ultimately works to subjugate women and other marginalized groups to structures of oppression by valorizing martyrdom and self-sacrifice. Gebara states that women have a special understanding of the crucified Christ because this image legitimizes their own suffering. "It is women who identify most with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. He validates their suffering and gives meaning to their lives."[51] Effectively reifying oppressive social structures, the Christian tradition has conflated love and suffering. "In Christian tradition love is identified with suffering, and this conjunction has penetrated deeply into Christian life and has often resulted in behavior far from liberating and supportive."[52] This

tendency is obvious in Ostler's discussion of 1 Nephi 19:9 which reads that "they spit upon him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his longsuffering towards the children of men." From this passage Ostler concludes that "the Book of Mormon focuses on Christ's entire mortal life as redemptive suffering and healing our alienation through his suffering love." [53] He assumes that because Christ endures suffering at the hands of others that this suffering is naturally redemptive; Christ endures suffering at the hands of those he loves because he loves them, but how can one draw from this that such suffering is redemptive or that it works toward "healing our alienation through his suffering love"? Too often, women have understood their own suffering as intrinsically good and redemptive just as Ostler sees Christ's suffering in this way. With Gebara, I maintain that this dubious assumption has contributed to women's acceptance of their own systemic suffering. [54]

What is problematic with lifting up the crucifixion as the ultimate act of love is that it not only validates current suffering, but incites women to seek out unnecessary sacrifice. According to Gebara, "the theory of sacrifice has succeeded in encouraging in many women a kind of pleasure in suffering or even confusion between pleasure and sacrifice." [55] This confusion of joy, sacrifice, love and pain are manifest in Ostler's theory in which he confusingly moves back and forth between talking about Christ's suffering and mutual love and joy. For example: "When we let go, the energy of pain that has been dammed within our hearts is transferred to Christ, and he willingly accepts it as a necessary result of entering into loving union of life with us." [56] This confusion of pleasure and sacrifice operating in the compassion theory is especially problematic given LDS theology's orientation toward theosis. Latter-day Saints claim, with Jantzen and Luce Irigaray, that "our fundamental moral obligation is to become divine." [57] This being the case, Latter-day Saints must be able to see divinity as something other than a state of perpetual masochism. This is not difficult given the LDS canon, but is given Ostler's bleak picture of divine-human relations with regard to atonement.

Jantzen speaks extensively of the "deathly imaginary" that has prevailed in the Western theological tradition and proposes its replacement with an "imaginary of natality." [58] Jantzen illustrates that while philosophers have written tomes upon the problem of evil, they have been "deafeningly silent" on the issue of providing for the corporeal salvation of those who are starving, homeless, etc. She asserts that philosophy's loquacity on justification for evil juxtaposed with its taciturnity on providing temporal salvation serves as "a glaring example of its investment in necrophilia." [59] Gebara proclaims feminist theology's ability to step outside the sadomasochistic economy of suffering. "While not denying the

truth of the cross of Jesus and of all crosses, feminist theology contributes to the opening of life and thought to a sense of solidarity, in the cross and beyond it."[60] Our religious insights must accommodate suffering, but need not venerate and glorify it. Religion certainly need not confuse suffering with love and joy.

According to Jantzen, a feminist philosophy of religion must adopt a symbolism of natality that urges individuals toward their ultimate goal of becoming divine. "Taking the idea of natality seriously has direct . . . consequences for a shift in the imaginary." This natality "affirms the concreteness and embodied nature of human lives and experience, the material and discursive conditions within which subjects are formed and out of which a religious symbolic must emerge."[61] Jantzen takes care to clarify that this new imaginary must affirm life and fecundity as represented in male and female bodies. "It is only from within our gendered embodiment that the source and criteria of religious imagination can be drawn."[62] Latter-day Saint theology has done well to affirm bodies, both female and male, and to offer a theology of natality and procreativity. It has managed to maintain such a view alongside Christ's atonement by focusing on Christ's life and triumph over sin and death. For the most part, Latter-day Saint theology depicts Christ as one who has overcome suffering and sin and so is not only able to succor his people, but to set an example of attaining joyful and abundant life. Unfortunately, Ostler's depiction of atonement sets us back to a patriarchal, pre-restoration emphasis on suffering.

This is problematic for Ostler, who wants his theory to cultivate mutual compassion in persons and deity. The compassion theory claims that atonement is not just about changing our minds, but about changing our hearts.[63] "Repentance is a change of heart that results in a change of conduct and thus a change of consequences for our acts."[64] A change of heart should effect in human agents desire and commitment not to harm others. But on Ostler's trajectory, a change of heart entails allowing someone else to suffer so we do not have to. That repentance requires one to develop—or maintain—a willingness to inflict pain on another is morally repugnant. This problem is especially flagrant given Ostler's statement that "since one of the primary purposes of the Atonement is to motivate us to enter into a saving relationship with God, one of the purposes of Atonement is furthered by being inspired by it."[65] This should be the case, but Ostler's depiction of the atonement does not serve to inspire. The compassion theory, in avoiding the problem of double punishment, achieves a double failure—it fails in cultivating compassion in human beings and fails to inspire *compassionate* persons to repent. If Christ's atonement was, in part, about inspiring persons to repent, I submit that there are much better ways to accomplish that objective.

Ostler's emphasis on the inspiring nature of the atonement echoes moral theories of atonement, in which Christ's suffering is not necessary to satisfy justice or appease God's wrath, but rather to inspire human persons to repent and live morally. Eugene England embraces a moral theory of atonement but, in contrast to Ostler, denies a clear calculus of suffering. For England, it is the very fact that Christ's suffering does not add up, does not factor into a precise divine-human equation, that moves human agents to repent and reconcile *themselves to God.*[66]

> Christ's sacrificial love was not conditional upon our qualities, our repentance, anything; he expressed his love to us while we were yet in our sins—not *completing* the process of forgiveness, which depends on our response, but *initiating* it in a free act of mercy. This is a kind of love quite independent from the notion of justice. There is no *quid-pro-quo* about it. It is entirely unbalanced, unmerited, unrelated to the specific worthiness of the object . . . and that is precisely why it is redemptive.[67]

While England's theory of atonement emphasizes the suffering of Christ, it denies a one-to-one correspondence between human repentance and Christ's suffering. England affirms that Christ's suffering in Gethsemane and on the cross entailed a risk since there was no guarantee that such suffering would be made efficacious through the agentic response of human persons. For England, atonement "takes a risk, without calculation, on the possibility that man [sic] can realize his infinite worth."[68] What is inspiring for England is that the suffering work of Christ was performed independent of human choice to receive redemption and be reconciled to the divine.

IV. CONCLUSION

If Christ's suffering for an individual's sins does not occur until that individual repents, two problems arise. The first is that atonement becomes a matter of conscious and volitional sadism on the part of the repentant sinner; the second is that because of this, human individuals who themselves have compassion and empathy for Christ would be highly unmotivated to repent. If, as Ostler states, "the purpose of the Atonement is to overcome our alienation by creating compassion, a life shared in union where we are moved by our love for each other,"[69] then this object is largely subverted by creating a model in which human persons either selfishly and sadistically transfer their pain to Christ in an immediate sense, or choose to refrain from participating in repentance and

atonement for the sake of sparing Christ more suffering. This may be especially true for women who are socialized to place the feelings of others before their own and to choose to suffer themselves in order not to impose suffering on others. As Gebara explains, "Given the patriarchal character of our society, the notion of sacrifice as good has a more powerful effect on those on the lower rungs of the social ladder."[70] She identifies those on the lower rungs as women and the poor.[71] Compassionate persons in general, and women especially, may be inclined to harbor the pain of sin rather than inflict it on another. Feminist theologians observe that a woman who learns to embrace self-sacrifice as valuable may "find herself choosing to endure suffering because she has become convinced that through her pain another whom she loves will escape pain."[72] This may be a problem for many theories of atonement, but the problem is exacerbated in Ostler's theory. The question, then, is no longer "can a male savior save women?"[73] but rather, can women save a male savior? Such a notion is not only absurd from an LDS standpoint, but is also impossible on Ostler's view since Christ "suffers because we choose to be alienated from him."[74] The compassion theory, then, places agents in a dilemma in which they cause Christ to suffer both through repenting and choosing not to repent. This predicament ultimately renders the theory unhelpful, though aspects of his thought have redeeming value.

It is not clear on Ostler's view why the atonement of Christ is absolutely necessary, nor why Christ was uniquely able to perform it since atonement occurs both before and after Christ's incarnation.[75] An important part of LDS theology is that God the Father, who is embodied, suffers with humanity. This is most apparent in the Book of Moses where God weeps because his children fail to love one another and to "choose me, their Father" (Moses 7:33). Combining this reality with a disembodied Holy Spirit that knows all things (Alma 7:13), it is difficult to understand why Christ's atonement is necessary. This is further problematic given LDS belief in God's pre-deified state; if God was once a man, Christ's suffering as a mortal is unnecessary in order for God to have compassion for us. Ostler claims the atonement is something that we "witness" that softens us, opening us to God and moving us into relation with God. However, it is not clear that our pain could not just as easily be transferred to God the Father as it is to Christ, since there is no problem in Mormon theology with God the Father suffering.[76]

Furthermore, a God who weeps is more inspiring than Ostler's depiction of a suffering savior since presumably God's pain is mitigated when we repent. One is likely to feel more motivated to repent if one believes that doing so dries God's tears instead of causing Christ to bleed at every pore. Perhaps Enoch's

God who can be pacified and comforted through obedience is a step toward shifting our religious imaginary into a space where humans add to the joyful life of the divine rather than adding suffering to suffering, thereby "adding sin to sin."

Re-imagining the atonement itself in such terms is not too difficult within Mormon doctrine. Given the scriptures of the Restoration, one can presume that God can anticipate the upper bound of sin and suffering humans will experience individually and collectively. This does not require God's absolute foreknowledge, but only that God knows where human bounds are set. Christ suffers for the maximal amount of human sin. Christ's suffering is not unjust, since his suffering is volitional. As Jacob Morgan opines: "We all readily see that it was unjust to punish Christ for sins that he did not commit; but since he volunteered, this injustice is part of what makes his sacrifice so awe inspiring. . . . The fact that Christ volunteered does answer the problem of the injustice toward him."[77] Christ's volitional, maximal suffering is further just because atonement is necessary "according to the great plan of the Eternal God" and because Christ is uniquely qualified to offer this sacrifice. "For it is expedient that an atonement should be made . . . a great and last sacrifice . . . it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice….there can be nothing short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world" (Alma 34:9-10, 12).

When a person repents, she eases Christ's suffering because her sin no longer exists, in Christ's flesh, his memory, or hers. This perspective still to some degree maintains that "pain is the currency of celestial economics,"[78] but this is necessary given the LDS worldview.[79] It better accomplishes what Ostler himself identifies as the purpose of the atonement: "Christ became what we are so that we might become what he is."[80] Christ is a being who lives to alleviate the pain of others. To become like Christ, to "become his peer,"[81] we must be enabled by the atonement "to freely choose to return to God's loving embrace by reciprocating his love with our own freely chosen love."[82] This means that we must be inspired by the atonement to alleviate the sufferings of a loving God and Savior, rather than inflict more suffering on deity through a transfer of human suffering in a celestial economics of pain. Such a relation would prove didactic for human agents seeking to properly relate to one another and themselves; assisting them in becoming truly compassionate.

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NOTES

[1] Blake T. Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," in *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2006), 235.

[2] Ibid.

[3] These themes have been described in the literature in terms of "necrophilia" and "self-sacrifice." See Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 8 and Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation,* trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 86-88.

[4] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 242.

[5] Ibid., 235.

[6] R. Dennis Potter, "Did Christ Pay for Our Sins?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 32: 4 (Winter 1999): 85.

[7] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 270.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 248.

[10] Ibid., 276; emphasis mine.

[11] Ibid., 248-49.

[12] See Alma 7:11-13.

[13] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 249.

[14] Ibid., 237.

[15] Ibid., 236.

[16] Ibid., 237.

[17] Ibid., 236-37.

[18] Backward causation refers to the philosophical problem that arises when an effect causally, though not temporally, precedes its cause. See "Backward Causation" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 29 Aug 2005, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-backwards/, (accessed 19 Dec 2008). Here, the problem arises if Christ suffers for human sin before it is committed and repented of.

[19] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 252.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 253.

[23] See 1 Nephi 2:23, Mosiah 2:31, Alma 37:16, Alma 60:15, Doctrine and Covenants 5:3 and 101:1-7, 97-101.

[24] Joseph Smith Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 258.

[25] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 237.

[26] Ibid., 254.

[27] Ibid.; emphasis added.

[28] Ibid., 244.

[29] Ibid., 247.

[30] Ibid., 248.

[31] Ibid., 253.

[32] Ibid., 238.

[33] Ibid., 240-41.

[34] Ibid., 243.

[35] Potter argues that suffering abounds in the world not because God is lacking in benevolence, but because God is finite. He depicts a practice of divine triage in which God gets to the most pressing situations first, and some needs fall by the wayside because there are more urgent needs to which God must attend. Potter too easily supports the claim that God is finite by an appeal to divine embodiment. He states that because God is embodied, he "will be at one and only one location at that time. Thus God cannot be multiply located" (R. Dennis Potter, "Finitism and the Problem of Evil," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought,* 33: 4 (Winter 2000): 95). Potter compares God to the color red, which can be multiply located, proving that there are logically possible situations which God cannot bring about. Potter concludes that God is finite (95). Potter, in the process of his argument, overlooks the insights made by Grace Dyck (Jantzen) on embodiment and omnipresence. Jantzen denies that omnipresence requires God to be disembodied ("Omnipresence and Incorporeality," *Religious Studies* 13: 1 (March 1977): 85). She explains, "all that is required for a person to be present with respect to the sphere is that he is aware of it, and perhaps can influence it. It is not necessary that he touch all parts of it or that he in any way permeate it….if God is omnipresent with respect to the universe…all that is required is that he is aware of every aspect of the universe and that he can influence it; it is not required that he permeate the universe" (90). Potter invokes the embodiment of God while ignoring the disembodied member of the Godhead who, LDS scripture affirms, "knoweth all things" (Alma 7:13).

[36] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 250; emphasis added.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 248.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 246; emphasis added.

[41] Ibid., 247; emphasis added.

[42] Ibid., 249.

[43] Carol P. Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 423.

[44] Ibid.

[45] These are immutability, omnipotence, omniscience, God's unsympathetic goodness, revelation as infallible, and immortality "as a career after death." See Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1984), 3-5.

[46] Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 144-45.

[47] Ibid., 25.

[48] Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation,* trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 117.

[49] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 254.

[50] Ibid., 237.

[51] Gebara, *Out of the Depths,* 88.

[52] Ibid., 108.

[53] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 253.

[54] See also Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 161-62.

[55] Gebara, *Out of the Depths,* 88.

[56] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 250.

[57] Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 6.

[58] Ibid., 129.

[59] Ibid., 146.

[60] Gebara, *Out of the Depths,* 118.

[61] Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 146.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 246.

[64] Ibid., 249.

[65] Ibid., 256.

[66] England, in contrast to Ostler, denies that God is reconciled to humans through the atonement.

[67] Eugene England, "That They Might not Suffer: The Gift of the Atonement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1:3 (1966): 149.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 235.

[70] Gebara, *Out of the Depths,* 88.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique,* ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 8. Quoted in J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 128.

[73] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 116.

[74] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," 253.

[75] Ibid., 254.

[76] Patripassianism is the doctrine that God suffered as Christ on the cross. It is considered heterodox since it relies on a modalistic view of the Trinity. See "patripassianism" in Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996). While LDS theology could not be properly considered modalistic, LDS theology lifts up God's ability to suffer

empathically with creation as one of God's perfections.

[77] Jacob Morgan, "The Divine-Infusion Theory: Rethinking the Atonement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39:1 (Spring 2006)**:** 60.

[78] Potter, "Did Christ Pay for Our Sins?" 79. Potter uses this phrase as a hypothetical, which he denies, but it seems to suit Ostler's thought on the reading I have presented here.
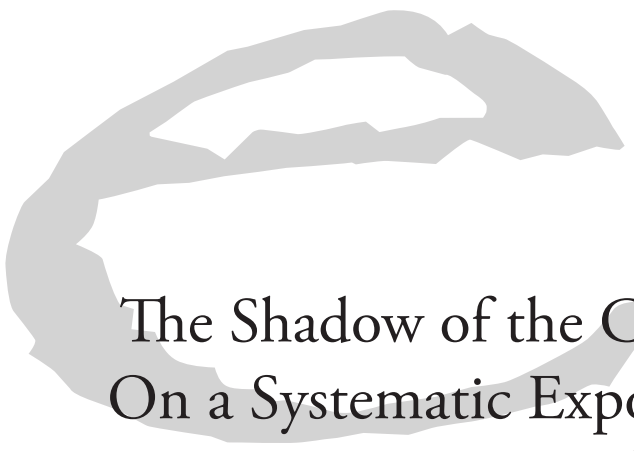
[79] I refer here to aspects of LDS thought such as a denial of creation ex nihilo and a belief that God is limited by human agency. See David L. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," *Brigham Young University Studies* 39:1 (2000): 53-65.

[80] Ostler, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement,"256.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., 255.

The Shadow of the Cathedral: On a Systematic Exposition of Mormon Theology

by Jacob T. Baker

INTRODUCTION

One recent topic in Mormon studies that has generated a fair amount of interest and debate is the place of theology in Latter-day Saint scholarly discourse. Specifically, the question has reemerged as to whether Mormons should or can "do theology." In fact, I have sometimes heard Mormons say that they are "allergic" to theology. This topic is relevant because it can be influential with regard to both internal and external discourse. It can influence internal discourse by both describing and prescribing what and how we believe as believers. It can influence external discourse by shaping the way that we furnish our beliefs to outsiders.

Mormons sometimes suffer (no differently from insiders of other faiths) from the form of cognitive dissonance known as the "fallacy of the native exegete."[1] This means that, as insiders, our exegeses of our religion, our theologies, our scriptures, etc., are necessarily informed by our experiences *qua* insiders. While we understand ourselves, our experiences, etc., in ways that could not be noticed or articulated by those outside the community, we are inherently limited by this position. Thus, it is no simple thing to adequately and sufficiently describe our point of view, our religion, or a particular theology to an outsider due to the limitations of being a "native." Of course, the outsider, in seeking either to understand or describe Mormonism,

suffers from what we could perhaps call the "fallacy of the foreign exegete." The outsider is limited by her position as well. However, unlike the native exegete, the foreigner has no burden to describe or understand Mormonism. That burden falls squarely on the shoulders of Mormons themselves, and to the extent there is miscommunication between the native and the foreigner, it will always be the native who will be most interested in repairing the interpretive breach, inasmuch as the native has the most to lose by being misunderstood. One goal of this paper is to address this breach and suggest a possible way forward.

The issues swirling around the question of theology in Mormonism, though relatively recent, are nevertheless complex. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present a detailed analysis of this complexity, though I will refer to some of the relevant literature. Instead, I wish to focus on what I consider to be the heart of many Mormon thinkers' disdain for theology, which is an approach to theology that is systematic in nature. Among those Mormon scholars who are aware of the variety of competing theologies through which religious ideas can be expressed, this is the one method of theology that is considered most problematic, even dangerous in Mormonism. Why is this? What are the potential consequences of presenting Mormon thought systematically? In this paper I will consider what it means for a theology to be systematic, outlining why some Mormon thinkers consider this approach to Mormon theology to be both practically and ethically inappropriate. I will then turn to defenses of systematic theology utilizing the philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead and Friedrich Schleiermacher to present the idea of an "open system." An open system retains the basic infrastructure of a systematized exposition of theology but is structured to allow creative novelty to continually reshape and redefine the system. Hence, the system is as much eventive as it is systematic. Finally, I will compare open systems that allow for novelty with the Mormon idea of continuing revelation, which allows for the divine will to directly inform and guide Mormon thought and practice.

I should clarify at this point what this paper is and is not. First, this paper is not an attempt to actually *construct* a Mormon systematic theology. Rather, it is an attempt to show how this may be possible. But perhaps I should use stronger language here. After all, LDS systematic theologies have been formulated in the past and continue to be promulgated today. Thus, I wish to show that not only are systematic expositions of LDS thought possible, but that in certain circumstances they are even *desirable.* Second, I will not defend the view that a systematic approach Mormon theology is the best method (as noted above).[2] I do not know what it means to say that there is a "best" (or

most appropriate) method or model for expressing Mormon theology. When we select one method as exclusively better than any others we run the risk of missing important ways of seeing and articulating Mormon thought. Perhaps an illustration will more clearly explain what I mean.

The Rouen Cathedral, a High Gothic cathedral in Rouen, France, has been the muse of many well-known artists, among them Roy Lichtenstein, Gustave Flaubert, and the famous Impressionist painter Claude Monet. Monet produced 28 paintings of one side of the Cathedral, painted at different times of the day. Taken together, Monet's paintings of the Cathedral allow for a more or less complete picture of one side of the Cathedral.

In 1972 distinguished professors of law Guido Calibresi and Douglas Malamed authored a landmark legal publication on property rights entitled, "Property Rules, Liability Rules, and Inalienability: One View of the Cathedral." For our present purposes the content of this article is irrelevant. What I will point to is the authors' appropriation of Monet's paintings of the Cathedral in order to demonstrate that their thesis is only "one view of the Cathedral," one way of viewing or understanding an area of the law that ultimately requires multiple viewings under a variety of circumstances in order to understand it fully. Calabresi and Malamed note that

> Framework or model building has two shortcomings. The first is that models can be mistaken for the total view of phenomena, like legal relationships, which are too complex to be painted in any one picture. The second is that models generate boxes into which one then feels compelled to force situations which do not truly fit…This approach affords only one view of the Cathedral.[3]

Perhaps there are few that would assert that Mormon theology *must* be articulated and expounded according to one and only one particular method or model. However, it would equally be unwise and unnecessary to insist that one particular method, system, or model is always, under every conceivable circumstance, inappropriate or impossible. Eschewing certain methods of articulating Mormon theology affords only one view of the "theological cathedral," where multiple views are necessary to paint a more accurate picture of what Mormon theology is or could be. This paper is an attempt to lay some groundwork for one such view of the LDS theological cathedral that many have deemed inappropriate and even dangerous to Mormonism.

SYSTEMS AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGIES

The Western world in general has long had a complex love/hate relationship with the idea of system. Since Plato, system as been the "goal of Western intellectual striving"[4] which has long felt compelled to categorize and classify reality. The goal of system is to locate particularities within a conceptualized whole that is greater than their sum.[5] In Western systems in particular, the search for, and the articulation of, the Absolute is a constitutive feature of system. Among Idealists and the Romantics, this search for the Absolute within system served to unite (Idealism) or to distinguish between (Romanticsim) philosophical and theological systems.

In theological systems, the God-world relationship is combined with the individual to form the foundational triad of western theology. Christine Helmer has argued that among Western theologians and philosophers, the individual has held a privileged, unique place in the world and in the divine cosmology. The integrated locus of matter and spirit coincide in the individual, and therefore reality demands to be known and loved by individuals who understand themselves to be historically constituted, thereby allowing the individual an awareness of particular questions centering on the self/God/world relationship. Helmer asserts that these onto-anthropological features of the human individual drive the individual towards system and categorization in an attempt to coherently integrate reason and experience.[6]

Not all, however, have been so taken with the utilization of system for understanding reality. Opponents such as Schlegel and the early Schleiermacher resisted the notion that reason could comprehend reality in its totality, "on the ground that finite reason was not capable of transcending its boundaries in order to comprehend its ground."[7] Furthermore, it is difficult to see how "systemic prettiness" can account for the messiness of life and nature in the face of the jagged rawness of suffering and the infinite movement and evolution of language. Thus, it seems that the apparent rational homeostasis of system-building has a difficult time accounting for the ebb and flow of living experience.

Concerning systematic theology, many Christian theologians have seen both its dangers and benefits. For example, Roger Haight writes that his book, *Jesus: Symbol of God,* is a work of systematic theology that does not subject his theological considerations to the finalizing totality of a system: "The systematic character of this work is defined, first, by a consistent perspective and method. . . . Second, the work is systematic also because it deals with a certain range of topics that are deemed relatively adequate

to constitute a broad treatment of the subject matter. . . . But these same two indicators [consistency and breadth] underline the severe limitations of this and any other systematic work. There are other legitimate perspectives and methods in Christian theology and Christology that will yield other genuine insights."[8] Haight points to what he sees as a benefit of systematic theology – presenting concepts in a way that is consistent and broad, and hence more understandable – but also as severely limiting inasmuch as one might ignore other ways of doing theology.[9] As Julia Lamm observes, any systematic theology would need to be both consistent and broad. However, these are necessary, not sufficient criteria for a systematic theology. Systematic theologians often exhibit the fallacious tendency to consider coherency, logical applicability, etc. as both necessary and sufficient criteria.[10] The problem is that theology is packaged as adequate and complete, and thus "closed" to other possibilities. A theological system may even begin as "open;" but upon gathering the "necessary" components for her system, the theologian may in essence declare that no more gathering is required.[11]

THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY IN MORMONISM AND THE DISTRUST OF SYSTEM

Mormon scholars have been among those dissatisfied with the failings and shortcomings of system as an accurate way of understanding Mormon theology. James E. Faulconer (professor of Philosophy at Brigham Young University) has been among the most outspoken and articulate proponents of this view. Faulconer has argued that, far from embracing any sort of theology as traditionally construed, Mormonism is in fact "atheological." He describes atheology as follows: "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."[12] Faulconer does not mean that Mormonism is utterly devoid of theology; Mormons engage in theological discourse just as any other group associated in any way with Christianity. Faulconer is instead attempting to argue that Mormons do theology differently, view it differently than other Christian religions traditionally have done. However, this is also why the term "atheology," although somewhat pithy and memorable, does not accurately describe what goes on in Mormonism when Mormons talk about their religion. It carries negative connotations inasmuch as foreigners might sense that, as Martin Marty puts it, "Mormons note and *sometimes even brag* that they do not have a theology, nor do they 'do' theology."[13] What Faulconer is actually

arguing against, as I will detail shortly and he clearly explains, is a systematic approach to Mormon theology, not that Mormons do not make theological statements.[14] Faulconer defines systematic theology as one that "begins with belief and uses the methods of rational philosophy to give support to that belief."[15] This interpretation is not intended to be exhaustive; much more could easily be said in defining systematic theology. But Faulconer's definition is sufficient to lay the groundwork for his suspicion and distaste for utilizing systematic theology to express how Mormons articulate and reflect upon their faith.

FAULCONER AND HUFF ON SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

The core of Faulconer's opposition to a Mormon systematic theology can be summed up under three sub-headings: Prophets, Practice, and Scripture. I will briefly elaborate upon each of these in order to more clearly present his overall argument against system.

I. Prophets.
One non-negotiable theological concept in Mormonism is the idea of continuing revelation through living prophets, who are said to guide the Church in accordance with God's will. According to Faulconer, this idea is inconsistent with having a well-developed systematic theology. Why? As LDS general authority Spencer J. Condie has written, "Change is an inevitable consequence of continuous revelation."[16] For Faulconer, a rational system "gives the appearance of being complete,"[17] which is at odds with the change that inevitably accompanies *continuing* revelation.

II. Practice.
For Latter-day Saints, there is a much greater emphasis on practice than on the precise explication of what Mormons believe. Beliefs are said to gain their significance through practice and ritual. Construction of a systematic theology – especially one that is officially sanctioned and accepted--would relegate the vital importance of religious practice as effectuated in Mormonism.

III. Scriptures.
Faulconer's approach precludes rational explanation as fundamental to scriptural theology.[18] Scripture (which is decidedly unsystematic) calls us to a life *in* faith rather than an assent to a set of rational propositions *about* faith.[19]

Despite his misgivings with systematic theology, Faulconer acknowledges that some Mormons, both historically and currently, have attempted to systematize Mormon thought. In fact, he even agrees in principle that systematic theology has a legitimate place in Mormon thought: "systematic theology has an important place in apologetics as well as in critical theology, for it explains our beliefs to others and helps us understand the limits of our claims about God."[20] Why then is systematic theology so dangerous? Because a focus on belief over practice runs the risk that our theology will become a "species of idolatry" inasmuch as we become unaware or ignore the reasons we do theology in the first place.[21] Is it the case that our theologizing becomes a mere intellectual exercise to satisfy our curiosity or vanity? Or do we engage in theology against the apocalyptic shadow of the real return of God to the earth? For Faulconer, the danger in systematic theology is manifest in its effects upon our character and our intentions, not necessarily in its methodology *per se.*

Nevertheless, Faulconer singles out systematic theology as being particularly susceptible to this shortcoming of what we might call "theoretical posturing." It cannot capture the "essence" of faith; its focus on propositions precludes such an accomplishment. Instead, one "becomes competent in the various ways in which words and actions are tied together in the various practices of religious adherents."[22] This alternative, and rather unsystematic approach to Mormon thought presumably comes closer to describing religious practice and allows room for a plausible explanation of continuing revelation and a hermeneutical integration of scripture into religious life.

Still, Faulconer has conceded that systematic theology may be useful in some circumstances, particularly those that require a coherent exposition of Mormon beliefs to outsiders. But is this concession consistent with his assertion that systematic theology is ultimately dangerous and not up to the task of describing Mormon doctrine? This is a tension that cannot be ignored.

But first, some discussion of the middle ground is in order. Faulconer points out that contemporary Mormon philosophers David Paulsen and Blake Ostler engage in just the systematization of Mormon thought that he has described, with "interesting and well-respected results."[23] However, these two thinkers have made little comment concerning their method in articulating theology, nor have they so much as admitted (at least to my knowledge) that the type of theology they do is systematic. Nevertheless, Benjamin Huff has recently defended systematic theology as a way of

engaging and understanding Mormon thought. He argues that not only is theology incapable of subverting the place of revelation in Mormon theology, but that it never even aims to do so in the first place.[24] With notable qualifications, Huff recognizes the importance of a systematic approach to theology.

Huff first notes that a systematic approach to theology can play an appropriate role in Mormonism, but only "within a larger, broadly hermeneutic process."[25] Recognizing the appeal and efficaciousness of a more narrative, practice-centric approach to Mormon thought, he nevertheless acknowledges that "as humans we inevitably understand these [narratives and practices] through rational concepts. That some of these concepts defy explicit definition and hence require practical judgment or *phronesis* to be properly applied does not prevent their being systematically related."[26] Consequently, Huff advocates what he calls a "polysystematic" approach to theology. A "monosystematic" approach--the effort to contain all knowledge within one comprehensive system--is rejected in favor of an approach that envisions the construction of a system of thought with the caveat that it will eventually be obsolete. When this occurs, another more adequate system is constructed to take its place, with the same caveat, and so on. The polysystematic approach recognizes human fallibility; while it accepts continuing divine revelation, how it interprets and applies revelation is subject to rationality, which is often error-prone; hence, the importance of a system to aid us in our interpretation. Huff makes this clear: "If one set of concepts is inadequate, then we should work toward a better set. The new set may also be inadequate, yet still be an improvement. To refuse to think through one's understanding systematically at all, I suggest, is to risk simply consigning oneself to confusion."[27]

While I agree with Huff's general conclusions, I would shift the burden of understanding to our exposition of a systematic understanding of Mormon theology to an outsider; that is, I think his observations and conclusions apply more directly to theological communication among natives and outsiders, rather than intra-theological discourse among natives. This is because I believe that a narrative or even declarative method of theologizing amongst Mormons themselves has been successful in communicating what Mormons have wanted to say to one another about their doctrines and beliefs.[28] Huff's notion of "polysystematic" theology is in fact an excellent springboard to a conceptualization of system that does not simply try to account for human interpretive error, but additionally *expects* unanticipated creative novelty as a necessary component of its system. I will now turn to

the notion of an "open system" and its applicability to a possible Mormon systematic theology that can potentially escape the "danger" Faulconer observes in systematic theologies.

OPEN SYSTEMS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR A MORMON SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Christine Helmer writes that "the fitting of a system to reality is a process that is never definitively closed."[29] This is because reality is ever-changing, unfixed, and messy. Historically, system-builders have not realized this fact. Thus, as one system is abandoned because it could not accommodate itself to reality, another one would simply be built to take its place. But this process has come to be seen by many philosophers and theologians as self-defeating. Of what use is a system that must of necessity face annihilation? Or are we so vain that with the construction of each system we say once again, "this time it's foolproof; this time it will work?" Consequently, some thinkers have sought for a redefinition of system, a more humble admission that reality cannot be fully encapsulated and contained. They have "posed the question of system's openness to experiential polyvalence."[30] But this question is not framed as a causal result of the recognition that human-constructed systems are inevitably prone to error; rather, the question is framed as a result of the recognition of the dynamic novelty displayed in nature and human beings. System was still necessary in order to coherently understand a world staggering in its complexity and immensity. But a reframing or recasting of system was vital in order to account for the rather "unsystematic" nature of experience. In order to illustrate further this integration of systemic coherency and dynamic novelty, I will briefly elucidate the thought systems of two thinkers who attempted to construct just such an open system: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Alfred North Whitehead.

EARLY AND LATER SCHLEIERMACHER: FOR AND AGAINST SYSTEM

In his early writings Schleiermacher was utterly opposed to a systematic expression of religion or theology. He wrote, "I continue to remain aloof from craving a system, a system which would provide me with definitive answers to all the questions which can be posed."[31] Jack Verheyden argues that Schleiermacher's rejection of system is a major theme in his seminal work, *On Religion.* Schleiermacher further elaborates: "Religion by its whole

nature is just as far removed from all that is systematic as philosophy is by its very nature inclined toward it."[32] Verheyden observes that Schleiermacher gives four reasons for rejecting systems: 1) Religious life is too immediate as it is lived out to be grasped by a system, which requires distance to be constructed; 2) A system naturally reaches to grasp the universal, thereby ignoring the individual; 3) System strangles that which is new and different, forcing everything to fit its mold; 4) Schleiermacher rejects the transcendental principle that deduces reality from an intellectual principle.[33]

The later Schleiermacher, however, lost his disinclination toward systems. In 1830 Schleiermacher wrote *The Christian Faith*, a mostly systematic presentation of Christian doctrine. The individual became critically important in Schleiermacher's thought with this and subsequent writings, and Schleiermacher found it useful to elaborate his doctrine of the individual by way of a system. In fact, he sought to separately create both philosophical and theological systems on the basis of what he considered to be distinct fields of study. But his systems were uniquely "open" in the ways in which I am attempting to explicate open systems. Concerning the individual, knowledge of the individual presupposes structures of identity for a correspondence between the system of thought and the system of the totality of reality. Though he eventually embraced system as an effective means of understanding and relating Christian doctrines to one another, Schleiermacher's later works aim at a systematic presentation of doctrine that remains open to both the history of a lived religion and the historical location of any theological articulation. System would not trump the lived experience of religion; it could only serve to help explain it at a particular time and location. This point is somewhat similar to one elucidated by Reformed Evangelical theologian and philosopher Stephen T. Davis at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology: "I don't see why the words of Mormon theologians or even official church-sanctioned theological statements cannot be indexed to a certain time. The point could be made or implicitly understood that any such statement is subject to revision by later revelation or authoritative interpretation."[34]

WHITEHEAD AND EVENT-BASED SYSTEMS

Where the openness of Schleiermacher's system was often more implicit than explicit, there is no ambiguity present in A.N. Whitehead's conception of an open system. According to Process theologian Roland Faber, Whitehead strove to construct a system while simultaneously understanding

the limited value of systematization. Whitehead affirmed systematization as an organic process that, at the same time, confirms and deconstructs system.[35] His concept of system is that of interpretation that essentially includes infinite revision.

Whitehead expressed clearly in his writings what he saw as the limitations of system: "One can never produce that final adjustment of well-defined generalities which constitute a complete metaphysics."[36] Whitehead saw reality as the constant process of becoming, and such "becoming reality" cannot be analyzed into a coherent system; "it must be understood as a living whole beyond structure, form, and logic; its is an organism."[37] Faber further notes that "the aim of system [in Whitehead's thought] is process itself that, as life, includes structure."[38] Thus, Whitehead's system has traditionally been understood as self-creative event: the system's event contains structures to protect the process from oppression of "despotizing unity."[39]

Faber points to the dual tendencies in Western philosophy between system's "self-confirmation," based on systematic criteria of reason, and its "self-relativization," based on reality's subversion of system by its constant circumvention of rational comprehension.[40] Whitehead seeks a balance between the desire for system and the drive to keep system open to process, flux, change, and novelty. Thus, the need to discard "failed" systems and start again is precluded in Whitehead's thought by the observation that system is nothing more than a reservoir of potential developments, that, in its abstraction from experience, cannot and does not seek to describe the whole of reality, but recognizes the constant ebb and flow of reality.

Theologian Marjorie Suchocki describes process as "system without certainty." A system must of necessity be open and figured away from any sort of dogmatic finality for the simple reason that it is impossible to incorporate clearly all that we experience. A closed system is, by virtue of its closedness, inadequate. The more open system is, the more adequate it becomes, but its adequacy is entirely provisional; the system can never be complete.[41]

The longing for permanence in system-building has traditionally been considered at odds with openness. For Whitehead, however, this situation shows the importance of novelty. Novelty (or creativity) is not a synonym for chaos; rather, the multiple and the one flow into one another in creative process, mutually enhancing both unity and multiplicity. Thus, Whitehead's system satisfies the longing for permanence and the longing for novelty.

TOWARDS A MORMON OPEN
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

The integration of open systematic thought into a systematic exposition of Mormon theology is not a smooth one-to-one correspondence. Primarily, this is because the tasks of Whitehead and Schleiermacher in constructing their systems are vastly different from the tasks of theology in Mormonism. By this I mean that where Mormons will be concerned with preserving the notion of continuing personal and prophetic revelation and elucidating religious practices, Whitehead was concerned with building a system that met the criteria of coherency and took into account the infinite complexity of the world. Schleiermacher, in contrast to both Mormonism and Whitehead, sought a balance between a clear, interrelated articulation of Christian doctrines in light of religious history and lived religious experience.

Nevertheless, all three modes of thought display a concern with openness and novelty, and this is the component that relates and connects them to one another. In order to construct a Mormon systematic theology in which continuing revelation is paramount, they will have to appropriate open systematic theologies in unique ways. One immediate concern will be how to address the dangers that James Faulconer sees with systematic theology in general. Can a novel reconstruction of systematic theology escape these dangers? On my account, the concern with one's inability to accommodate the drastic change of new revelation is mitigated by the very nature of event-based open systems wherein the structuring principle is the anticipation of change. But can such theologies address Faulconer's other main concern, namely that theologians are so concerned with coherency and precision that theology is done in ignorance or even open disdain for the Apocalypse? My answer is a tentative yes, they can address this concern. I answer in the affirmative because the very notion of a system subject to expected radical changes affirms a certain inherent humility concerning the ability of human beings to understand and predict their world. The world is complex and in constant flux and the divine will can be manifest at any time and in multiple forms. In the face of such uncertainty, humility and the desire to learn seem to be the appropriate responses.[42] The answer is tentative because, in the open systems discussed above, there is still an inordinate concern with coherency, adequacy, and consistency. Thus, the danger still exists with being overly "taken" with constructing a system based on these prerequisites while de-emphasizing the space for creativity, novelty, revelation. Any Mormon appropriation of open systems would need to be cognizant of these cautionary boundaries.

Once again, my argument has not been to defend open systematic theology as the primary way of doing Mormon theology. Nor, in advocating that open systematic theology can and should in certain circumstances be done, am I saying that the Church or Mormons generally should adopt, even provisionally, this approach. However, I do believe that systematic theology, at least in regard to "first contact" with outsiders is possibly the best way to assist them in understanding Mormon thought. Perhaps later, after sustained dialogue, Mormons could express themselves in less systematic ways that are more meaningful and expressive of their faith. But, as Paul Owen puts it, "Both Latter-day Saints and Classical Christians ought to maintain the factuality of religious knowledge, *and the potential for substantive theological dialogue based upon objective points of reference.*"[43] A systematic presentation of Mormon theology, in my opinion, seems to be the most efficacious way of accomplishing this worthy goal, but, as I have attempted to show, Mormons can engage in a systematic presentation of their beliefs that does justice to the important Mormon emphasis on continuing revelation, while avoiding the pitfalls of closed systematic theologies. Consequently, we may find ways to consider and concretize our beliefs, as Professor Faulconer eloquently put it, in the shadow of the apocalypse, as well as in the shadow of the Cathedral.

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NOTES

[1] I borrow this phrase from a former classmate at Claremont Graduate University, Roy Whittaker, who used the term in a class on "Mormonism and Christian Theology."

[2] Along with certain other Mormon scholars I have much sympathy, for example, for narrative theology being an especially appropriate method for articulating Mormon theology.

[3] Guido Calabresi and A. Douglas Malamed, "Property Rules, Liability Rules, and Inalienability: One View of the Cathedral," 85 *Harvard Law Review*, 1128 (1972).

[4] Christine Helmer, "Introduction," in *Schleiermacher and Whitehead: Open Systems in Dialogue*, ed. Christine Helmer (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 1.

[5] Ibid., 2.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 3.

[8] Roger Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), xiii.

[9] Haight's criticism of systematic theology is weak and trivial, inasmuch as too intense advocacy of any method of approaching theology could be cause for

ignoring other theologies. It is not a criticism of the methodology of systematic theology itself, but rather of all theological methodologies.

[10] Julia A. Lamm, "The Force of Dialogue and the Dialogue of Forces: Resources for Open Theological Systems," *in Schleiermacher and Whitehead: Open Systems in Dialogue*, ed. Christine Helmer *(Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004)*, 238.

[11] See, for example, David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 15, 37, 57, 170, 228; where Tracy discusses several such components such as "criteria of relative adequacy," "motif-research," "the history of religion and culture," as necessary components, among others, for a systematic theology.

[12] James E. Faulconer, "Rethinking Theology: The Shadow of the Apocalypse," in *The FARMS Review of Books* 19/1 (2007): 179. .

[13] Martin E. Marty, "Foreward," in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies,* ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), vii, emphasis mine.

[14] Consequently, though it hasn't attracted a huge following outside Mormon scholarly circles, I think the term should be jettisoned from LDS theological discourse.

[15] James E. Faulconer, "Why a Mormon Won't Drink Coffee But Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Element* 2.2 (Fall 2006), 21.

[16] Spencer J. Condie, *In Perfect Balance* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 106; quoted in James E, Faulconer, "Response to Professor Tracy," in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies,* ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2007), 474.

[17] Faulconer, "Rethinking Theology," 179.

[18] Ibid., 180.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 182.

[21] Ibid., 199.

[22] Brian D. Birch, "Theological Method and the Question of Truth: A Postliberal Approach to Mormon Doctrine and Practice," in *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities*, ed. James McLachlan and Loyd Ericson (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 111.

[23] Faulconer, "Rethinking Theology," 182. See also, idem, "Response to Professor Tracy," 472.

[24] Benjamin Huff, "Theology in the Light of Continuing Revelation," in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies,* ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2007), 478.

[25] Ibid., 485.

[26] Ibid., 487.

[27] Ibid., 487.

[28] However, this is not to say that even here there has not been a good deal of

confusion that a more systematic approach may help to alleviate.

[29] Helmer, "Introduction," 8.

[30] Ibid., 4.

[31] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Eternal Covenant: Schleiermacher's Experiment in Cultural Theology*, trans. Gerhard Spiegler (NY: Haper, 1967), 39; quoted in Jack C. Verheyden, "Mapping the Land of Beginning Again," in *Schleiermacher and Whitehead: Open Systems in Dialogue*, ed. Christine Helmer (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 19.

[32] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers,* ed. and trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14.

[33] Verheyden, "Mapping the Land," 21.

[34] Stephen T. Davis, "Philosophical Theology for Mormons: Some Suggestions From an Outsider," paper presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, 16. Forthcoming in *Element*.

[35] Roland Faber, "Whitehead at Infinite Speed: Deconstructing System as Event," in *Schleiermacher and Whitehead: Open Systems in Dialogue*, ed. Christine Helmer (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 47.

[36] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 145.

[37] Faber, "Whitehead at Infinite Speed," 55.

[38] Ibid., 71.

[39] Ibid., 72.

[40] See Helmer, "Introduction," 11.

[41] Marjorie Suchocki, "System without Certainty,"in *Schleiermacher and Whitehead: Open Systems in Dialogue*, ed. Christine Helmer (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 129.

[42] Of course, many Mormons might cringe at my attempt to find a place for "uncertainty" in Mormon theology. However, an honest assessment of what we do and do not know in Mormonism must conclude that, in spite of our firm convictions (and in many cases because of them) there is much of which to be uncertain in Mormon theology.

[43] Paul Owen, "Can Mormon Theology Be Systematic?" Paper delivered at Yale University Divinity School conference, "God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History," March 29, 2003. Electronic copy in my possession, quoted with permission from author.

Ritual as a Process of Deification

by Michael Ing

Yan Yan further asked, "Is ritual of such urgent importance?"
Confucius replied, "It was by ritual that the early kings took upon themselves the Way of the heavens, and ordered the responses of the people. For this reason, one who loses ritual dies, and one who attains ritual lives."
-Li Ji, "Li Yun"

For Latter-day Saints, the eternal self is an embodied self. From this perspective we are not *who we are* without our bodies. Our spirits without flesh are incomplete portraits of our true self. Despite these deep theological claims, a uniquely Mormon conception of body is lacking. Mormon language is replete with attempts to speak of the body as something to be controlled, conquered, and objectified. Latter-day Saint metaphors, for instance, speak of the body as a temporary vessel for the spirit – as if people are saved *despite* their bodies, not *because of* their bodies.

This scenario presents a conflict between two prevalent, yet competing paradigms of the self. The first can be designated "the paradigm of self-*as*-a-body" and the second "the paradigm of self-*in*-a-body." The former views the body as a constitutive part of the self, and the latter views the body as a container or receptacle for the self. In their theology Latter-day Saints tend toward the paradigm of self-as-a-body; however, colloquially they tend toward the paradigm of self-in-a-body. This disjuncture is reflected in statements from past presidents of the Church such as Joseph Fielding Smith

(1876-1972, presiding 1970-1972), who stated, "There are two purposes for life – one to gain experience that could not be obtained in any other way, and the other to obtain these tabernacles of flesh and bones. Both of these purposes are vital to the existence of man."[1] On the one hand Smith employs the metaphor of body-as-container; or in this case, body-as-tabernacle.[2] As such the body is a house for the spirit – similar to the way the tabernacle of the Old Testament was a "house" for Yahweh. Just as Yahweh was considered an entity residing in (and independent of) the tabernacle, we are entities residing in (and independent of) our bodies. On the other hand, Smith's first purpose of life is ultimately predicated on the second. In other words, the "experience" Smith has in mind is an *embodied experience*. It is experience made possible only because of a body; and only through, with, and in a body. Implicit in Smith's thought is that this life is a bodily training for the next eternally embodied life.

The purpose of this essay is to provide resources for further thinking about Latter-day Saint conceptualizations of the body. More specifically it will explore one meaning of ritual as it relates to a larger theory of body – a theory where the body is a transformative participant on the path to self-realization; or to put it in Mormon terms, the body as part of an unfolding process of deification. In doing this I will utilize resources from religious traditions other than Mormonism. In particular I will employ Confucian theories of ritual. I believe my purposeful use of a system of thought most Latter-day Saints are very unfamiliar with, will in effect lay claim to a series of larger arguments that extend beyond the topic of ritual and the body.

This paper, therefore, makes one explicit claim and two implicit claims. The explicit claim is that Mormon notions of eternal embodiment, combined with the idea that a central purpose of this life is to gain a body, should more deeply impact Latter-day Saint conceptions of bodily practice. Because there is ultimate significance in bodily experience in this life, the notion of ritual needs to be reexamined and expanded to include all practices and ways of practice that go toward cultivating the body in the process of becoming a deified body. Confucian theories of ritual can assist in deepening and broadening these conceptions.

Implicit in this argument is the value of the "other." It is my position that traditions of religious thought can contribute things of religious significance to each other. This is to take a pluralistic view where non-Mormon religious traditions at the very least provide an opportunity to engage in a process of inverse hermeneutics; and at most offer up new "truths" that modify Mormon ontology. By "inverse hermeneutics" I am referring to an attempt

to reinterpret the familiar in the terms of the previously unfamiliar – where "hermeneutics" can be said to be a process of primarily interpreting the unfamiliar. Confucianism, in this case, provides the frame of the unfamiliar with which to reinterpret Mormonism, or the familiar. "Modifying Mormon ontology" means adding or removing a component to or from the Mormon world-view that carries with it a sense of ultimate significance. Suggesting, for instance, that Confucian theories of ritual assist the Mormon self in becoming a deified self could be considered an example of modifying Mormon ontology. My attempt here is to demonstrate the process of inverse hermeneutics and suggest that Confucianism can in fact contribute things of ontological significance to Mormonism. Since these claims, for the most part, will remain indeterminate, I will refer to them as the "emic implications" of my argument – meaning that these claims have significant implications for participants *within* Mormonism.

The second implicit claim can be said to have "etic consequences" – meaning repercussions for those participating in discourses *about* Mormonism (or Religious Studies broadly conceived).[3] Ritual theory is obviously born of the historical circumstances of the "Western" academy. Early studies of ritual have moved through *functional* (Emile Durkheim), *structural* (E.E. Evans-Pritchard), *symbolic* (Clifford Geertz) and more recently, *performative* phases (Catherine Bell). And while we, as scholars, have become more sensitive to universalist assumptions of "Western" theory as the *only* theory, we have made little progress in taking Marcel Mauss' 1934 injunction seriously that, "there are techniques of the body which we have not studied, but which were perfectly studied by China and India, even in very remote periods."[4] Given that we, as scholars, want to take the subjects we study with utmost seriousness, discussing them "on their own terms," I propose that we look at them as a source *for* theory rather than simply as the object we use our theory on. This is to say that Confucianism itself provides a thick theory of ritual practice.

At this point it makes sense to stipulate that ritual obviously has no one-to-one mapping with any Chinese term. The idea of *li* 禮, often translated as ritual, ceremony, deportment, or propriety (among other translations), has significant overlap with Western notions of ritual (be it structural, functional, etc.). My intent here is to stretch the definition of ritual to include *li*. In most cases, no extreme stretching is necessary. Translated as "ritual," *li* brings added meaning to the concept and broadens our traditional understanding. However, *li* understood *as* ritual limits its potency. I want to be clear therefore, that when I speak of "ritual" I primarily have in mind the concept of *li*.

It is also worthy to note that when I refer to "traditional notions of ritual," I am referring to structural, functional, and/or symbolic definitions. By "structural definitions" I imply an understanding of ritual in which it is viewed as an attempt to alter or order the world of a participant. In Mormon terms structural definitions are seen in assertions such as, "Baptism 'unlocks the gate' by which one can enter into God's presence." Ritual in this sense changes the ontology of a believer's world. By "functional definitions" I refer to an understanding of ritual where ritual is construed as acts that serve to stabilize the community. For Latter-day Saints this alludes to something such as the social function of the sacrament – it serves to bring the community together once a week, united in the renewing of their common covenant. Lastly, by "symbolic definitions" I mean the perception of ritual where it represents or refers to the sacred. Latter-day Saints tend to interpret large parts of the temple ceremonies symbolically. Hence "traditional notions of ritual" is short hand for the ways in which ritual tended to be interpreted for most of the history of the field of ritual studies. It also implies the ways in which most Latter-day Saints understand ritual (although most Mormons are prone to see ritual in symbolic and/or structural rather than functional terms).

RITUAL AS *LI*

The Confucian notion of the self (*shen* 身) is a pictograph of the body. In a very real sense, there is no distinction between "self" and "body." The human self, therefore, is an embodied self; and the purpose of this life is to cultivate the self (*xiushen* 修身), or more literally to cultivate the body. The body in this view is an attainment achieved through proper practice of being human. To learn with one's body is to learn to become human.

The body is sometimes spoken of as an instrument of sorts, except it is not instrumentalized or objectified. This is to say that Confucians realize that there is often a disconnect between what one internally wills and the body's ability to perform one's will. However it is important to note that this disconnect is not because of a distinction between self and body.[5] Rather from the Confucian point of view we are co-subjects with our bodies, and our bodies become an instrument similar to the way that the violin becomes an extension of the violinist. Take away the violin and there is no violinist. Take away the body and there is no self. From the Confucian perspective, our bodily performances are not only expressions of who we really are; but we are, in a very concrete way, the performances of our bodies.

The process of self/body-cultivation in Confucianism is performed by means of *li*. The *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字, one of the oldest Chinese dictionaries (compiled by Xu Shen 許慎 ca. 58 CE- ca. 147 CE), defines *li* 禮 as the composite of two characters, *shi* 示 and *li* 豊.[6] *Shi* is defined as an ideograph meaning "up," referring to the objects of the sky – the sun, moon, and stars – which, according to Xu Shen, were given as signs to human beings, in order that we can "observe the patterns of the heavens [and] fathom the changes of the seasons," thereby allowing us to see the times of "fortune and misfortune." In short, Xu refers to *shi* as "the affairs of the spirits [above]."[7] The second character, *li* 豊, is defined as a pictograph of an instrument of ritual – a vessel with an offering placed on it. Combined together Xu then defines *li* 禮 as "to perform" or "to carry out (according to a certain path)." It is "serving the spirits in order to obtain blessings."[8] This description of *li* is remarkably close to traditional definitions of ritual as response to the sacred, or in the terms of Mircea Eliade, a mirroring of a "divine model" or "archetype."[9] One of the *Five Classics* of Confucianism, the *Li Ji* 禮記, or *Discourses on Ritual*, even describes the coming forth of *li* as rooted in the creation of the cosmos itself.[10] However, as close as this may come to traditional notions of ritual, *li* should not be understood simply as "symbolic activity as opposed to the instrumental behavior of everyday life."[11] In other words *li* is not confined to ceremony and rites. Following Xu Shen's definition, *li* is not necessarily the physical form of the ritual event (i.e., ritual conceived of as a noun), as much as it is the *performing* of the ritual event (i.e., ritual as a verb), or the "carrying out" of the ritual. *Li*, therefore, is processual. It is the enacting of the ceremony, or the comportment of the rite. As the contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Weiming states, "*Li* in this connection is understood as movement instead of form. The emphasis is on its dynamic process rather than its static structure."[12]

Li as process, performance, or demeanor extends beyond any particular event, and becomes a "way" (*dao* 道) of performing. The telos of *li*, therefore, is not a physical destination (such as the completion of a ceremony) but a condition one conducts the journey in.[13] In short it is a way of life. To draw from Tu Weiming again, "*Li* thus may be understood as the movement of self-transformation, the dialectical path through which man becomes more human."[14]

Herbert Fingarette, in one of the most influential works on Confucianism in the English language, describes *li* as "the map or the specific road-system which is *Dao*."[15] His book entitled *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* demonstrates how Confucianism blurs the line between traditional categories of sacred and

secular; and that *li* is a process of sanctifying even the most mundane aspects of life. The first printing of the book even had an enlarged character *li* 禮 standing alone on the cover. This sacralization of life, therefore, can also be spoken of as a ritualization of life.[16] The ideal human being is *li* in everything she or he thinks, says, and does.

This last statement indirectly refers to the twelfth chapter of the *Analects* where Confucius states, "If not [seen with] *li* do not look. If not [heard with] *li* do not listen. If not [said with] *li* do not speak. If not [performed with] *li* do not act."[17] Confucians, as experts in *li*, therefore should not be thought of as experts in a limited number of ceremonial ordinances (which is the way they are popularized in most non-specialized English writing), but instead as experts in performing proper human behavior. To state it succinctly, they are virtuosos of becoming a completely realized human self.[18] This implies that Confucians will never "arrive" at complete self-realization in this life. As long as there is more life to be lived, there is more self to be realized. This is echoed in Confucius' autobiography in the second chapter of the *Analects* where it is suggested that even Confucius still had room to grow.[19] The processual dimension involved here is worth re-emphasizing. I am relying primarily on a notion articulated by Roger Ames, who describes the Confucian self as a human *becoming* as opposed to a human *being*.[20] In other words, Ames wishes to highlight the Confucian self as a self perpetually in a dynamic state of transformation, rather than as a self categorized according to the possession of certain eternal attributes.

What this means for Confucianism in general and a *li*-like lifestyle in particular is that people are all fellow travelers on the same path, and fellow performers in the same ensemble, so-to-speak. We are working as a communal body of human beings, each learning what it means to be human.

To relate this briefly in Mormon terms, learning to be human takes on an added significance; for learning to be human is learning to be a god. And learning to be a god is best understood as a process. The community of Mormons, therefore, is a fellowship of willing individuals seeking to understand what it means to be human. Indeed, this means seeking a way to live as gods-in-embryo. This also means – to relate it back to the processual dimension of *li* – that our journey through life is defined by our walk, or the way we act out in life, and not simply by the physical events of life (or rituals) themselves. From this perspective, which will be elaborated later, the ritualization of Mormon living is in the "framing" of conduct, or the way in which actions are *enacted*, and not limited to particular activities traditionally associated with ritual.[21]

LI AND THE BODY

The connection between *li* and the body is rather obvious. *Li* as a process of self-cultivation is an embodied process. Thus, as one can imagine, the body is often spoken of in terms of *li*. The *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳, a commentary written over two-thousand years ago on one of the *Five Classics* describes *li* as the "trunk" of the body (like the trunk of a tree – extrapolated to mean the "base" of a person) and as a thing that "shields" the body.[22] *Li* in its relationship with other virtues is also likened to the way that "muscle meets with flesh, and sinews connect bones."[23] Xunzi, a third century BCE Confucian, defines *li* as "that which rectifies the body."[24]

Another commonly used Chinese character for body is *ti* 體. *Ti* shares some linguistic relationship with *li*. The right-hand portion of the character employs the same graph as the right-hand side of *li*; which, as we have seen, Xu Shen defined as a pictograph of a ritual vessel. [25] While it is possible that the character borrows the graph for its sound rather than its meaning, the two are clearly paired together in Confucian discourse. The *Discourses on Ritual*, for instance, states, "*Li* is similar to the body (*ti*). When the body is not complete, the profound person will consider such an individual 'an incomplete person'."[26] The second to the last character, *cheng* 成, translated here as "complete" can also be understood as "fully grown," "capable," "realized," "becoming," or "successful [in attaining]." Thus the implication of this passage is that fully realized *li* is metaphorically similar to a fully realized human body.

Mencius (ca. 372 BCE-ca. 289 BCE), one of the most influential thinkers of Confucianism, taught that *li* is so innate in the human body, that it is one of the four "sprouts" that all people are born with. In his theory, *li* must be cultivated like a tender plant to become a guide to human action. And since *li* is similar to a young plant, it is also capable of being damaged like a young plant. Thus, in language similar to the *Discourses on Ritual*, Mencius describes the loss of *li* as the loss of what it means to be truly human. Indeed, he even likens these four sprouts to four parts of the body.[27] On the other hand, according to Mencius, the nourishing of *li* is also the nourishing of inborn human nature. And since human nature is not only innate but also conferred by the cosmos above, there is a reciprocal relationship at play here. Thus, while we, as human beings, can nourish *li*, the cultivation of *li* symbiotically results in the nourishing of the self. In the words of the *Discourses on Ritual*, "When *li* resides in human beings, it is nourishment."[28] One passage from

the *Xunzi* in particular describes the relationship between *li* as nourishment and the body:

> Thus, the meaning of ritual [*li*] is to nurture. The meat of pastured and grain-fed animals, rice and millet blends and combinations of the five flavors, are what nurture the mouth. The fragrances of peppercorns and orchids, aromas and bouquets, are what nurture the nose. Carved and polished [jade], incised and inlaid [metals], and [fabrics] embroidered with the white and black axe emblem, the azure and black notched-stripe, the azure and crimson stripe, the white and crimson blazon, are what nurture the eye. Bells and drums, flutes and chime-stone, lutes and zithers, reed pipes and reed organs, are what nurture the ear. Spacious rooms, secluded chambers, mats of plaited rushes, couches and bed mats, armrests and cushions, are what nurture the body [i.e., the remaining parts of the body]. Thus, rituals are what nurtures.[29]

The objects listed here are implements used in particular ritual ceremonies. There is a direct connection drawn between each set of objects and the differing parts of the body. Each part of ritual has a corresponding part of the body that it nourishes. The power of ritual therefore, is not only in changing the ontological structure of human life (a "structuralist" mode of interpreting ritual); but also in effecting a power inherent in the human body. To say it another way, there is not only an upward component of ritual that aligns the self with a transcendent power; but also an inward component that makes manifest the immanent nature of human beings. The power of *li* therefore is to both shape human nature and unlock human nature. It has ramifications that transcend the physical action taking place, but also has significance immanent in the action of the ritual itself. *Li*, in short, is both about transforming our selves into the people we ought to be, as well as realizing the divine self we already are.

This dual function of *li* is a prominent factor in Confucian texts; where ritual, besides being spoken of as inherent in human nature is also likened to levies that direct the flow of water, and described as a means for restraining the self.[30] Ritual has a habituating force that, as Catherine Bell explains, creates a type of "instinctive knowledge… embedded in [our] bodies."[31] Another passage in the *Xunzi* states, "Rites [*li*] trim what is too long, stretch out what is too short, eliminate excess, remedy deficiency, and extend cultivated forms that express love and respect so that they increase and complete the beauty

of conduct according to one's duty."[32] *Li*, therefore, while rooted in the self is also meant to work on the self by acting as an exercise in humanization through bodily training.[33]

LI AND RITUAL REENACTMENT

One reason that theory on the body is so prevalent in Confucian thought (and Chinese thought in general), is that it lacks the exclusive dichotomy of body opposed to mind. As such, the assumption is that body and mind are mutually penetrating categories that serve to work on each other. While most texts speak of the mind as the director of the body and its parts, the body is also frequently spoken of as having the ability to shape the mind. A recently discovered bamboo text, dating back to at least the third century BCE, for instance, concludes with the peculiar phrase, "The profound person regards the body as that which controls the mind."[34] This line is not to be taken too literally, but in the larger context of the piece it speaks to the importance of the body in moral cultivation. The thrust of this text, the *Xingzimingchu* 性自命出, is that participation in ritual reenactments of past heroic events develop bodily habits that create a naturalness in responding to future circumstances. To use an example extrapolated from the text, reenacting the glorious overthrow of the decaying Shang dynasty provides an experiential basis for understanding what it was like to do the right thing in that circumstance. In other words, rather than simply relying on a theoretical discussion of the event to inculcate a sense of moral rightness, the actual practice of the event itself benefits the participants by encompassing them more fully in the unfolding of the event. Thus, not only does one know *what* happened, but one also knows *how* it occurred. This notion of experiential learning also creates an embodied connection to the sage-like individuals who originally enacted the event.

For Mormons this has not only implications in doing temple ordinances for those who have passed away (and temporarily lack a body), but also for ritual broadly conceived as reenactment. In this light there is more than symbolic significance in the temple when one acts as Adam or Eve. In the tying and untying of the robes, the posturing of the body, and the performative utterances of the covenants, there is an embodied learning that takes place. There is a bodily transformation of sorts that happens as participants habituate themselves, as well as a connection that is strengthened between them and the great individuals who have come before.

But this style of ritual learning is not limited to the temple, where ritual is

perceived to be most potent. The recent efforts to reenact the crossing of the plains by the pioneers are also examples of embodied ritual. The re-creation of their faith, fortitude, and sacrifice binds past to present not only by providing an opportunity to learn the stories of the past, but also by bodily binding people of the present to the experiences of the past. From an emic perspective we capture a more holistic picture of who these pioneers were, and what it meant to choose the right in their circumstances. Granted that one would not go so far as to say that we actually take upon ourselves their private experience, but we do gain a glimpse into their personal lives, and this glimpse leaves a lasting impression of moral rectitude in body as well as mind.

LI AS A MORMON THEORY OF RITUALIZATION

To understand Mormon ritual in terms of *li* would broaden the category of ritual to include all bodily performances done for the sake of cultivating a divine body. In essence it would expand ritual to include every activity humanly possible when performed in accordance with *li*. In other words, understanding ritual in the processual terms of *li* means taking ritual as a posture for performance, and as a ritualization of everyday life. This would in effect be carrying Arnold van Gennep's "pivoting of the sacred" to its extent – for here since ritual has the ability to define what is sacred, the commonplace activities of the humdrum life become sacralized.[35] This "pivoting," for Latter-day Saints, would mean that not only are baptisms, blessings, and marriages ritual; but so are the more mundane acts of ironing the shirt, corralling the children into the mini-van for church, and making the physical voyage to the chapel. The weekly congregating with fellow Saints likewise takes on new meaning in this light. The significance in attending is not simply learning new ideas from sermons and Sunday school or partaking of the sacrament (as significant as these things are). In addition there is an embodied significance in cultivating the social habits of sitting together, listening to the voice of the speaker, and in raising one's hand to sustain a newly called member. Singing hymns and reading scripture becomes a means by which participants do more than learn concepts about the gospel. They furthermore engrain the words of the text into the very "fiber of their being." Singing as a congregation, in a literal way, brings souls together as participants not only repeat the same words at the same time, but as their bodies (and more specifically their vocal cords) vibrate with the same frequency. Singing in harmony allows every "body" to perform a different function, yet resound in a bodily way that

contributes to a greater whole.

Temple ceremonies, from this perspective, begin long before one puts on the robes and makes the covenants. Indeed one postures one's body differently the moment one walks in the door. But even before that, while getting dressed at home, the body is already being groomed as a co-participant in a ritualized performance. The physical voyage to the temple, often understood symbolically as a sacrifice one makes in order to attend, can also be understood as instilling a directionality in the body – the self learns the way to the temple; and with further repetition it reflexively follows that way.

The home has long been regarded as a sacred place in Latter-day Saint belief. Indeed, most Mormon homes are replete with representations of sacredness in pictures of temples, figures of Jesus Christ, and Mormon scriptures lying in plain view. From the perspective of *li*, however, homes are more than symbols of sacredness. They are also the sacred grounds of ritual training. Education in the home is nourishment for the entire self; and extends beyond scripture study and family home evening. The conversation over the dinner table, the combined efforts of spring cleaning, or the tender embrace as mother leaves for work serves to inculcate a memory in one's body of how to engage in sacred interaction.

The proper performance of bodily activity in the home (or chapel, or temple) serves as a corpus of knowledge to draw from in performing appropriately beyond the walls of the house. The usage of "corpus" here is purposeful, as it implies the bodily word "corpse." In essence, training in the home bestows a "corpus of habits" in the body that allows one to respond to various circumstances.[36] As new circumstances arise the ritualized self taps into this corpus and enacts the appropriate response. These appropriate responses in turn contribute to the body of knowledge one draws from in future situations. Thus the corpus of knowledge and the corporeal body increase in their capacity to realize the divine self.

The sacralization of life through the theory of *li* could of course be carried over into the more mundane. From this perspective, conversing with our friends, the way we eat lunch, and the way we drive our car, are also ritualized performances. Because this life is about bodily training, and ritual is a means of bodily training, everything we do can be done in the frame of *li*. Thus there is not only an ontological significance to ritual, but an existential one as well. This is to say that there is not only a transformation that takes place on the level of ultimate being as ritual is performed, but also a tangible sacralization that takes place in the existential self. In short, from this point of view, ritualization is a sanctifying process for the human body in its aspiration to

reach its eternal goal.

The body in this regard is not an object to be controlled, conquered, or constrained. The spirit is not in bondage to the body. This line of thinking gives additional insight into Joseph F. Smith's account of the spirit world in *The* Doctrine and Covenants section 138, where the dis-embodied spirits "looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage."[37] The body, in this sense, is a liberating component in a Mormon world-view. It serves as an essential element in freeing oneself from the "awful monster" of death and hell; for without the body "our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God."[38] In the words of Joseph Smith, "[S]pirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fullness of joy."[39]

RITUAL POWER AND RITUAL AUTHORITY

The discussion thus far has been a somewhat romantic portrayal of a Mormon integration of the Confucian concept *li*. Stated flatly, however, *li* can also be seen as a form of "social control." [40] And as such we must take into account the relations between parties vying for power in creating, modifying, and enacting ritual.

The institution of the Church, and more specifically the priesthood within the Church, is the entity traditionally associated with the authority to perform ritual. While this authority is occasionally challenged, Church leadership has been rather effective at defining the parameters of ritual enactment – determining not only who receives the priesthood, but also how and when religious rituals are performed. Indeed it could be said that for the vast majority of church-attending Latter-day Saints the institution of the Church is the only party with the authority to determine ritual performance. The ritualization of everyday-life, therefore, can be seen as both extending the power of the Church and challenging its power. To put it in theoretical terms, expanding the concept of ritual serves to augment the current sources of social control – for in addition to those activities traditionally taken as ritual, the non-ritualistic activities endorsed by the institution are now ritualized. But at the same time, expanding the concept of ritual also creates competing sources of social control – for the parties normally seen as uninvolved in ritual, now take on a new significance. This conflicting situation means that broadening the category of ritual increases the power of the Church because the seemingly non-ritualistic activities encouraged by the Church (such as wearing white shirts and ties to meetings) are now included as ritual; but

it also brings other players to the table who from now on act as alternative bases of power that compete to define proper ritual performance. To state it succinctly, expanding the real estate of ritual invites speculators into a new and contested space.

This is not to say that many of the tensions highlighted here are not already latent in the current situation. The present belief in the home as a source of the sacred implicitly competes with the Church for control of the sacred – especially since even the idealized leadership structures of each entity do not map on to each other.[41] John-Charles Duffy's recent article in the *Journal of Ritual Studies* highlights the Church's attempt to control (and mask control of) bodies via changes in certain temple ceremonies.[42] Indeed, much of what this discussion on ritual accomplishes is raising the level of consciousness toward the power relations that already exist.

The Church, as a vibrant institution, has the resources to continue navigating these streams of competing power – particularly as it relates to ritual. The notion that the individual is a co-possessor (and by implication a co-competitor) of godly power is not a new claim in the history of Mormonism. The individualistic spirit of "knowing for one's self" seems to be within Mormonism from its early roots. The combination of the opposing forces of individualism and authoritarianism, therefore, is not new. As pointed out by Terryl Givens, Mormonism in this respect seems "especially rife with paradox."[43] The challenge here, however, is in dealing with an ever-increasing number of competitors vying for ritual control. The tension is not simply between the individual and the institution, but also between various sub-groups within the institution (such as the Relief Society and the priesthood) as well as emerging groups that extend beyond the institution (such as Hispanic and American cultural groupings). The relations between parties become even more complex as the Church continues to become an international organization.

This long-standing paradox within Latter-day Saint culture suggests that the success of this endeavor lie not in a resolution of the tension between competing parties, but in an ongoing dialogue of mutual "edification."[44] In other words any attempt to monopolize the power to define ritual performance undermines the foundational experience where Joseph Smith, circumventing the religious authorities of his day, "inquired" for himself. Indeed the belief that every human being has a divine nature must serve as a basis for further reflection in defining the ritualization of every-day life. This need not suggest that all things are equally sacred – one should perform much differently in the celestial room than in the dining room; but rather, the sacralization of the

body happens through a diversity of performances – many of them lying in the mundane.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this piece for broadening the notion of Mormon ritual to include all bodily practices and techniques that produce a divine body. Since the primary purpose of this life is to gain a body and enable a process of embodied learning, Latter-day Saints should not view the body as something objectified and as a thing to be conquered. Indeed, from a Latter-day Saint perspective we are not our selves without our bodies. The Confucian notion of *li* provides a way for reconceptualizing ritual and its relationship with the body. In the words of the *Discourses on Ritual*, "When *li* resides in human beings, it is nourishment." In Mormon terms, this line should be read literally. Going to church, for instance, provides more than "spiritual nourishment." There is bodily sustenance in physical participation. The embodied habits of daily prayer and scripture reading serve more than to reveal the ontological structure of reality. They convey an existential import that imprints itself in the very marrow of our bones.

One of the questions this piece implicitly raises is, how much of another religious tradition can Latter-day Saints accept? How much of the Confucian notion of *li*, for instance, can be made "Mormon"? Without pushing the issue too far, there are obvious points of conflict. But what I have tried to portray here is a theory that may stretch the boundaries of tradition yet remain within Mormon orthodoxy. Had I perhaps the room to write a second piece, I would focus on a Mormon contribution to Confucian religiosity.

The title for this article was scripted from a piece that Tu Weiming wrote in 1972 entitled "*Li* as [a] Process of Humanization."[45] Substituting "Ritual" for "*Li*" reveals the etic claim I am attempting to make. Namely, that methodological sophistication exists in places other than the "West," and these theories from the "other" can indeed shape the way we conceive our own categories. Substituting "Deification" for "Humanization" reveals the emic nuance that Mormonism puts on the term "human." In Confucian terms the purpose of life is to become fully human. In Mormon terms becoming fully human means becoming divine. Emically speaking, Latter-day Saints catch a deeper glimpse of what it means to be human, and have a body, through dialogue with Confucianism on the topic of ritual; for Confucianism demonstrates that the body is not a way-station on one's path to progression. It is the culmination of that progression.

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NOTES

[1] Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-1956), 1: 66.

[2] For more on metaphor theory see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[3] Emic and etic are terms for denoting an account of a cultural activity from the perspective of a participant or an observer, respectively. The terms were first utilized by the linguist Kenneth Pike in the 1950s and since then have been developed in the fields of anthropology and sociology. For Pike's usage see Kenneth Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior,* (Glendale, California: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1954).

[4] Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society* 2 (1973): 87.

[5] For the issue relating "will" to "action" in Confucianism see David Nivison, "Weakness of Will in Ancient Chinese Philosophy" in David Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 79-90.

[6] All translations that follow are my own, unless noted otherwise. For the sake of the English-speaking reader I have tried to cite sources that provide both an English translation as well as the Chinese original. I also employ the Pinyin system of Romanization for Chinese words. The only exception is the names of contemporary Chinese authors whose work is cataloged according to various Romanizations.

[7] Xu, Shen, *Shuowen Jiezi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 7. 示 天垂象, 見吉凶, 所以示人也。从二。(二，古文上字)。三垂，日月星也。觀乎天文，以察時變。示,神事也。 "示: The heavens hang down images to reveal fortune and misfortune, and thereby display (示) [fortune and misfortune] to people. It comes from 二. (二 is the ancient character for "up"). The three [images] that hang down are the sun, moon, and stars. Observe the patterns of the heavens to fathom the changes of the seasons. 示 are the affairs of the spirits."

[8] Xu, 7. 禮 履也。所以事神致福也。

[9] Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 21.

[10] See for instance the "Li Yun" chapter in *Li Ji*. 是故夫禮．必本於大一．分而為天地．轉而為陰陽．變而為四時．列而為鬼神．其降曰命．其官於天也. "Therefore, as for *li*, it must be rooted in the great unity; which divides to become the heavens and the Earth, rotates to become Yin and Yang, transforms to become the four seasons, and splits to become ghosts and spirits. What it sends down is called the mandate; and its abode is in the heavens." Yihua Jiang, *Xin yi Li ji du ben* (Taibei Shi: San min shu ju, 1997), 339. Hereafter "*Li Ji*."

[11] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and*

Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 55.

[12] Weiming Tu, *Humanity and Self-cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 1998), 25.

[13] I borrow this notion from Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 20.

[14] Tu, *Humanity and Self-cultivation,* 27.

[15] Fingarette, *Confucius,* 20.

[16] I believe it more than coincidence that scholars mentioned later in this piece such as Catherine Bell, who frequently employ the term 'ritualization', specialize in China. See for instance Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[17] *Analects* 12.1.2. James Legge (trans.), *The Four Books*, (Taizhong: Yishi Chubanshe, 1971), 250. 子曰．非禮勿視．非禮勿聽．非禮勿言．非禮勿動．

[18] This is one reason that there are very few self-proclaimed "Confucians." On this issue see John Berthrong, "Boston Confucianism: The Third Wave of Global Confucianism," in *Confucianism in Dialogue Today*, ed. Liu, Shu-Hsien et al. (Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 2004), 26-47.

[19] *Analects* 2:4. Legge, *The Four Books*, 146-147.

[20] Roger T. Ames, "Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism: A Dialogue," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 30 (3-4:2003): 403-417. Also helpful is Roger T. Ames, "The Meaning of Body in Classical Chinese Thought" in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*. Edited by Thomas P. Kasulis with Roger T. Ames and Wimal Dissanayake (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 157-177.

[21] For more on the idea of "framing" action as a way of conceiving ritual see Michael Puett et al., *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially page 5.

[22] James Legge, ed. and trans., *The Chinese Classics, With a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes* (Taibei: Wen shi zhe chubanshe, 1971), 379, 386. "Cheng Gong" 13 …禮身之幹也． "…*Li* is the trunk of the body." "Cheng Gong" 15 …禮以庇身…. "use *li* to shield the body." I came across the latter of these references when reading Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China,* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 323.

[23] *Li Ji*, "Li Yun," 339. …而固人之肌膚之會．筋骸之束也．

[24] John Knoblock, trans., *Xunzi,* (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), 38. *Xunzi* 2.11. 禮者所以正身也….

[25] Xu Shen defines *ti* as a composite character taking its meaning from the left-hand side graph *gu* 骨 (flesh and bones), and its sound from the right-hand graph *li* 豊 (a ritual vessel with an offering placed on top). Xu, 86. 體　總十二屬也。从骨豊聲。　"體: All twelve appendages. [It's meaning] comes from骨．豊 is [its] sound."

[26] *Li Ji*, "Li Qi," 352. 禮也者．猶體也．體不備．君子謂之不成人．

[27] *Mencius* 2.1.6. Legge, *The Four Books*, 201-204.

[28] *Li Ji*, "Li Yun," 339. 其[禮]居人也曰養.

[29] Knoblock, *Xunzi,* 602-603. *Xunzi* 19.2 故禮者，　養也　。　芻豢稻粱　，　五味調香　，　所以養口也　；　椒蘭芬　苾　，　所以養鼻也　；　雕琢刻鏤　，　黼黻文章　，　所以養目也　；　鐘鼓　管磬　，　琴瑟竽笙　，　所以養耳也　；　疏房檖貌　，　越席床第几筵　，　所 以養體也　。　故禮者養也。Knoblock's translation.

[30] See for instance *Li Ji*, "Fang Ji," 715-735. And *Analects* 12.1, Legge, *The Four Books*, 249.

[31] Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 222.

[32] *Xunzi* 19.13. Knoblock, *Xunzi,* 625. 禮者，　斷長續短　，　損有餘　，　益不足　，　達愛敬之文　，　而滋成行義 之美者也. Knoblock's translation.

[33] 'Humanization', here meaning a process of becoming a proper human being.

[34] *Guodian chu mu zhu jian* (Beijing: Wen wu chu ban she, 1998), 181. 君子身以為主心.

[35] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M.B. Vizedom and G.L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 12. As quoted and explained in Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 37.

[36] A similar play on "body" as "corpus" occurs in Roger T. Ames, "The Meaning of Body in Classical Chinese Thought" in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice,* ed. Thomas P. Kasulis with Roger T. Ames and Wimal Dissanayake (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 157-177.

[37] D&C 138:50

[38] See 2 Nephi 9:7-10 where Jacob asserts that part of the "awful[ness]" of death and hell is the permanent separation of spirit and body.

[39] D&C 93:33.

[40] See Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 222; where Bell describes ritual as "social control" and explains that is must be "perceived as . . . amenable to some degree of individual appropriation" in order to maintain its staying power.

[41] Interesting work could be done on the changing relations between the family and the church throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One part of this picture is that in the last few decades the church has attempted to bolster the power of the family (and perhaps its influence in the home) by decreasing the number of activities it holds and encouraging activities in the home such as family home evening.

[42] John-Charles Duffy, "Concealing the Body, Concealing the Sacred: The Decline of Ritual Nudity in Mormon Temples," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 21.2, (2007): 1-21.

[43] Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xiv.

[44] This refers to D&C 50:22, where the "edification" of the Holy Ghost is predicated on the mutual understanding of all parties involved in dialogue.

[45] Reprinted in Tu, *Humanity and Cultivation*, 17-34.

Toward a Mormon Metaphysics: Scripture, Process Theology, and the Mechanics of Faith

by Andrew Miles

I am convinced that many Mormons like metaphysics, even though the word would likely mean little to the majority of them. Nevertheless, they seem to embark on metaphysical journeys often, usually under the guise of searching for answers to questions about how the larger universe works in accordance with the spiritual laws of the gospel. While few consider this line of inquiry vital, a good number would probably describe it with terms such as "interesting," or even "fascinating." The reasons for their interest are not hard to find, for from the earliest days of the Latter-day Saint movement Joseph Smith, the founder, included metaphysical ideas in the revelations he reported. Extensive descriptions of pre- and post-mortal conditions, along with references to eternal laws, elements, intelligences, spirits, and the like, presented a picture of eternity in which the spiritual and the scientific were closely intermingled.

Over the years, several Mormon thinkers have tried to construct a more systematic synthesis of the scattered metaphysical references found in their canon. In this essay I will reference two persons in particular, John A. Widtsoe and Parley P. Pratt. Both of these men sought to create a grand narrative which explained God, the universe, and everything in it.[1] My own aim is somewhat more modest. I will show how a particular understanding of the fundamental materials of the universe, element and intelligence, can provide a coherent foundation upon which additional metaphysical principles can

be based. Drawing on two basic insights offered by process theology, I posit a relationship between the two that promises great explanatory insight into other aspects of Mormon cosmology. In order to appropriately lay out this idea, I will first describe the LDS basis on which a dualistic understanding of the universe's essential materials is based, and then relate how both Widtsoe and Pratt utilized this idea in their metaphysics and the consequent questions that their work raises. I will briefly describe two principles from process thought and the solution they suggest, and then explore the explanatory power of this modified version of an LDS metaphysics by testing it against Mormon conceptions of faith.

FUNDAMENTALS OF LDS METAPHYSICS

Latter-day Saint scripture describes a universe composed of several fundamental materials, but just what these are can be challenging to discover. The Doctrine and Covenants records that "[m]an was . . . in the beginning with God," then explains that "man is spirit."[2] The two statements taken together in effect proclaim that there is something of a person, a spiritual essence, which has always existed. Other canonical accounts, reinforced by later LDS teaching, suggest that this spiritual component is in the form of a human being, albeit without physical materiality.[3] The Doctrine and Covenants also describes a second material existing alongside eternal spirits by stating that "[t]he elements are eternal, and spirit and element inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy."[4] Thus at first glance spirits and elements seem to be building blocks of the universe. Yet the same revelation in The Doctrine and Covenants also describes a third aspect of existence, something it calls "intelligence." "Intelligence," which it defines as "the light of truth," is likewise eternal, for it "was not created or made, neither indeed can be."[5] To further complicate matters, a later revelation declares that "[t]here is no such thing as immaterial matter" and hence "[a]ll spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes."[6] By this definition, spirits would appear to be constructed from elements and hence *not* self-existent in the universe. How are we to make sense of these seemingly contradictory statements?

Fortunately, Joseph Smith's teachings and other revelations shed a great deal of light on the subject by indicating that terms like "spirit" and "intelligence" can have different meanings depending on their context. In a book of LDS scripture, the book of Abraham, "intelligence" is used as a descriptive trait, that is to say, as describing the intellectual capacities and knowledge of other

beings. The text describes Abraham as he learns the secrets of the universe from God. He is told that "there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord thy God, I am more intelligent than they all."[7] Later in the same text, however, "intelligence" is used to indicate a distinct consciousness, a type of pre-mortal person. It records that Abraham saw "the *intelligences* that were organized before the world was,' and then describes them as "souls" and "spirits" that have the characteristics of being "noble" and "good."[8] Here "intelligence" is used to express the same idea typically conveyed by "spirit." Hence the term is used both to refer to a type or primal, spiritual person and to describe the mental capacity of such beings.[9] So defined, "intelligence" does not seem to qualify as a foundational component of the universe. Used to refer to a trait, it becomes merely descriptive and must have a pre-existing object to describe. As a synonym for "spirit," it refers to a type of being which is composed of the more fundamental material of matter, as noted earlier. Must we then conclude, despite references to the eternality of man, that the elements are the only permanent feature of the universe?

Here Smith's non-canonical remarks provide useful clarification. On one occasion, Smith taught that "[t]he mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal with God himself."[10] This suggests a third way that the term "intelligence" can be used, namely as a referent to the cognitive capacities that constitute an individual's personal essence (as opposed to her material spirit). According to Smith, it is the mind/intelligence of a person, not necessarily the material spirit, that is eternal. Later LDS Church Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith similarly noted the multiple meanings of "intelligence" when he said that "intelligence, like time and space, always existed, and therefore did not have to be created. However, intelligences spoken of in the Book of Abraham were created, for these are spirit children of God."[11] "Intelligence," then, can refer to two different aspects of the universe, only one of which, the mind-version, can be considered fundamental. The other referent, the material spirit of a person, is composed of elements and hence cannot be a primary substance. Unfortunately, even this clarification fails to fully explain what "intelligence" is; the phrase "[t]he mind or intelligence which man possesses" could refer to either a collective substance called "mind" from which individual spirits are formed or to individual mind*s* that have always existed as distinct entities. In either case, however, once the terminological confusion is sorted through, it seems apparent that intelligence, defined as the eternally-existing mind or minds of persons, stand alongside the elements as a type of primary material in the universe.

Two important Mormon thinkers, John Widtsoe and Parley P. Pratt, recognized the duality inherent in the fundamental components of the cosmos, and each formulated a metaphysics that sought to incorporate element and intelligence into a coherent narrative. Widtsoe's approach is the more complete of the two and has had the greatest impact on mainstream Mormon thought. He begins with the claim that "[t]he Gospel accepts the view, supported by all human experience, that matter occurs in many forms, some visible to the eye, others invisible, and yet others that may not be recognized by any of the sense of man." This gradated matter, "in its essence, is eternal, that is, everlasting."[12] Matter, which Widtsoe uses interchangeably with the term "elements," is paired with energy such that "[i]t is not conceivably possible to separate them." Although Widtsoe is reticent to distinguish too concretely between the two (instead leaving open the possibility that matter is a form of energy or vice versa), he is clear that the two are invariably joined. He is more confident in positing that they are ultimately controlled by a universal intelligence, though he again hesitates to specify a more precise relationship between them. He does, however, suggest two very interesting possibilities. In the first case, he mentions the idea, if only to state that it cannot be affirmed, that "a degree of intelligence is possessed by every particle of energized matter," an interesting approach that would suggest that the elements have a measure of thinking-capacity and lean more toward an conception of intelligence as being eternally individual. The second idea, which he seems more confident of, is that "energy is only a form of intelligence, and that matter and intelligence, rather than matter and energy, are the two fundamentals of the universe!"[13] This, of course, leads us back to the conclusion reached above, namely that intelligence and elements are the foundational components in the Mormon view of the cosmos, though it does not clarify whether "intelligence" is to be understood collectively or individually .

While Widtsoe feels that intelligence is eternal, he seems to consider it as something distinct from the intelligence possessed by humans. This form of intelligence has a beginning, a time "when conscious life was just dawning." Once sentient, intelligences are characterized by "distinct individuality impossible of confusion with any other individuality among the hosts of intelligent beings," central to which is their capacity to exercise an independent will. In Widtsoe's mind, the universe is governed by fixed laws, and primal persons develop by asserting their wills to learn and master the principles by which the cogs of the cosmos turn. This, in turn, increases their power, for as they understand more of the laws, they are better able to manipulate and utilize them.[14] God himself evolves by the same means,

and his position as sovereign of the universe is a result of intense effort in ages past that resulted in "a conquest over the universe, which to our finite understanding seems absolutely complete."[15] God, in turn, offers assistance to less advanced intelligences by conveying the knowledge that they need in order to progress more readily.[16] In the end, intelligences have the capacity to learn all the laws as did God, though "the understanding that will give [them] full mastery over nature will come little by little, yet," Widtsoe predicts, "in the end, man shall know all that he desires."[17] For Widtsoe, knowledge is the key development and power, and can be gained by any intelligence that exercises its will toward acquiring it.

Like Widtsoe, Parley P. Pratt envisions a cosmos in which intelligence and elements are fundamental, and in which the former exercises power over the later. In his words, "[t]he whole vast structure of universal organized existence, presents undeniable evidences of three facts, viz. – First. The eternal existence of the elements of which it is composed. Second. The eternal existence of the attributes of intelligence, and wisdom to design. Third. The eternal existence of power, to operate upon and control these eternal elements, so as to carry out the plans of the designer." [18] Intelligence and power work in concert to form the elements into created works (persons, planets, etc.). In Pratt's mind, the elements have innate "energies, attributes, or inherent powers" that are the basis for the "love, joy," and similar emotions that intelligent spiritual beings (which we must remember are composed of matter) enjoy.[19] Presumably Pratt means that the combination of matter in certain ways allows such sentiments to be felt. Pratt does not indicate whether or not he endorses a view of intelligence as the mind of humans, co-eternal with God, for his use of the term in outlining the three fundamental facts of the universe describes intelligence as an attribute. He *does* adopt a more personal definition later on when he describes man as "an organized individual or intelligence," but this description better fits the idea of "intelligence" being synonymous with a created and material "spirit." In any event, he agrees with Widtsoe that these intelligences are meant to progress and are bound by laws, though he does not posit a metaphysical connection between the two, i.e. that laws facilitate advancement. On the contrary, he seems to see them almost as hurdles to be overcome. In his view, laws are imposed by God as a test of obedience. In the end, those pre-mortal persons who obey the laws of God will advance to a mortal probationary period, followed by a post-mortal interim of similar purpose. Having passed all of these tests, they will be placed in a position in which "all the elements necessary to [their] happiness . . . are placed within [their] lawful reach, and made subservient to [their] use."[20] Having proven

themselves worthy, dominance over the elements will be given to them, presumably by God. Thus while Widtsoe views laws as the metaphysically-fixed mechanisms for advancement, Pratt sees them more as test of a person's willingness to follow God. It is nonetheless significant that even with these differences, both thinkers fixed on elements and some understanding of intelligence as fundamental, and that both described a relationship of power between them.

The similarities expressed in Widtsoe's and Pratt's metaphysical understandings of the universe raise several interesting questions. The overarching problem is how a meaningful metaphysics can be created that incorporates the ideas of intelligence(s), elements, and some type of power relationship between the two. Widtsoe, at least, indicates that the concept of eternal laws provides a means by which the power dynamic can be understood, theorizing that intelligences that learn the laws will be able to manipulate the elements through their use. Yet even if his idea is accepted, it still fails to adequately answer the question of just what those laws are and, especially, how an intelligent being can *metaphysically* influence matter. Is there a way to posit a relationship between intelligence and the elements that is logically coherent? In the end, any Mormon metaphysics will have to explain a variety of LDS concepts in order to be seen as viable. The next question therefore becomes: to what extent can a given metaphysics explain and illuminate other Mormon ideas?

MORMON METAPHYSICS AND PROCESS THOUGHT

A possible key to unlocking the connection between intelligence and elements is offered by a relatively recent philosophical and theological movement known as process thought. Originating in the early twentieth century in the works of Alfred North Whitehead, it has since been expanded and refined by a number of influential thinkers.[21] While its ideas are often complex and vary widely, there is nevertheless basic agreement on several general points. Fundamental to process understandings of the universe, unsurprisingly, is the idea that all reality is in process, or in other words, in a state of becoming. Reality is composed of numerous individual events of becoming, called "occasions of experience." These occasions are intimately related, and are formed by and in turn influence all other occasions. For process theologians, though certainly not all process thinkers, God represents one of these influences. It is important to note that interconnectedness does not necessitate a form of determinism, with each new occasion being totally

determined by the external influences acting upon it. These external forces, while powerful, must take account of another fact: actual occasions are always, at some level at least, self-determining. This inherent freedom means that occasions are able to deviate from a straightforward cause-and-effect type of becoming and introduce a degree of novelty into the way reality is formed both in the present and in the future. Put simply, all of the components of the universe have free will, and hence can and do genuinely influence the way the future unfolds.[22]

While such a bare-bones overview of process thought is vastly oversimplified and incomplete, it nevertheless introduces and situates the two main ideas that are of great use in forming a Mormon metaphysics, namely freedom and relatedness. To see the connection, it will be useful to unpack these concepts to observe what they imply. Freedom suggests a choice, and the claim that all components of reality are free is equivalent to saying that they all have the ability to decide, however limited these decisions may be. This, in turn, implies a degree of thinking-capacity and individuality on the part of all occasions of experience. Process thinker C. Robert Mesle explains that for the simplest occasions – e.g. those making up electrons- the "capacity to 'decide'" might be limited to a choice "between moving this way or that way." As these simpler occasions combine into "societies of occasions," more complex beings are formed which in turn develop "the capacity for moral thought and significant moral freedom." Yet these higher thought processes do not negate the freedom of the individual components which gave it life. On the contrary, Mesle suggests that they retain their individuality, but combine in order to experience greater enjoyment. As occasions combine, he argues, "experience becomes so incredibly rich and complex that the wealth of experience of billions of individuals can be amplified, transformed, and fed into a single, central experience capable . . . of thought and imagination, and of emotions like love, hate, and jealousy."[23] What we have, then, is self-determining occasions that combine in order to pursue some higher aim, such as experiencing ever-greater sensation. These more complex beings in turn develop a greater capacity for thought and, with it, an increased ability to act freely.

The question remains, however, of how simple occasions with only enough capacity to "mov[e] this way or that way" would know to combine at all. It seems unlikely that in their simple state they would have sufficient reasoning capability to make such a decision. Process theologians offer one way of overcoming this difficulty. For them, God is an essential part of the universe who acts as someone somewhat akin to a cosmic foreman. It is God

that provides the impetus for simple occasions to combine into more complex beings, for God wants all occasions to maximize their positive experiences and knows that greater complexity allows for greater creativity and enjoyment.[24] To accomplish this, God gives each occasion an "initial aim," which is "an impulse . . . to actualize the best possibility open to it, given its concrete situation." God cannot overrule freedom, and hence cannot force occasions to comply with the divine organizing scheme. Yet some listen and respond, and slowly God is able to move the universe through a gradual process of evolution toward greater complexity and enjoyment.[25] An important point is that God's ability to lure creation into being, so to speak, is dependent on God's essential relatedness to all things. It is because of this inextricable connection to all actual occasions that God can know what each needs and consistently offer initial aims to all of them at every moment of time. Hence relation is the metaphysical principle by which God is able to exert influence on the universe.

What do these process ideas of freedom and relationality offer LDS thought? In the first place, process conceptions of freedom suggest that all aspects of the universe, down to the most fundamental components, possess a self-determining will. The individuality that this implies can be useful in sorting through the question of whether "intelligence" should be understood as a collective substance of mind or as a referent to an eternally individual entity among many such entities. Process suggests that in order for intelligence to truly be free, it must be individual. This agrees with Widtsoe's strong emphasis on the "will" of man, though it takes the idea further than he was willing to go by depicting it as eternal, that is, without beginning. In the second place, process thought's description of God's interaction with the universe lends itself to the idea that as not all occasions will respond to God's initial aim, there must exist a spectrum of complexities and, hence, a spectrum of mental capabilities. Widtsoe would agree with this conclusion, though he would likely disagree with the metaphysical description of how it comes to be. Thus while he admits that there is "the probability of infinite gradation from the lowest to the highest development" in intelligent beings, he sees this gradation as the result of the successful mastery of natural laws. He states that "man in his primeval as in his present condition, possessing with all other attributes of intelligence, the power of will, exercised that will upon the contents of the universe. The reaction of the will upon the material universe within reach enabled intelligent beings, little by little, to acquire power. By the use of this will upon the contents of the universe, man must have become what he now is."[26] For Widtsoe, the task of progression is one of

domination, of attaining to "an intelligent control of nature."[27] The universe is filled with "contents" that are to be acted upon. Process thinkers, on the other hand, emphasize a relational form of power in which God must *persuade* the "contents" of the cosmos to comply, for each individual occasion has a will that cannot be disregarded. The components out of which the universe exists are not inert, but self-determining.

The process idea of relational power suggests a model for understanding the way that intelligence has power over the elements, a relationship that both Widtsoe and Pratt identify. Let us assume for a moment that the process depiction of power is correct and that God can only exercise persuasive influence. As mentioned, this would require that every component part of the universe possess some degree of freedom and capacity to choose (otherwise there would be no reason for God to attempt persuasion). The question then becomes how, in an LDS framework, a capacity to choose could be seen at the most fundamental level, that is, in intelligence and the elements. Ironically, Widtsoe himself suggests a solution, though he is unwilling to pursue it. Matter, he states, "is always associated with energy," which energy serves to "vivif[y]" it. This energy might be seen as "only a form of intelligence," or in other words, as a rudimentary form of self-determination. Thus the idea that "a degree of intelligence is possessed by every particle of energized matter" which he so quickly dismisses as speculative provides a metaphysical means of assigning freedom to the most fundamental components of the universe.[28] Individual intelligences, each joined to an element particle, would have the ability to hear God's call and freely respond. God's power could be truly persuasive. The implications of this idea for an LDS metaphysics are profound, but their discussion will be deferred to a later portion of this essay. First it is important to address some of the potential problems raised by this arrangement.

Initially, we may be led to ask why a Mormon approach would posit a union of intelligences and elements. Is it simply because process thought does likewise, or can it be defended on other grounds? This objection can be answered on two fronts. In the first place, such a move can be defended in light of the explanatory power that it brings to other LDS principles, as will be seen later in this essay through our discussion of faith. In the second place, it corresponds with the concept, found in several places in LDS scripture, that intelligences are happier (a process person might say they have more "enjoyment") when paired with matter. Why this is the case is not specified, but that it is so comes through clearly. The Doctrine and Covenants states as much: "spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of

joy."[29] This fits neatly with another LDS idea, albeit more speculative, that mind-intelligences were housed in material spirit bodies as one step in their progression.[30] Taking material form was seen as an advancement, not a hindrance. Consider also the vision of church president Joseph F. Smith who, in a vision of the afterlife, saw that "the dead . . . looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage."[31] These spirits, though arguably still material beings, nevertheless craved the enhanced sensations that a physical body provided. The underlying theme in all three of these examples is that intelligences and the intelligent beings they grow into are more fulfilled through connection to the elements.

At this point we encounter another problem. If the universe has only two basic components, intelligences and elements, and intelligences are able to progress, how can we posit that some are bound to individual element particles? If all intelligences are capable of significant progression, would not such an arrangement limit them to existence at the most rudimentary level? There are two possible solutions to this conundrum. In the first, the pairing of an intelligence with an element particle can be seen as a step in the developmental process through which all intelligences must go. In this scenario, an intelligence would join with an element particle and exist as an element/intelligence pair until it had learned all that was necessary from such an experience, at which point it would be advanced to the next stage of progression, perhaps assignment to a material spirit body. A newer, less developed intelligence would then be assigned to the element so that it retained its freedom (necessary in order to respond to God's call). Such a system would require an endless supply of intelligences, for no single group would remain joined to the elements indefinitely.

The second possibility, which given other LDS ideas seems more likely, is that many, if not most, intelligences stop progressing at a certain point. This solves the problem of needing an infinite number of intelligences, for it is possible to imagine that intelligences of limited capacity are permanently paired with the elements. Only some intelligences would be able to progress to higher forms of being. In a faith that professes the possibility of eternal progression, such a proposition may at first glance seem untenable. The idea of limitation, however, is by no means foreign to Mormon thought. In The Book of Mormon, the prophet Alma discourses on the high and holy calling of high priests. In his remarks he states that some men were so called "from the foundation of the world . . . on account of their exceeding faith and good works; in the first place being left to choose good or evil." Others, who "might have had as great a privilege," were denied this calling, for they chose

to "reject the Spirit of God." Lest the point be missed, Alma clarifies that "in the first place they were on the same standing with their brethren; thus this holy calling being prepared . . . for such as would not harden their hearts."[32] Pre-mortal persons, all of whom had the same potential to progress, limited themselves through incorrect decisions. Widtsoe also believes in the possibility of self-limitation, for in describing spiritual beings he explains that "[t]hrough the exercise of their wills they grew, remained passive, or retrograded, for with living things motion in any direction is possible."[33] The same idea is expressed in The Doctrine and Covenants, where a person's eternal state of glory is determined by his thoughts and actions while on the earth. Those not marrying by priesthood authority, for example, "are appointed angels in heaven," for they "did not abide [God's] law; therefore, they cannot be enlarged, but remain separately and singly . . . forever and ever."[34] In this view, intelligences stop progressing at different points due to choices that they make.

Another possibility is that intelligences are innately limited. Such an approach might be indicated by a passage in the book of Abraham. One verse states that "[t]hese two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they." This description indicates that spiritual beings are not all equally intelligent, the implication being that this inequality creates a gradation of thought-capacities and abilities. God governs because he is "more intelligent than they all."[35] What this passage does not tell us, nor is it to be found anywhere in the LDS canon, is whether the differing capacities of intelligent beings can be attributed to differences in type. For some limitation on progression comes through an improper exercise of will, as just seen. Is it not possible, however, that other intelligences are of a different sort, one that is innately unable to evolve beyond a certain point? Mormon scriptures have little to say on this question; what limited references they contain to pre-mortal existence concentrate predominately on primal persons, those that would eventually be born onto the earth.[36] Thus they do not confirm nor deny the possibility of fundamentally limited intelligences. Yet positing that some intelligences are inherently limited might account for other scriptural passages that describe lower aspects of creation, such as animals and even the earth itself, as having spirits. In this scheme, intelligences with less potential could be assigned to a mortal existence (remember that materiality brings joy) as an insect, or a dog, or some other being that as far as we know cannot progress beyond a certain point. This being said, there is always the possibility that intelligences that end up as lesser beings originally had the potential of infinite progression

but early on made choices that severely limited them, and only at that point were they assigned to be the spirits of animals and the like. In either case, whether intelligences are self-limiting or inherently limited, the important point is that the idea of intelligences being limited is not contradicted by LDS scripture and is, indeed, supported by it.

While determining whether intelligences are limited or uniformly capable of unbounded progression is a worthy undertaking, it lies beyond the scope of this essay. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that reasons exist within LDS thought to believe that intelligences can be paired with the elements and, indeed, have a compelling reason for being so joined. More importantly, a union of intelligences with elements provides a metaphysical reason for believing that the universe, down to its smallest intelligence/element pairs, has some degree of freedom. Having established the viability of this approach on one front, let us now turn our attention to a test of its explanatory power.

A CASE STUDY OF FAITH: TEST DRIVING THE INTELLIGENCE/ELEMENT UNION HYPOTHESIS

As with any metaphysical principle, the most resounding affirmation of the idea that intelligences and elements are joined is its ability to coherently explain other aspects of an LDS theological system. While I do not presume to claim that it adequately deals with all Mormon concepts, I do believe that it provides the key to compellingly explain LDS understandings of faith.

Mormon canonical references to faith are frequent, but not always clear as to their meaning. What exactly is faith? While this question cannot be answered definitively, there is a scriptural base for defining it as trust, especially trust in God's power. Connecting faith to trust at first might seem somewhat problematic, for though both concepts are discussed in LDS scripture, they are never equated with one another directly. Yet it seems apparent that the Book of Mormon uses the terms interchangeably, as evident from a quick comparison between two segments of a speech attributed to a king named Benjamin. Benjamin, in a farewell address to his people, declares that Christ "cometh unto his own, that salvation might come unto the children of men even through *faith* on his name."[37] Shortly thereafter, he reemphasizes his point using different- and for our purposes significant- wording. Christ's atonement, he says, was "prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his *trust* in the Lord."[38] In the first instance, Benjamin says that salvation comes by faith, while in the second he just as clearly declares that it comes to those who trust God. He

is either contradicting himself or else using the two terms interchangeably. That the latter seems to be the case seems clear from other Book of Mormon references. In the famous chapter on faith, Alma 32, Alma describes faith in relational terms. After admonishing his listeners to remember "that God is merciful unto all who believe on his name," he tells them that God's desire is "that ye should believe, yea, even on his word." This belief should lead to action, and Alma encourages his audience to "awake and arouse [their] faculties, even to an experiment upon [his] words."[39] God, the merciful and hence trustworthy one, wants humans to trust what he declares and promises, and to act accordingly. Nephi, another Book of Mormon prophet, demonstrates a similar understanding of the connection between trusting God and action. In response to a difficult request he tells his father that he "will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for [he] know[s] that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them."[40] Nephi is willing to act precisely because he feels confident that the Lord will not fail to assist him. In short, Nephi trusts God, and so acts faithfully. Although many more examples could be given, the foregoing are sufficient to support the definition of faith as trust.

In addition to a working definition of faith, it is also important to mention the idea of power. Many scriptural passages link faith with the ability to exercise power. The book of Acts, for example, describes a man named Stephen as one who was "full of faith and power," such that he "did great wonders and miracles among the people."[41] *The* Book of Mormon also ties power to faith. One prophet, Jacob, declares that all who attain an "unshaken" faith can "truly command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey . . . or the mountains, or the waves of the sea."[42] Another, Nephi, is described as being able to "minister with power and with great authority" to the point that "it [was] not possible that [others] could disbelieve his words" because his faith was so great.[43] The last prophet recorded in the book states the relationship succinctly: "And Christ hath said: If ye will have faith in me ye shall have power to do whatsoever thing is expedient in me."[44] Faith, then, is tied to God's power.

From a basic understanding of faith as trust and the power it apparently possesses, interesting questions arise. How is it that faith/trust relates to power? Can it be seen as a metaphysical mechanism for exercising influence? It is here that the ideas proposed in the previous section offer the greatest illumination. Recall that joining intelligences with particles of matter provides a means of affirming a basic level of self-determination to every component

of the universe. This, in turn, allows for a God that works through persuasive influence rather than through domination.

Consider the following scenario. God, wanting to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man," decides to assist underdeveloped intelligences in their advancement.[45] Knowing that material existence is the path to progression and enjoyment, he urges an intelligence to join with a particle of some element.[46] The intelligence, at whatever level of thought it is capable of, decides that God is trustworthy. This may be because, as Widtsoe suggests, God "exercised his will vigorously . . . [and] his recognition of universal laws became greater until he attained at last a conquest over the universe" and this mastery reassures it of God's competence.[47] Perhaps the intelligence also senses that God has its best interest at heart. In any case, it trusts God, so when he gives a command to or offers to pair that intelligence up with an element of matter, it consents. Furthermore, when God decides that several of these pairs need to combine to make more complex molecules and structures, each participating intelligence again decides to trust God, i.e. to have faith in God, and so they combine. (Similarly, if and when God commands the intelligences to break apart or perform some other action, they trust that God knows what is best and comply.) As more and more intelligence/element pairs combine, more complex structures are created to which more advanced intelligences can be joined, and so on up the intelligence chain until we see the formation of organisms that humans would recognize as having some ability to choose, like animals. Yet at no point is the freedom of intelligences circumvented, and they are forever able to choose for themselves.

In such a scheme, God surely has power over the universe, but that power comes because intelligences trust and choose to follow him. God's power comes from their faith in him. This is consistent with other descriptions of influence found in Mormon scripture. Section 121 of The Doctrine and Covenants describes the principles upon which power should be exercised. "[T]he powers of heaven," it states, "cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness." Those who "undertake to cover [their] sins, or to gratify [their] pride, [their] vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness" are deemed untrustworthy, and their power is removed. Others, however, realize that "power or influence . . . ought to be maintained . . . only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned," as well as by "kindness, and pure knowledge." These attributes, in contrast to the previous set, make a person worthy of trust, and hence others can have faith in him/her. The result for those who so

act is a "dominion [that] shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto [them] forever and ever."[48] Dominion by this definition is never forced, but comes as a voluntary offering of those being governed, persons who are content to obey because they have complete faith in the person they are following. While the principles described in this section are given as a description of mortal power relations, the fact that they can produce results that last "forever and ever" indicates that they also have application in the larger universe. Indeed, they complement the idea of God using persuasive power. If persons will willingly follow another human who displays noble characteristics, is it not reasonable to conclude that they, and all self-determining components of the universe, would be willing to trust and obey the being that possesses those attributes in perfection?

In addition to corresponding to principles of power found in the Doctrine and Covenants, the idea of God exercising persuasive influence also seems to make sense out of the several scriptural passages that equate power to God's word. One such is the widely read first chapter of the book of Genesis, in which God is depicted as creating through verbal commands. "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light."[49] While some undoubtedly regard such a statement as purely metaphorical, a literal reading seems to be supported by another, much clearer, passage in the Book of Mormon. "[B]y the power of [God's] word man came upon the face of the earth," says Jacob, "which earth was created by the power of his word." Lest his meaning be unclear, he continues: "Wherefore, if God being able to speak and the world was, and to speak and man was created, O then, why not able to command the earth, or the workmanship of his hands upon the face of it, according to his will and pleasure?"[50] Jacob clearly regards God's power to be one of a divine impetus, perhaps even a verbal command, followed by compliance on the part of creation. While such a notion seems fantastic, even in violation of the laws of nature as we know them, it is not antithetical to the relationship between trust and power described above. It is possible that the self-determining intelligence/element pairs of which everything is composed, under normal circumstances, are content to follow the normal patterns of behavior, that is, the universal laws. Thus when Jesus and his disciples were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, they were only seeing nature acting as it normally does. Yet when Jesus arose and "rebuked the wind and the raging of the water," the pairs recognized him as an authoritative and trustworthy source, chose to comply with his command, and altered their normal activities. In this regard, Jesus' calming of the seas need not be seen as a violation of natural law, but rather a manifestation of a higher principle.

While the foregoing might describe how intelligent beings can have faith in God, and the consequent influence that this affords him, it does not, at first glance, indicate how humans are able to similarly tap into faith's potential for power. That people are able to exert great power through faith is a doctrine well-attested in LDS canonical works. Yet humans typically are far less worthy of unwavering trust than is God, if for no other reason than they lack the exhaustive knowledge of natural laws that, arguably, is partially responsible for God's trustworthiness. If the fundamental intelligence/element pairs cannot have faith in humans, how can humans exercise the type of influence over them necessary to produce the types of results described in scripture?[51] One answer is suggested by a passage in the book of Moroni: "And Christ hath said: If ye will have faith in me ye shall have power to do whatsoever thing is expedient in me."[52] This text indicates that when people attempt to exercise faith-based influence, they are actually trusting Christ to exert influence in their behalf. If I want a sick friend to recover, I place my trust in Christ, who then performs the healing, as long as it is in accordance with his larger purposes. In this model Christ retains all the power, and any sense that humans possess power over the natural world via their faith is an illusion.

A second, but related, approach is indicated by the words of the prophet Jacob who said that with "unshaken" faith people can "command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey [them], or the mountains, or the waves of the sea."[53] This method of exercising faith seems more direct, for the human agent directly commands the natural world with the anticipation that it will respond. In this scenario, intelligence/element pairs respond directly to a human, not to Christ who is acting at a human's request. Initially this formulation seems to encounter the same problem described above, which is that the pairs have little reason to trust the human that is commanding them. Yet in this case Jacob specifically mentions that the human agent speaks "in the name of Jesus," indicating that his request is in compliance with the overall purposes of God. The intelligence/element pairs can feel confident in responding, not because the human is trustworthy, but because the divine being and divine plan that the person represents is trustworthy. Thus in either scenario, humans can be accurately described as being able to exercise faith in a way that does not violate the trust-based metaphysical operations argued for in this essay.

We have seen, then, that any Mormon metaphysics must incorporate the two basic components of existence as described in LDS scripture, namely intelligences and elements. Both John A. Widtsoe and Parley P. Pratt include these into their descriptions of the cosmos, and both posit a relationship

between them, with intelligence having power over the material universe. Process philosophy offers two principles - relational power and freedom at all levels of the universe - which suggest a way that intelligences and elements can be understood and combined. The union of basic intelligences and particles of matter is consistent with Mormon ideas of the desirability of material existence and does much to explain the mechanisms by which faith operates. Faith, which is synonymous with trust, allows God to exert great influence over creation via relationships with the fundamental intelligence/element pairs of which everything is constructed. These pairs trust God (and any person affiliated with God) and therefore obey his commands.

The idea of a union of intelligences and elements by no means lays out a comprehensive Mormon metaphysics. Nevertheless, in light of its ability to provide a compelling description of the metaphysical principles underlying faith that are consistent with LDS scriptural references to the same, and the fact that it makes sense of several other concepts, like the importance of material existence and free agency, this hypothesis warrants serious consideration. Admittedly, it only adds to the frameworks constructed by earlier Mormon thinkers like John Widtsoe and Parley P. Pratt, and even then in a way that leaves gaping holes of theological underdevelopment through which the winds of criticism can blow. What happens, for example, if the fundamental intelligences upon which God's creative power rests choose to rebel and disregard God's instructions, no matter his level of trustworthiness? While this and other such questions cannot be answered here, it is appropriate to suggest that we look to other theologies for answers, especially to the process thought that yielded two of the basic ideas upon which this work is built. Indeed, even from the brief sketch of process theology given above, readers can detect the strong similarities between a process metaphysics and an LDS approach based on relational power. This overlap leads one to hope that the solutions to similar problems encountered in process thought can provide answers to their Mormon counterparts. So, too, can we hope that this approach to an LDS metaphysics will provide valuable insights into other areas of Mormon doctrine and theology.

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NOTES

[1] In this essay, I will use the term "God" generically, that is, without any attempt to differentiate between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. My reason for this

is that such distinctions make little difference to the type of argument that I am making, and would only clutter the text and create confusion.

² D&C 93:29, 33.

³ See Ether 3:16.

⁴ D&C 93:33.

⁵ D&C 93:29.

⁶ D&C 131:7.

⁷ Abraham 3:19. The book of Abraham is contained in *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).

⁸ Abraham 3:22-23. Emphasis added.

⁹ Joseph Smith also used the term "intelligence" interchangeably with "spirit." On one occasion he taught 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." (Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, Inc., 2002), 367).

¹⁰ Ibid., 365.

¹¹ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1960), 125.

¹² John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1966), 11.

¹³ Ibid., 12-14.

¹⁴ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 167.

¹⁸ Parley P. Pratt, "Origin of the Universe," *Key to the Science of Theology: Designed as An Introduction to the First Principles of Spiritual Philosophy; Religion; Law and Government: as Delivered by the Ancients, and as Restored in this Age, for the Final Development of Universal Peace, Truth and Knowledge* (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1855), in *The Essential Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 194.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 197-99.

²¹ Prominent among process theologians (which I should note are not the only persons who adopt a process approach to metaphysics) are such persons as John Cobb Jr., David Ray Griffin, and Marjorie Suchocki.

²² John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), chapter 1.

²³ C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction*, with a concluding chapter by John B. Cobb Jr. (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1993), 55. (note that my citation of Mesle is not exact, as I corrected his phrase "love, hate, and jealously" to read "love, hate, and jealousy").

²⁴ Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology,* 56-57.

[25] Ibid., 53. See also Mesle, *Process Theology,* 60-61.

[26] Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology ,*17.

[27] Ibid., 165.

[28] Ibid., 12-14.

[29] D&C 93:33.

[30] For the idea of spirits being material, see D&C 131:7-8.

[31] D&C 138:50.

[32] Alma 13:3-5.

[33] Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology,* 17.

[34] D&C 132:16-17.

[35] Abraham 3:19.

[36] I say "predominately" because of references to Satan and those who followed him. These were certainly primal persons by any definition given in this essay, but due to the choices they made in the pre-earth life they were never permitted to acquire physical bodies.

[37] Mosiah 3:9; emphasis added.

[38] Mosiah 4:6; emphasis added.

[39] Alma 32:22, 27.

[40] 1 Nephi 3:7. Note that this reference is listed under the heading of "Faith" in the LDS Topical Guide.

[41] Acts 6:8.

[42] Jacob 4:6.

[43] 3 Nephi 7:17-18.

[44] Moroni 7:33.

[45] Moses 1:39.

[46] Please note that for the sake of both clarity and style, I will use the pronoun "it" to refer to the intelligence I am describing even though I fully realize that the question of whether gender is an everlasting attribute of persons, stretching back even to the intelligence stage, is still debated in Mormon thought.

[47] Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology,* 25.

[48] D&C 121:36-37, 41-42, 46.
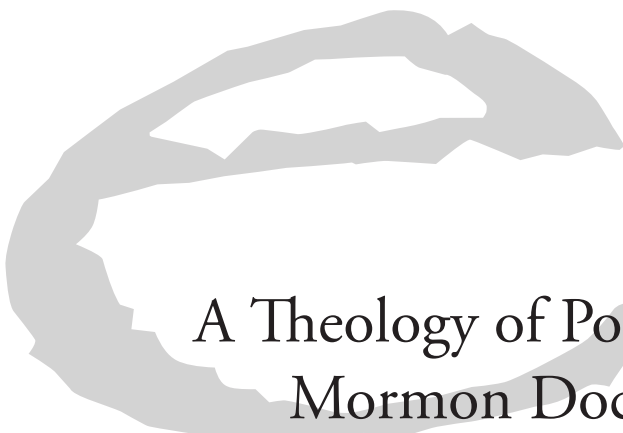
[49] Genesis 1:3.

[50] Jacob 4:9.

[51] A related question, and one almost entirely bypassed in this essay, is how anyone, God or human, is able to communicate with the basic intelligence/element pairs of which the universe is composed. Even in process thought, insofar as I am aware, the actual mechanics of the communication remain a metaphysical mystery.

[52] Moroni 7:33.

[53] Jacob 4:6.

A Theology of Possibilities: Mormon Doctrine and Open Folk Beliefs

by Dennis C. Wendt

In his 2007 speech "Faith in America," presidential candidate Mitt Romney objected to the reported pressure that he had been receiving to "describe and explain his church's distinctive doctrines." Romney argued that "no candidate should become the spokesman for his faith. For if he becomes president he will need the prayers of the people of all faiths."[1] This was a welcome decision if for no other reason than the discomfort created by high profile political figures attempting to explain what Latter-day Saints believe. My concern, shared by many Latter-day Saints, is that someone like Romney may give, or be perceived as giving, a definitive treatment of Mormon doctrine. Furthermore, there is the added danger that such an account would be mixed, in problematic ways, with particular political platforms. In such a scenario, *Romney's* Mormonism may very well be perceived as *our* Mormonism, as *my* Mormonism.

Perhaps my worry stems from countless experiences in church meetings or casual conversation, in which fellow Latter-day Saints do not hesitate to see themselves as definitive spokespersons regarding unclear doctrinal matters: Evolution is true (or not), polygamy will be reinstated, coffee and tea are prohibited because of caffeine, women are inherently more "spiritual" than men, God has exhaustive definitive foreknowledge, you can count the sons of Perdition on one hand, food needs to be blessed – the list goes on and on. I do not see an inherent problem with a Latter-day Saint having any or all of these beliefs – as far as I am concerned, each *could* be true. The problem,

though, is that these beliefs often are not seen for what they really are, namely *folk beliefs*.

In contrast to definitive statements and creeds, which are commonly seen as objective, universal, and absolute, folk beliefs are interpretive, contextual, and modifiable. The term "folk belief" is not meant to be disparaging. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is "almost entirely lacking creeds or formal theology" and has a radical commitment to human agency and intelligence,[2] folk beliefs are crucial, meaningful, and – often – true. Problems occur, however, when individuals construct a certain kind of folk belief, which I call *closed folk beliefs*. A closed folk belief (hereafter CFB) is a belief that is incorrectly interpreted by its holder as definitive – in other words, it is not seen by them as a folk belief at all.

Closed folk beliefs are present in many different groups (religious or otherwise), and a consequence of not fully recognizing and appreciating the assumptions of cultural and individual values. The problem is unique for the LDS Church, however, considering that submission to Church authority is "without parallel in modern Christianity" and epistemological certainty is seemingly emphasized.[3] For this reason, it is easy for a popular network of closed folk beliefs to hover as a definitive authority that portends to fill in many of the Church's theological, doctrinal, and practical gaps. In proper fashion, these CFBs are mistakenly seen as collectively held by all faithful Latter-day Saints. As a result, many potentially important folk beliefs may be prevented or suppressed.

This paper proposes that the Latter-day Saint community embrace the idea of what I term *open folk beliefs*. In contrast to CFBs, open folk beliefs (OFBs) are recognized *as* folk beliefs (i.e., what an individual Latter-day Saint believes, recognizing that other faithful Latter-day Saints may believe differently). An OFB community would be grounded at some level in more authoritative LDS teachings, but it would also consist of a pluralism of open folk beliefs.[4] Collectively, such a community could be considered to embrace a *theology of possibilities*. Relying on the philosophy of William James, I attempt to demonstrate some qualities of an OFB community, and discuss how such a community may be crucial for individual and collective spiritual progression.

WILLIAM JAMES, RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AND POSSIBILITIES

The philosophy of William James appears to be an excellent starting point for helping to sort out an open folk belief community. One

of the hallmarks of James' work, as evidenced in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is a humble, open commitment to take religious experience seriously, in all its varieties.[5] James' appeal for openness was very much ahead of his time, considering that the leading philosophies of his day, idealistic transcendentalism and mechanistic determinism, were dogmatic and monistic. These two philosophies, though worlds apart, both understood the course of the world to be fixed and immutable, void of genuine possibilities. Though both philosophies were unproven by human experience, they "dogmatically affirm[ed] monism as something with which all experience has got to square."[6]

James, on the other hand, was looking for a philosophy that took human experience seriously in all its manifold and messy varieties, including the spiritual, psychical, and mystical. Rather than experience needing to accord with the monistic truth claims of his day, truth claims needed to be brought before the "court of experience."[7] For James, according to Daniel Robinson, "it is within the arena of events *as experienced* that all epistemic, ontological, and moral claims must be settled and must compete for our attention and our convictions."[8]

The difference between James' philosophy and the monistic philosophies of his day is perhaps best reflected in their explanations of human freedom. James reasoned that humans experience regret for unnecessary evils and desire freedom to prevent such. For the idealistic transcendentalist, however, all evil is necessarily determined, and cannot be prevented, in order to form a greater dialectic with good. For the mechanistic determinist, it is virtually meaningless to say that there are unnecessary evils; bad things simply happen as part of a causal chain over which humans have no control. James reasoned that neither of these philosophies is able to satisfy the deeply held human experience of genuine regret for the evils of the world.[9] This experience could only be solaced, for James, with a libertarian notion of free will that understands the world as continually in process, dependent in some degree on one's own actions.

For James, the question of free will was similar to all important questions; it is one that "cannot wait for sensible proof," but rather is a question of "the heart." Such queries are inevitable, even for science, which "consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man." According to James, a "pure intellect," divorced from one's desires and passions, is a myth. "If your heart does not *want* a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one." Indeed, even the "agnostic" practice of postponing belief

in God (or anything else) until there is further evidence is itself a decisive leap of faith, and one that is grounded in passion![10] Therefore, one has no choice but to take "a leap in the dark" concerning "all important transactions of life."[11]

James acknowledged that he did not have absolute certainty regarding an open-ended, libertarian world. All the same, he could not see what purpose it would serve to believe in a deterministic world, even if it did end up being true. If such were to happen – and this is crucial for understanding James – its "happening" could only occur in the future.[12] As for today, the world is far from set, it appears, and therefore a person would be wise to act as if the world had real possibilities. James dared even to consider that acting for the sake of a given possibility could be the very thing that leads to its being made![13]

At this point one can begin to see how James' thought might be instructive for LDS theology. For James, the world could not be adequately explained according to a fixed and monistic metaphysics; moreover, such explanations were not sufficient guides for action. Likewise, there is not a systematic theology that can adequately explain or guide Latter-day Saint living.[14] Although faithful Church members are bound together by certain "incontrovertible teachings," "these teachings are surprisingly few in number."[15] According to James Faulconer,

> There are basic beliefs, doctrines, and practices about which there is wide-spread and even universal agreement. Among these is the central doctrine that Jesus is the Messiah – that his life, suffering, death, and resurrection were literal – and other teachings, such as that Joseph Smith was the prophet through whom Jesus worked the restoration of his ancient gospel, that the Book of Mormon is a record of an ancient people, and that all human beings must be baptized. It is difficult, to the point of being inconceivable, to imagine the LDS Church abandoning these. Nevertheless, though it [is] clear that such foundational beliefs and teachings exist, there is no official list of them.[16]

Even these foundational beliefs and teachings are pragmatically meaningful only as they intersect with Latter-day Saints' experiences. "God is love," for example, means little as a formal proposition that Latter-day Saints can intellectually agree upon; it is *experiencing* God's love in the thickness of real life that matters. These diverse experiences could never be captured in a net of theological categories. Moreover, although scripture and church teachings

are necessary guides for Latter-day Saints,[17] they do not provide sufficient counsel for their application in specific, meaningful contexts.

It is easy, of course, to argue that the solution here is personal revelation through the Holy Ghost, which "will show unto you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:5). This may be true, but it does not mean that the purpose of the Holy Ghost is to distribute definitive axioms; rather, one of the primary benefits of the Holy Ghost is a personally tailored companionship within the particulars of life. For this reason, Latter-day Saints cannot passively wait for the Holy Ghost to guide them. Rather, they "should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will" (D&C 58:27). This scripture could be interpreted as saying, similar to James, that mortals must first be "anxiously engaged" and freely choosing what to do, as opposed to simply waiting for certainty (from the Holy Ghost or elsewhere) in a spirit of agnosticism. In this respect, Latter-day Saints cannot know the end from the beginning or avoid leaps of faith.[18] Rather, it is in the experiential context of desire, hope, faith, and action – a world of multiple viable possibilities – that theological understandings are formed and interpreted.

Certainly such understandings include the construction and interpretation of folk beliefs that are in accord with one's own experience, but cannot necessarily be seen as definitive claims for LDS theology. In fact, even the way that one understands a more definitive theological claim (e.g., "God is love") requires the generation of folk beliefs (concerning the ways that God loves and how His love is interpreted here and now). Folk beliefs often are not formalized, but it is safe to say that as a general way of making sense of one's experiences and goals, it is inevitable for each Latter-day Saint to construct them. In this respect, theology is something that Latter-day Saints *do*, not simply believe. This construction of folk theologies is an inextricable part of experience and as such has significant consequences for a person's life (more on this below). These beliefs might happen to be false, but, like for James, this "happening" is in the future only. As for now, the person has no choice but to act as if certain folk beliefs are true.

A brief example helps to illustrate the inevitability and importance of folk beliefs. It is probably safe to say that a faithful Latter-day Saint cannot help but have some kind of belief, however informal, about the extent to which one's own actions influence others. There are many scriptural and doctrinal teachings that can aid church members in this regard. However, there is not a definitive LDS position, as far as I am aware, that answers the question: "Do my actions make an irreplaceable difference, ultimately, on the eventual exaltation of another?" A common (folk) answer to this question is, "No, that

would be unjust. If a person needs your help and you (in your selfishness) fail to deliver, someone else will eventually help them, and *you* will be damned unless you repent. Temporally, we may hurt others, but *ultimately* you can only hurt yourself." For many Latter-day Saints, this position makes good sense and is widely believed. Predictably, some mistakenly suppose that this position represents a definitive church teaching.[19]

For others, however, this belief might be troubling. A full-time missionary, for example, may be frustrated in thinking that the only ultimate benefit of his service is a self-benefit. This implication might not square with the missionary's experiences in prayer, interpretations of scripture, or sense of intimacy and urgency in his labors. The situation may be complicated further by the possibility of inconsistent church teachings, or at least the perception of inconsistencies. In the midst of these conflicting experiences and teachings, the missionary might reason, however informally, "I am a much better missionary when I think that what I am doing *really* makes a difference to the salvation and even exaltation of others. Really, is there any harm in believing this? I can't think of any. As for now, I will act as if this belief is true." With his new folk belief of radical interdependence of mortals, the missionary might exhibit greater charity and diligence and find greater meaning and purpose in his labors. It could certainly be possible that this folk belief is crucial for him to hold, even in terms of the exaltation of himself and others. It is not only inevitable for the missionary to have a folk belief on this matter, but the folk belief that he constructs might have enormous consequences.

To this point, I have provided only a preliminary sketch of how William James' philosophy might be helpful for understanding Latter-day Saint folk theologies. These include, 1) the recognition of the insufficiency of definitive theological statements, 2) a fidelity to human experience in all its manifold and messy varieties, and 3) a willingness to be "anxiously engaged" in the midst of uncertainty. From this preliminary sketch, a discussion of two crucial aspects of James' philosophy – pragmatism and pluralism –help to provide a fuller picture on what James' thought might mean to an open folk theology community of Latter-day Saints.

PRAGMATISM

A crucial requirement for a theology of possibilities, from James' standpoint, is a commitment to *pragmatism*. Although traces of James' pragmatism are found in his earlier psychological works,[20] his most thorough and systematic treatment is a later series of philosophical lectures, published in 1907 as

Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking.[21] In these lectures, James sets out pragmatism to be "a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable." The key issue for the pragmatist is to consider the practical difference that follows from the resolution to a given question.[22] "Grant an idea or belief to be true, [. . .] what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"[23]

Connotations of "cash-value" notwithstanding, pragmatism should not be misunderstood as a theory of utilitarianism or behavioral economics.[24] James argues that pragmatism cannot aim directly at happiness and that it is concerned with life's deepest matters, including spiritual and religious experiences that would be easy for the utilitarian to write off.[25]

> Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact – if that should be a likely place to find him.[26]

This passage illustrates the openness of James' pragmatism. Because experience is the ground of pragmatic concerns, individuals would thus avoid having a priori prejudices against a given belief or idea.

Whatever the pragmatist decides, she *acts* as if the claim is true, as exemplified by James' commitment to free will and the full-time missionary's beliefs regarding his influence. However, she also would be open to being proved otherwise by future experience, and is also mindful that others may genuinely believe differently due to different pragmatic considerations.

This pragmatic approach appears to be a good fit for a Latter-day Saint theology of possibilities, especially considering the Mormon emphasis on "right practice" (orthopraxy) as opposed to orthodoxy in the traditional sense.[27] This emphasis is aptly demonstrated by Mormons' use of terms such as "active," "less active," and "inactive" to describe relative faithfulness, as well as a heavy emphasis on "works." In ecclesiastical interviews and disciplinary procedures, Latter-day Saints are not judged based on intellectual acceptance of specific doctrinal statements, but rather by general "testimony" concerning the Godhead and restored gospel, support of the Church and priesthood authorities, and moral conduct pertaining to Church covenants and standards, family relationships, and organizational affairs. Even where members have

folk beliefs that are out of step with current church teachings, it is typically only a sustained public engagement of such beliefs, often accompanied with contempt for Church authorities, that is grounds for disciplinary action. Because God "will yet reveal many great and important things," it is certainly possible that a privately held heterodox[28] belief could become publically acceptable or even widely taught in the future.[29] The same could be said, perhaps more importantly, for non-heterodox folk beliefs for which the Church currently does not have a position.

The upshot of the Mormon emphasis on practice is that there is tremendous openness in terms of the folk beliefs that Latter-day Saints construct in order to meet important pragmatic concerns. This openness is crucial because the demands of human experience, fraught with uncertainty and messy circumstances, are not guided well by one-size-fits-all theological abstractions. For James, there is nothing inherent in human experience that can be called universal. Things become "universalized" only later "by being conceptualized and named. But all the thickness, concreteness, and individuality of experience exists in the immediate and relatively unnamed stages of it."[30] Even where such abstract conceptions can be agreed upon in order to facilitate communication, they are "shiveringly thin wrappings" that "carr[y] us hardly an inch into the concrete detail of the world we actually inhabit."[31] For this reason, when a person begins to treat matters pragmatically, these matters "pass from the vague to the definite, from the abstract to the concrete."[32]

The pragmatic insufficiency of universal abstractions can be illustrated with James' example of the chess master in his essay, "The Dilemma of Determinism." Though the chess master may have an abstract understanding of chess rules, possible strategies, and all the possible moves of his novice opponent, "he cannot foresee exactly what any one actual move of his adversary may be."[33] Here James was elaborating a defense of free will – in which the novice is free in spite of the chess master's virtually assured victory – but the example also points to the fact that the chess master cannot even play the game, let alone win, based on a priori abstractions alone. Rather, it is in the concrete, lived experience of the actual game, including the present and unpredictable relationship among the game pieces, that the chess master must be guided concerning his next best move. It is only in the present moment that the master can know which rules and strategies apply and which are held in abeyance; there is never an acontextual moment in which "pure" abstractions can be marshaled.

If these abstractions are insufficient guides in a game like chess, for which there are unambiguous boundaries for lawful action, then how much more so

in actual life, for which these boundaries often appear to be fuzzy and unclear! Because of these real-world ambiguities, the Latter-day Saint cannot rely on abstract doctrines or principles that determine a priori specific pragmatic criteria and aims. There is no substitute for experience, and thus it is only within the context of concrete experience that folk beliefs can be constructed, interpreted, and evaluated.

I anticipate that many will take issue with the seemingly unbounded theological openness of the pragmatic principle sketched above. Certainly Latter-day Saints, one might argue, have limits regarding what they may rightly believe. What if Brother Jones, a Latter-day Saint, based on his "experience," says that he is acting as if God is an illusion? Are we to remain open to his experience simply for the sake of being open to possibilities? To answer these questions, it is necessary for me to explain three important reasons that James' pragmatism does not consist of an "anything goes" relativism (in which all beliefs are equal),[34] as well as to elaborate on how these reasons might apply to an OFB community of Latter-day Saints.

First, James would hold that a belief must be pragmatically judged against the rest of a person's beliefs; it is important that it does not clash, for example, with other beliefs that the person continues to hold.[35] Such an approach may be compatible with Nathan Oman's interpretive approach to settling difficult issues of Church doctrine. According to Oman, the doctrinal claims of Latter-day Saints "are made against a background of teachings, experiences, and texts that they seek to accommodate and charitably characterize. It is their interpretation of the totality that produces their conclusions about what is or is not Church Doctrine."[36] For Oman, this approach requires clear, undisputed core beliefs.[37] A Jamesian pragmatism could certainly agree, provided that these core beliefs are themselves grounded in the pragmatic demands of experience (more on this below). Assuming that this is the case for Latter-day Saints' beliefs in the existence of God – a fairly safe assumption – an OFB community of Latter-day Saints would have no problem rejecting Brother Jones' folk belief of God being an illusion. It is certainly possible that a few Latter-day Saints might keep this belief open as a future option, but I suspect most would see no pragmatic need to do so, given their ongoing religious experiences.

Second, pragmatically verified beliefs vary in the extent to which they are true. For James, beliefs are not simply true or false; rather, beliefs "become true just in so far as they help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience."[38] Two people could hold two different beliefs, but one is better than the other in terms of the possibilities it opens. Sister Edwards, a

pragmatic Latter-day Saint who believes in God, could hold, for example, that Brother Jones' belief could be "true" to an extent. She could reason that it is plausible that Jones' folk belief that God is an illusion is in fact grounded in experience and that it has genuine pragmatic benefits for him. It may be, for example, that Jones' *conception* of God is in fact an illusion, and that there are important reasons to no longer believe in this false god. From the perspective of Edwards, however, Jones' belief would be seen as inferior. It would foreclose on too many crucial beliefs that are themselves continually grounded in relationship with God. Sister Edwards could claim, "For *me*, my belief in God, grounded in my own experience, is truer than your belief, which is not at all confirmed by my experience and for which I have little pragmatic value." Theoretically, Edwards *could* be wrong, but practically speaking there is no reason for her to take Brother Jones' beliefs seriously. If this example seems too relativistic, rest assured that it is possible for Edwards to make bolder claims (e.g., that Jones is willfully rebelling against his knowledge of God), but these claims would need to be grounded in experiential relations with both Jones and God (more on this below).

Third, by acting as if a certain possibility is true, a person closes off other possibilities, at least temporarily.[39] This third reason has obvious overlap with the first, but it deserves its own attention here in order to make clear that a theology of possibilities cannot possibly embrace every conceivable possibility. By acting as if God is an actual Being, one forecloses on the possibility that He is an illusion and all other beliefs implied by it. To borrow from Oman's analogy, when a person agrees to play a game of chess, she commits herself to the rules of chess; "willful flouting" of these rules is cheating.[40] Likewise, there are core beliefs and practices that Latter-day Saints covenant to abide by, such as a belief in God, that foreclose certain contrary beliefs. There is always the option to quit the game, but for a Latter-day Saint to play according to their own contrary rules is to no longer play "chess." Thus, it would be impossible for a Latter-day Saint who wishes to "play chess" to keep playing with one who does not. The rule breaker would effectively be outside the community of chess players. She might convince others to play according to new rules, but it would not be chess. Likewise, she might remain in some kind of game-playing community with chess players – provided they do not play chess.[41]

Of course, unlike chess, acceptable "rules" for Latter-day Saints are not so cut and dried. From an OFB perspective, it is not uncommon for Latter-day Saints to have conflicting folk beliefs (as shown above with the question of radical interdependence of mortals). The answers to these disagreements often cannot be settled by some kind of appeal to official or definitive Church

doctrine, as discussed above. Moreover, even where more definitive "rules" apply, it is not always clear what these rules mean in the context of one's practical life.

For these reasons, it is necessary to evaluate folk beliefs pragmatically, in light of one's concrete experience. Specifically, one might ask: How does this belief fit with the rest of my beliefs and commitments? Does it give greater meaning or depth to my relationship with God and others? Does it enable me to have greater charity? Will it help others in ways that are important to them and to God? These types of questions might be considered, however informally, by a pragmatically-minded Latter-day Saint. Such an approach allows for the contextual and relational vicissitudes of life – the concrete – to be the master, not the slave, of one's beliefs. Indeed, one might say, "Theologies are made for man, not man for theologies." To adequately flesh out these conclusions, however, it is necessary to address James' pluralism.

PLURALISM

Given the diversity of human life, the "practical difference" spoken of by James naturally results in a wide diversity of folk beliefs. In this respect, pragmatism forces "us to be friendly to the pluralistic view."[42] Thus, it should come as no surprise that one can find evidence of pluralistic leanings in his early thought. Indeed, it is difficult to talk about James' pragmatism without also talking about his pluralistic philosophy, which is set out in more detail in his later works, *Pragmatism* and *A Pluralistic Universe*.

For James, pluralism is necessary in order to allow for real possibilities. Monistic philosophies, as mentioned above, insist that the world is uniformly one and cannot be any other way. Pluralism, on the other hand, calls for "the legitimacy of the notion of some: each part of the world is in some ways connected, in some ways not connected with its other parts. [. . .] *Reality MAY exist* [. . .] *in the shape not of an all but of a set of eaches, just as it seems to*."[43] In other words, pluralism is open to the existence of multiple views of reality that do not cohere (at least in the present) according to some kind of univocal logic. This position relates to James' position on free will and acting for the sake of possibilities, unlike the monistic philosophies of his day, which presumed a deterministic world.

An important assumption of James' pluralism is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find such a thing as reality that is "independent" of human thinking. "We may glimpse it, but we never grasp it; what we grasp is always some substitute for it which previous human thinking has peptonized and

cooked for our consumption." For this reason, "what we say about reality thus depends on the perspective into which we throw it."[44] Because each person has a different perspective – due to differing experiences, relationships, and desires – each person will "constellate"[45] reality differently, resulting in differing folk beliefs. This argument is famously presented by James in *Varieties*:

> I do not see how it is possible that creatures in such different positions and with such different powers as human individuals are, should have exactly the same functions and the same duties. No two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical solutions. Each, from his peculiar angle of observation, takes in a certain sphere of fact and trouble, which each must deal with in a unique manner. One of us must soften himself, another must harden himself; one must yield a point, another must stand firm. [. . .] So a "god of battles" must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace and heaven and home, the god for another.[46]

Though James was speaking here on the value of different religious sects and creeds, it certainly follows that his views are applicable to a single religious group. In terms of the LDS Church, it is inevitable and essential, given differing backgrounds, goals, and values, that Latter-day Saints will have differing, perhaps even contradictory, folk beliefs. The diversity of these backgrounds, values, and needs are increasingly apparent as the Church becomes more of a worldwide and heterogeneous organization.

It is certainly plausible that many of these differing, even contradictory, folk beliefs have a crucial pragmatic value for individuals to hold. Returning to the example of the full-time missionary and his belief in the radical interdependence of mortals, one can easily imagine the need for a pluralism of folk beliefs regarding the extent to which mortals are (co)responsible for the exaltation of others. Consider, for example, a single mother whose son strayed from the fold and eventually committed suicide. Suppose this mother worries obsessively about what she might have done differently to prevent the son's lapse. In this case, it might be wise for her to take solace in the counsel, often given by Church leaders, that each person has agency and even the best parents can have children who fall away. However, this same solacing belief might be a damning excuse for the complacency of overly permissive young parents who have not adequately followed God's command to "bring up your children in light and truth" (D&C 93:40). Again, on yet another

other hand, one could imagine a set of parents who, with a folk belief of radical interdependence, micro-manage their teenage daughter in a way that undervalues her God-given agency and curtails opportunities for growth.

These examples point to the fact that each Latter-day Saint has a unique way of being in the world, consisting of irreducible background information, tacit knowledge, personal and cultural values, and relationships. On paper, examples like these are useful but admittedly thin descriptions of religious experience because they are abstractions that are disengaged from the flux and flow of concrete life and its pragmatic demands. James' solution to this problem, not surprisingly, is to understand theological beliefs in the context of concrete experience. According to James, one needs to "dive back into the flux" of the "living, moving, active thickness of the real." Rather than being disengaged with religious experience in an attempt to translate "the heart's battles" into conceptual jargon, "we must turn our backs upon our winged concepts altogether, and bury ourselves in the thickness" of the temporal world of experience. Within this context, abstractions can be used "to your heart's content," but they would be seen as mere "snap-shots" of continually unfolding religious experience.[47]

Considering the temporality of experience, folk beliefs can be largely unarticulated and continually changing. This kind of pre-reflective looseness and adaptability is a common trait for OFBs. In fact, a common problem with those who hold CFBs is that they are stuck in fixed beliefs that are not always responsive to changing contexts and relationships.[48] One can easily see a problem, for example, with a person whose God is *always* a God of battles or *always* a God of peace – the scriptures unambiguously confirm otherwise. However, there *could* be a problem even for those with a God that is always honest, loving, or just. If "honest," "loving," and "just" are viewed as fixed abstractions, then it may be that they do not always accord with the honesty, love, and justice of God Himself. It may be that God is "honest," "loving," or "just" in one way with one child and in a qualitatively different way with another child – as Abraham, Job, or Nephi could attest. In this respect, these abstracted principles might simply be a way of pointing to a *certain kind* of relationality in God, rather than attempting to logically circumscribe His essential character. However, if a person remains mired in fixed concepts about God, then it may be that he is not worshipping God at all, but rather "walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god" (D&C 1:16).

Thus, to elaborate on James' position, the solution to being mired in monistic concepts about God is to continually experience Him – to be in continual relationship with Him. Assuming (safely) that faithful Latter-

day Saints strive to properly prioritize the two great commandments of loving God and neighbor, it would seem logical that a pragmatic approach would take these (ever-changing) relationships as the primary grounds for constructing and evaluating folk beliefs, which itself would almost certainly result in a pluralism of folk beliefs. Consider, in this regard, the following explanation from Brent Slife, who uses his own chess master analogy to discuss the necessity of a relational grounding of God within the context of a Christian family:

> [God] is believed to be continually involved in the "game" of living and always available for consultation through the Holy Spirit and prayer. This heavenly master can advise the family on the "next best move" for moral action and can intervene on behalf of what is right or good in the specific context of the family. Because God is believed by Christians to be intimately involved in every person's life, the heavenly master – like the chess master – must take into account the temporality of the game of living. A God-centered family, then, requires a temporal or relational value center. This type of center puts the emphasis squarely upon one's *relationship* with the Master rather than upon [abstract] moral principles.[49]

Here one's relationship with God, as with all relationships, only makes sense within the context of concrete experience. Even God Himself, from this perspective, takes his cues from His concrete, or temporal, experience of present relationships with His children. For this very reason, it would be a mistake to think that conceptions of God can be captured by fixed abstractions. These abstractions would fail because God is always situated in a context, and thus who He is depends on the situation and the perspective of those relating with Him, inevitably resulting in multiple ways of talking about God – pluralism.

The same thing could be said regarding multiple ways of talking about anything in LDS theology. It is difficult if not impossible to talk about proper practice outside of the context of one's concrete experience, including one's experiential relationships with God and with others. The folk beliefs that emerge are likely to be crucial for Latter-day Saints to hold, but they cannot be captured in a net of abstract theological categories – something always escapes. Experience, argues James, "has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas."[50] Latter-day Saints with open folk beliefs (OFBs) allow for experience to continually modify their "present formulas"

of theology.

In this respect, one can imagine that the real problem with the micro-managing parents (from the above example) is that they have a closed folk belief regarding their influence on their teenage daughter. Perhaps they are guided too much by an acontextual CFB regarding what it means to be a good Latter-day Saint parent (e.g., good parents can behaviorally modify their children to obey and be good Latter-day Saints), not realizing, perhaps, that this belief is not always appropriate for *their* daughter, right here and right now. It may be that the rigid acceptance of this theory, perhaps intricately woven with their core LDS beliefs, closes them off from important experiences with their daughter (or from having better interpretations of these experiences) that might help them to understand her and know how to best raise her according to present needs. It could be, moreover, that being closed off from their daughter's experiences is correlated with being closed off from God, who has been informally substituted with some kind of abstract idol.

The solution, from the perspective of a Jamesian pluralism, is for these parents to recognize other theological possibilities and to be open to them. This openness would require seeing one's folk beliefs for what they really are – *closed* folk beliefs. This revelation could occur after repeated frustration with present theological formulas not working, resulting in a desperate return to genuine relations with God and others. Preferably, however, these parents would have already been a part of an OFB community of Latter-day Saints and others (including God and their daughter) in which CFBs might be more readily manifest for what they are. In either case, it is a commitment to experience, in its messiness and variety, that is the answer. By returning to experience and its pragmatic demands, these parents would likely realize that there is not a definitive theological standard that can serve as a proper guide for raising children. For this reason, a pluralism of folk beliefs, even contradictory ones, might be legitimate for faithful Latter-day Saints to hold.

CONCLUSION

An open folk belief community of Latter-day Saints can help many if not all of its members by being open, to the extent possible, to a pluralism of folk beliefs. This openness would not require Latter-day Saints to believe all of these possible folk beliefs – this would be impossible, considering that some folk beliefs would be contradictory. It would require, however, for Latter-day Saints to be careful about how they talk about what *we* believe and to take responsibility of "owning" their beliefs. This community would be careful

before saying that certain views are heretical, especially without considering – on pragmatic grounds and in intimate relationship with others – why those views would matter (leaders and teachers would need to be especially careful here). Members of this community could even acknowledge that certain beliefs seem "weird," "not for me," or potentially damaging, but they would be careful before insinuating that one who holds such beliefs is not a faithful Latter-day Saint.[51]

To be sure, this type of community(s) is already present in the Church to a fair and growing extent; however, there are currently many folk beliefs that are incorrectly shut out due to the failure to see CFBs for what they are. In some cases, this lack of openness may be trivial, but in other cases it can have severe consequences, as discussed throughout this paper. By having a Church membership with a more visible openness to religious experience, pragmatic flexibility, and multiple viewpoints wherever possible, it could help many Latter-day Saints to be freer in constructing folk theologies that are of the best use for them in coming to know God and in serving His children.

It is important, however, to note that pluralism in the Jamesian sense is not interested in diversity for diversity's sake. Although James was interested in being open to possibilities, he was deeply committed to humankind's progress in coming to fuller notions of the truth. The realism and progressivism of James' pluralism might be contrasted from more relativistic brands of pluralism,[52] in that James' pluralism can lead a community to have fuller, more accurate notions of the truth, including truths about God. Said James,

> If an Emerson were forced to be a Wesley, or a Moody forced to be a Whitman, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer. The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. Each attitude being a syllable in human nature's total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely.[53]

Contrary to monistic philosophies, pluralism allows for the reality of the world to grow with experience. This growing together of reality and experience is due to their "indistinguishable connections." Viney et al. explain, "As experience grows, reality grows, and it is experience that contributes meaningful additions and alternative ways of seeing reality."[54]

In this respect, an LDS theology of possibilities would be important not just for the integrity of the individual, but for the Church as a whole to

grow as a result of continuing fellowship among Church members of diverse backgrounds. By embracing a pluralism of folk beliefs, Latter-day Saints likely would grow into fuller and richer conceptions of God. My experience with a God of battles might help to fill out your understanding of God, and your experience with a God of peace might help to fill out mine. And, in the words of William James, "Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs [i.e., folk theologies] may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?"[55]

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NOTES

[1] Mitt Romney, "Faith in America," 6 Dec 2007, available from http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16969460; Internet; accessed 12 Dec 2008.

[2] Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 15, 32.

[3] Ibid.

[4] This approach recognizes, of course, that even authoritative teachings are necessarily interpretive. As I discuss below, one's understanding of authoritative teachings is inseparable from one's practical engagement in the world. Thus, authoritative teachings are not meaningful as timeless, objective abstractions, but rather as meanings that are constantly interpreted (and re-interpreted) in the here and now.

[5] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), in *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987).

[6] James, "Preface," in *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), in *Writings 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 447.

[7] Donald A. Crosby and Wayne Viney, "Toward a Psychology That Is Radically Empirical: Recapturing the Vision of William James," in *Reinterpreting the Legacy of William James*, ed. Margaret E. Donnelly (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1992), 103.

[8] Daniel N. Robinson, "Is There a Jamesian Tradition in Psychology?" *American Psychologist* 48, no. 6 (1993): 639.

[9] James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), in *Writings 1902-1910*, 538-39, 601, 603; "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884), in *Writings 1878-1899*, 577.

[10] James, "The Will to Believe" (1896), in *Writings 1878-1899*, 472-73.

[11] Fitz James Stephen, as qtd. in James, "The Will," 478.

[12] James, *Pragmatism*, 599.

¹³ Ibid., 574, 581; James, *The Varieties*, 463.

¹⁴ James E. Faulconer, "Why a Mormon Won't Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Element: Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 2, no. 2 (2006); Nathan B. Oman, "A Defense of the Authority of Church Doctrine," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 4 (2007); Oman, "Jurisprudence and the Problem of Church Doctrine," *Element: Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 2, no. 2 (2006).

¹⁵ Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "A Mormon President? The LDS Difference," *The Christian Century*, 21 Aug 2007, available from http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3594; Internet; accessed 3 Dec 2007.

¹⁶ Faulconer, "Why a Mormon," 21.

¹⁷ Oman, "A Defense."

¹⁸ See Boyd K. Packer, "The Candle of the Lord," *Ensign* 13, no. 1 (January 1983): 51. According to Packer, "Somewhere in your quest for spiritual knowledge, there is that 'leap of faith,' as the philosophers call it. It is the moment when you have gone to the edge of the light and stepped into the darkness to discover that the way is lighted ahead for just a footstep or two. . . . We begin with faith – not with a perfect knowledge of things."

¹⁹ It is important to point out that this example folk belief, like many others, is probably not often made explicit, as it is here. More likely, it is an implicit background understanding that informs other things that a person might say or think (e.g., "When you don't forgive someone, you only hurt yourself"). Regardless, I suspect that if most Latter-day Saints are asked the question I ask here, they likely will have something to say, even if it is "I don't know." Even if they have never directly considered this question before – we simply are too connected to others for this question to not be in the background, given the high stakes of our mortal probations.

²⁰ See James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1890).

²¹ James, *Pragmatism*.

²² Ibid., 506.

²³ Ibid., 573.

²⁴ Robinson, "Is There a Jamesian," 640; George S. Howard, "Why William James Might Be Considered the Founder of the Scientist-Practitioner Model," *Counseling Psychologist* 21, no. 1 (1993): 121.

²⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 604-05.

²⁶ Ibid., 522.

²⁷ David L. Paulsen, "Polemics, Apologetics, and the Fruits of Dialogue," in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2007), 12. See also Faulconer, "Why a Mormon" and "Rethinking Theology: The Shadow of the Apocalypse," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007).

²⁸ By "heterodox" I mean a belief that is incongruent with the current teachings

of church leaders.

29 See Faulconer, "Why a Mormon," 24-25.

30 James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), in *Writings 1902-1910*, 757-58.

31 Ibid., 691, 693. By "shiveringly thin wrappings," James was actually referring to his own third lecture in this series. In the context of this quote, however, the same thing could be said about abstract conceptions generally.

32 James, *Pragmatism*, 543.

33 James, "The Dilemma," 592.

34 Charlene H. Seigfried, "The World We Practically Live In," in *Reinterpreting the Legacy of William James*, 85-88; Wayne Viney, "The Radical Empiricism of William James and Philosophy of History," *History of Psychology* 4, no. 3 (2001): 215-217.

35 James, *Pragmatism*, 518-21.

36 Oman, "Jurisprudence," 10.

37 Ibid., 14-15. According to Oman, "The interpretive approach necessarily assumes that many aspects of Church Doctrine are clear. . . . We always can have disagreements about certain aspects of what Church Doctrine requires and . . . the only way of doctrinally settling these disagreements will be by resort to complex arguments about the best possible story to be told." Here I see Oman's interpretive approach as very much in line with a Jamesian pragmatism – with the possibly needed clarifications that "complex arguments" must be grounded in meaningful experience (not technical abstractions), and that the settling of doctrinal disagreements might often require, at least for now, "one best possible story" for Sister X and another "best possible story" for Brother Y. These clarifications might be necessary consequences of Oman's approach that requires for the moral demands of "unity" and "charity" (14) – often the most charitable approach to unity is to take the experiences of others seriously – especially when there are not clear institutional answers.

38 James, *Pragmatism*, 512 (italics omitted). In this passage, James is describing the pragmatism of Dewey and Schiller; however, the passage reflects just as well on James' own philosophy of pragmatism.

39 Ibid., 573; Robinson, "Is There a Jamesian," 641.

40 Oman, "A Defense," 20.

41 Nothing in this example suggests, of course, that the rule-breaker must be wrong. Theoretically (though not from an LDS perspective), she could be in fact right that there are core beliefs of Mormonism that are wrong. It is unlikely, however, that this person would create a practical option (a "new game") that most Latter-day Saints would take seriously.

42 James, *Pragmatism*, 558.

43 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 666, 688.

44 James, *Pragmatism*, 594-95.

45 The term "constellate" is best understood in the context of James' discussion in *Pragmatism* on the various ways that star constellations can be ordered and named. There is not a univocal reality that dictates the way stars are constellated; indeed, some stars "might feel much surprised at the partners we had given them."

Even constellations consisting of the same stars are named differently, as in the cases of Charles' Wain, the Great Bear, and the Dipper – three names that signify three different ways of interpreting the "same" reality. James' pluralism is quite satisfied with allowing for all three names to coexist. All three names would be true in some respect, although the extent in which they are true would vary depending on the context and the individual. James' friend Frederick Myers, for example, "was humorously indignant that that prodigious star group should remind us Americans of nothing but a culinary utensil" (597).

[46] James, *The Varieties*, 436-37.

[47] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 638, 736, 745-46, 750.

[48] Interestingly, one of the common features of every prominent personality theorist in psychology is a conceptualization of some kind of "stuckness" (not usually using this term) as an underlying feature of mental illness. Stuckness is conceptualized by Freud as fixation, Adler as a maladaptive life plan, Jung as one-sidedness, Skinner as a maladaptive reinforcement history, Rogers as incongruence with the natural self, and Kelly as a fixed personal construction system. See Joseph F. Rychlak, *Personality and Psychotherapy*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

[49] Brent D. Slife, "Values from Christian Families: Do They Come from Unrecognized Idols?" *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 136. Also see Slife, "Taking Practice Seriously: Toward a Relational Ontology," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 24, no. 2 (2004).

[50] James, *Pragmatism*, 583.

[51] I personally feel this way regarding Latter-day Saints who strongly believe that polygamy will be reinstated for mortal church members. This belief is not important for me to believe, nor do I see any pragmatic benefit in doing so – moreover, it is a belief that, for me, is "weird" and I think might be interpreted by *certain* members in a way that is damaging. However, it would not be correct for me to say that someone must be a bad Latter-day Saint on virtue of having this strong belief. It would be wise for me, at least on this belief alone, to see this person as a faithful (non-heretical) Latter-day Saint. If it is important for this member to hold this belief, more power to them. This view, however, certainly would not foreclose dialogue with this member in which either they or I change our mind.

[52] James, *Pragmatism*, 542; Rebecca Stone, "Does Pragmatism Lead to Pluralism? Exploring the Disagreement Between Jerome Bruner and William James Regarding Pragmatism's Goal," *Theory and Psychology* 16, no 4 (2006).

[53] James, *The Varieties*, 437.

[54] Wayne Viney and others, "William James on the Advantages of a Pluralistic Psychology," in *Reinterpreting the Legacy of William James*, 93.

[55] James, *The Varieties*, 463.