



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Mormons and more traditional Christians have a long history of conflict. But they also have a history of dialogue as well. This practice of dialogue has been going on among a variety of participants in differing venues, from average people in neighborhoods to more formal discussions among academics in universities and other settings, and other forms in between. One particular form of this dialogue has taken place between Evangelicals and Mormons. This too has had a variety of manifestations, but wherever it has taken place it seems to have been done in ways that resonate more with Evangelical priorities than Mormon ones.

Evangelicals are used to thinking about Mormonism in terms of its beliefs, and in this doctrinal perspective the religion of the Latter-day Saints is typically analyzed with Evangelical doctrinal priorities at the forefront. But if we step back a moment and try to understand Mormonism from the perspective of those on the inside, we learn that Mormonism is not primarily a religion of doctrine, but instead of ethics, praxis, and narrative. For example, Mormons emphasize an ethical lifestyle summarized by the phrase “choose the right.” This is then applied to a variety of life choices. In terms of practice, Mormons emphasize having a testimony about Joseph Smith and his calling to restore the church, participation in the local ward is important, as is participating in a variety of rituals in temples. In terms of narrative, Mormons look to the Plan of Salvation, the First Vision, and the Pre-existence as sacred stories in which they situate their lives and faith. To be sure, Mormons have beliefs, and doctrines have been developed in conjunction with Mormon ethics, practice, narrative, and history, but doctrine is not the primary frame of reference for Latter-day Saints. This is confirmed by the recent survey titled “Mormons in America” conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.¹ In this survey of Mormons, in responding to the question “What makes a good Mormon?,” various doctrines that Evangelicals would equate with a definition of Mormonism did not make

the top five responses of the list. Instead, believing in Joseph Smith's First Vision, and helping the poor were the top two responses, followed by others that fall in the realm of ethical practices.

Understanding Mormonism from the perspective of the Mormon rather than as an outsider, reveals that in Evangelical-Mormon dialogue the Mormons have come closer to Evangelical concerns for discussion rather than Evangelicals have toward Mormons. There is a need to add additional conversation topics to the dialogical agenda, and to do so in ways that involve issues that resonate with Mormon concerns.

Given this background I was pleased to find Stephen Webb, and his book *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Webb is a Roman Catholic scholar who did his PhD at the University of Chicago, and he teaches religion and philosophy at Wabash College. *Jesus Christ, Eternal God* is a carefully argued and rich consideration of the idea that God is embodied. Classical Christian theism has long argued that God is immaterial, and that it was only when the eternal Word of God took human form at the incarnation that the idea of divine embodiment could be considered. Webb argues to the contrary, and he develops his thesis by considering elements relevant to his argument that have been expressed through philosophical and theological history. He also considers Mormon theology, which has long incorporated the idea that God has a body, and Webb even goes so far as to argue that traditional Christians can learn from Mormonism on this topic. In this regard Webb writes in the Introduction:

Chapter 9 might be the most controversial of my book, because I am convinced that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has much to contribute to contemporary theology, especially on the topic of Christian materialism. Unfortunately, creedal Christians rarely take Mormonism seriously. Perhaps the main reason for this neglect is the Mormon rejection of creation out of nothing, which puts it at odds with most of Western metaphysics and Christian theology. None of its philosophical positions has made it more prone to scholarly condescension than this one....I think that traditional or creedal theologians have more to learn from Mormonism than any other religious tradition today, and that the Mormon position on matter can be reasonably defended, though I offer some suggestions on how to revise it in the light of the teaching of heavenly flesh.

The thesis of Webb's book provides an area of discussion of mutual interest to both Mormons and traditional Christians. Although it is theological and philosophical in nature, the subject of divine embodiment is one that resonates with the Mormon conception of God, and it represents an important option for discussion between these religious communities.

This issue of the *Sacred Tribes Journal* is a dialogical one that seeks to bring traditional Christians and Mormons together to address topics neglected in other dialogue venues. As this edition of the journal begins,



it brings together a Roman Catholic scholar, Frank Beckwith, and a Mormon scholar, Charles Randall Paul, who interact with Webb's book and share their perspectives. These essays are then followed by responses from Webb. This subject is a complex one, and Webb's volume is substantial, so these essays should not be construed as exhaustive, but rather, serve as the initial conversation starters for others who wish to take up the dialogical mantle on this topic.

As this issue of the journal continues with its theme of dialogue with Mormonism, Melody Wachsmuth contributes to the discussion as she considers the implications of Christ's atonement on relationships between dialogue partners in Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints. She also considers the implications of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 on such encounters. An essay by James Holt follows, which takes a look at the "ground rules" that have been in place for Mormon-Evangelical dialogue, and how the classification of Mormonism as Christian or not is an elephant in the room that must be acknowledge. He then suggests a way forward. This issue of the journal concludes with two book reviews, the first looking at Douglas Davies' latest book on Mormonism titled *Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Satanic Opposition*,² and a review by Darwin Glassford of Ronald Flory and Donald E. Miller's *Finding Faith*.³

I believe you will find the materials that follow enriching and challenging, and I wish you a good read and thoughtful reflection.

¹ "Mormons in America: Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society – Executive Summary," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (January 12, 2012): <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Mormon/mormons-in-america-executive-summary.aspx> (accessed 6 February 2012).

² Douglas Davies, *Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Satanic Opposition: Atonement, Evil and the Mormon Vision* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

³ Ronald Flory and Donald E. Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).