



GOD IS SOMEBODY TO LOVE

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Confessing and Professing About God

This book is a sincere confession from a Catholic professor who is talking out loud in front of believers. Webb's argument leads into the fundamental human desire to worship God. Nietzsche and Marx are the secular shadows that still haunt modern theologians: are they selling some scientifically plausible story about an ultimate Santa Claus Super Power to calm our fear of death and placate our demand for justice? Webb is not defending or selling God. He is worshipping God with his intellect as well as his heart in this text. He takes the events reported in the New Testament as they are reported.

The Gospels report the experiences of Jesus and his disciples, not their theological or philosophical ruminations about their experiences. Jesus is transfigured with ancient prophets while Peter, James and John look on. The text does not follow the event with a discourse on its purpose or on how transfiguration occurs from the point of view of physics or metaphysics. That it occurred was the most important matter for the gospel writer.

In his Ricoeurian second naïveté without apology Webb *starts* with the reality of material non-mortal bodies and works backwards into theology, metaphysics, hermeneutics, and science. Although quaint these days, Webb's approach honors historical witnesses to bodily events that include God as in and part of history. In this respect Mormons will welcome him as a fellow traveler in their camp even if he still is tempted to believe God is worshipworthy because *It* is Awesome Omnipotence instead of The Most Loving Person of All. For their part, after reading Webb Mormon intellectuals might be less tempted to shake off the "embarrassingly" recent claims that resurrected men including the Father and the Son visited upstate New York in 1820.

For me Webb opens the door to a refreshing breeze of naturalist theology that coherently allows for the eternity of matter and forms that do not place God outside of them. In the spirit of William James, Webb allows for material reality that is currently unmeasured by our instruments. He seems to believe science, philosophy and theology are useful tools for tentative conclusions about the changing eternal nature of God and humanity, but he applies those tools to his prime fact of history: Jesus Christ as a material person revealed the true material God and the true divine human to the world.

The Body of God Matters

This enthralling book of historical and constructive Christian theology shows Stephen Webb as an erudite, convicted confessor seeking to coherently explain how the person, Jesus of Nazareth, was a material, bodily person before, during, and after his earthly sojourn. Webb believes that Christians took a wrong theological turn during the early centuries when, pondering how Jesus could be God and human, the mainstream decided that any form of matter was an impossible limitation on the omnipresent omnipotent Creator. They concluded an immaterial God stooped temporarily into material mud through Jesus Christ—to rescue and purify sullied humanity.

Stephen Webb writes this book as a Christology with only one end in mind: to go farther than other theologians “in lifting up the absolute eternity of the incarnate Jesus Christ.” Why is Webb so keen on this goal? Why is the *eternity of incarnation* such a pivotal truth to him? It must have something to do with his desire to worship the right God, and more, to rightly know who this worshipper is. The eternity of the incarnate Christ points to the same eternal incarnate possibility for Webb and every human person. To be clear, if this doctrine that God is heavenly flesh from eternity is true, then humans can take an optimistic attitude about their experience in this material world, and look forward with hope for some kind of heavenly embodied social life that includes at least Jesus.

Parenthetically, let me say this book review will be more of a dialogue into which I feel Webb has invited me. In what follows I will respond to several of Webb’s ideas as they tend to support or critique the thought of Joseph Smith, Jr. the Mormon prophet as I think many, but clearly not all, thoughtful Mormons might interpret it.

To try to understand how matter as we conceive it is related eternally to God, Webb delves into the metaphysics of physics (macro and micro) and takes a lively new look at the old subject of divine incarnation and human divinization. This unusual book sketches a middle way between conceiving the cosmos in radically dualistic or monistic terms by exploring the category of spiritual matter or material spirit that, as an old sub-atomic scientist might say, can act like energy or particles de-



pending on the observers. The physics and metaphysics discussed are analyzed in the context of Webb's first reality: Jesus Christ, the Eternal God. This is not a scientist making sense of divine matter as much as a theologian making sense of natural matter. Webb has provoked a deep conversation aimed to improve the coherence of Christian theological traditions and spiritual health or faith of people that feel estranged from an immaterial divinity.

Webb's thesis as I see it is summarized in this pithy citation:

The body Jesus Christ had on earth is a specification of the body the Father gave to the Son before the world began. If this seems abstract, it should not be. I am seeking the most concrete way of interpreting the claim that everything that exists is what it is because it has its being in Jesus Christ.

If the being of Jesus Christ is conceived as an immaterial spirit to which we are related in a mysterious and miraculous manner (a manner which does not include our bodies), then it is hard to fathom how our being originates in and from Jesus. . . . [but] If Jesus Christ is the prototype of all matter, the source and origin of energy, the sound that vibrates the world into being and the light that vivifies every atom . . . [then] The flesh of Jesus is both heavenly and earthly, both particular and universal, both personal and cosmic. It is the substratum, the essence, the beginning of creation, the model and prototype of all matter just as he is the original basis of human nature.

Far from being nothing, and even further from being evil, matter is the means by which God gives us life, and as such, it is that which God has decided to be, from eternity, so that we too can progress eternally into the divine substance without losing our identities. We will take new forms, undoubtedly, in the afterlife, but those forms will be revisions and recreations of what we already are, since our heavenly bodies will not need to be created out of nothing.

I quibble with his use of terms "substratum" and "divine substance" as vestigial Hellenisms that seem to be gratuitous if not misleading descriptors in this contra dual manifesto of matter; but aside from this

‘essential hedging’ he takes his stand forthrightly against “high immaterialism” in his conclusion that turns incarnation’s theological purpose back upstream from the pre-mortal Son and the Father. His theology does not conform to a trinity of mystical ontological unity, and he rejects both panthesim and panentheism as adequate positions to grasp the heavenly flesh of Jesus Christ.

Still, Webb cannot go all the way in thinking that the matter of Almighty God can prefer human form, but he believes God is spiritual-material. Webb demurs from going too far—rather like Moses only talks about seeing the hind parts of God or Milton only describes the feet of God. This he does, however, not out of traditional humility that will not dishonor God with feeble human thought or speech that cannot hope to get God right. But Webb’s basic argument and confessional confidence does not lead to this reticence—his good old Trinitarian monotheism does. Webb actually thinks that Christ’s body (and through him, our bodies) improves on the unnamed form of a spiritual-material God, and that God is glad about the improvement. But that leaves him with two Gods, neither of which acting as the omnigod of the tradition.

What breaks in the universe or pluriverse if God is in the same form as Jesus, making two distinguishable Gods? Nothing (my answer). However, for traditional theologians—that still honor the Greek ideal of an omnipower without whose omniscient omnipresence chaos would instantly destroy all physical and metaphysical order—‘nothing’ indeed would be the result when God embodied somewhere could no longer do his theological chore omniwhere as the divine substratum on which all stands. In other words, Webb is being polite, not humble. He wants to keep God (and those who think God can’t stand with competition) from the embarrassment of demotion—if not utter unemployment—after the singular ground of being itself is compared to the eternal worshipworthy bodily exuberance of the Son.

Greek philosophers seemed to prefer adoring an ideal idol of Omni-Perfection as distinct from the Hebrews (prior to their rabbinic philosophical turn) that worshiped a Tribal God that resembled a human with a proper name and quirky, dangerous, amazing unpredictable habits. More like this Hebrew God, the Mormons worship a divine person, a Man of Holiness, a living, learning, loving leader God who sent his Son to reveal our Father and thereby, ourselves. Most Mormons do not feel tempted to worship an ideal or principle of perfection, beauty, truth, or goodness. Love is personal desire and action for the well-being of another. Only persons love and persons are unimaginable without particular material form. A God who desires to love voraciously can only be worshiped as a person because to Mormons worship is loving *emulation*—not praising awe and grateful wonder at something beyond all emulation.



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Knowing God or Anyone: The What and How Is Good, The Who and Why Is Better

As I proceed in speculative thought about God, a modest preamble is apt. Mormons know that they can say too much God's nature, and ours as well, but their penchant for divination leads them into temptation. They are delivered from evil, however, by the very unlimited optimism that endangers them: In all their hope for worlds to come Mormons still *do* leave the best unsaid. They leave it untold either because they only have hunches about the facts of eternal life, or because they have been asked by God not to disclose these facts after receiving them by direct revelation. As a Mormon you go to church with people who look like regular folks, but for all you know might have been personally visiting with God and resurrected beings just yesterday.

This is the quiet esoteric doctrine of Mormonism: there is a silent community of exalted souls, promised they will rise for sure as gods, sitting among the community as if they are just regular folks. Like the initiates of mysteries in ancient Greece, these true saints keep their peace and do not tell the best. Even if they did, there are likely no referential words that can *really* describe life among the gods and goddesses anyhow—you have to see it first hand under the influence of divine spirit to get it. But Mormons are supposed to seek this gift. They are to seek to experience the Transfiguration of Christ like the ancient witnesses did.

I say this to provide a context for Mormon speculation like mine that is not based on revelatory experience. Mormons actually believe people who desire it enough can be transfigured in their living bodies in order to see and converse with the spirit-material Persons, God our Heavenly Father and Jesus and our ancestors. So speculative theological adventurism (Barth's, Webb's or mine) is utterly tame compared to the actual theological trips some humans are quietly taking. That is what keeps me laughing at myself (and hoping God is too) as I reach to make coherent statements about divine and human persons—filling in for God where He has left things unclear or unsaid.

Webb's book is his own theological dialogue with classical Christian and Greek philosophers—and with a new player, Joseph Smith, Jr. I will focus on this novel dialogue between a living Roman Catholic and Joseph Smith, Jr. *in absentia*. Webb includes Smith because Smith made the theological link between a God-that-loves and personal bodily form more cogently than any human thinker or prophet. Smith saw that love needed both relational freedom and material form to be potent. He claimed to be visited by the Father and the Son who were both material humanlike bodies that spoke with him as one does with a friend. Whether

or not young Smith met two tangible Gods in the spring of 1820, the theological aftermath of his experience was extraordinary. Webb gives no allegiance to Mormonism, but he has a master's grasp on the formal and informal sources that provide the basis for Mormon theological thinking, and he says,

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 [the eternity of] matter can be reasonably defended, though I offer some suggestions on how to revise it . . .

Joseph Smith's work was intent on lifting men and women to come boldly to the loving throne of mercy to meet the Son and the Father and family and friends after death in resurrected social life. Challenging the radical otherness of the divine, Jesus upgraded his servants to friends at the end of his life, saying greater things than he did they would do. The term friend implies some kind of equal status. How that status works out—human divinization—is the Christian mystery question nested within the theology of incarnation of the Son. Whatever goes on as divine gift or human effort or both, eternal life will be a collaborative interpersonal experience that is open to infinite experiences of love. Smith, like process theologians to some degree, believed God and all of us can grow 'better' if the summation of our experiences yields more loving friendships. (Facebook succeeds by superficially grasping something deep.) Mormons imagine that persons in heaven continue to develop and employ their infinite capacity for creative purposefulness in social groups of friends.

Webb says,

From the perspective of classical metaphysics, of course, little of Mormon doctrine makes much logical sense. The idea of a radically plural and finite divine substance, however, just might have its own logic as well as its own religious and ethical advantages. At the very least, the fluidity and materiality of the Mormon view of God enables it to capture the essential sameness of Jesus Christ with us in a most striking manner. Mormons go so far as to insist that God was once a man just like us, which can sound confusing, but it is, in a way, the flipside to the belief that we will become, in the afterlife, just like him. There is a grand and cosmic circularity that connects Jesus with humanity, and it never stops rolling, like a dance with countless changing partners and yet everyone always comes around to dancing with him.



Mormons believe all humans lived in a pre-mortal world where we knew the material-spiritual Jesus, and that we will do so after death too. Webb does not address human pre-mortal existence but affirms Christ's eternal material form as God's Son before and after his mortal sojourn. Thus, to understand matter is to know God and life eternal. He says, "To understand what the divine substance is, then, we obviously need a clear definition of matter." If *substance* can refer to 'material stuff' rather than the some immaterial reality that undergirds eternal matter, then Webb is consistent with his thinking. His theology addresses a vital question for people looking for a coherent way to conceive of an unseen God that is somehow materially related to us. However, even if we understand the science of matter and how God is material, we are still far from knowing God as a person in social relations.

While for Webb Greek metaphysics provides the context for modern physics and for theological thought, the bottomless 'given' of matter for Joseph Smith was not metaphysics or physics, but interpersonal sociality (the emphasis of the Hebrew Bible: let US create male and female in our likeness). Metaphysical and physical orders of matter developed from the always prior social-psychology of purposeful gods. The only solid matter was the constant loyalty of a loving God in the flux of change and infinite freedom. In spite of all the talk of cosmic world making exalted beings, the Mormons are not that interested in cosmic science. They are teleologists at heart, not cosmologists. Webb will help Mormons see how they could take cosmology more seriously with this book. But Webb has opened a dialogue that will continue fruitfully in the social sciences and teleology too.

Joseph Smith's thought focuses on an infinite regression of sociality, and this moves from questions about *how* eternal material persons change, to questions of *why* they have chosen to establish social orders when they don't 'need' each other to sustain their existence. Why do eternal persons desire to associate together if they have no divine economy based on scarcity or security? Smith's answer is they enjoy loving each other and the creative originality association yields.

For the Greeks and Patristics and many contemporary Christian theologians chemistry and physics are still the disciplines that frame reality. The interest was in the how of things--assuming the why cannot be fathomed. But for Joseph Smith, the workings of spirit matter were less important than the loving personal relations that formed around mutual purposes. Matter always matters as an instrumental form to accomplish some new purpose. "Desire for" is inherent in all forms of matter to a greater or lesser degree. In God it is most intense. Thus, why Christ is

Lord for us is more important than how Christ became the Son of God. Still, Webb's dialogue with the thought of Joseph Smith will allow Mormons interested in metaphysics and physics to think about the coherence of their beliefs about resurrected and pre-mortal material forms. This will challenge Mormon and other philosophers and scientists to work through speculative theological interpretations in a more elegant way. However, many believers (certainly most Mormons) are about as interested in proving the claim that Jesus is a material body as they are that their parents exist as material entities. They feel his love in their bodies and they sense why he loves in their bodies and thus love him as a person in return. This they do without understanding their own embodied selves or God.

Heavenly Societies

Mark Heim in his book *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995) argues from the Christian scriptures that God will provide different heavenly situations for all souls according to their desires. If the Mormons have their hearts desire heaven will be where they can enjoy new projects with an ever-increasing circle of friends and family. Now, if they happen to be called gods in the process, fine. But that is not their primary motive. They want their loves to continue and expand. They love close association with flesh and boney brainy and brawny beautiful people—and think that resurrected personal bodies will be preferred to “almost formless” matter. So if God turns out to be “a ubiquitous impersonal unifying force” that invites us to advance beyond bodies into a heaven without material persons, the Mormons will be inclined to decline the offer. They would think Sartre (and God in this example) just had it wrong: Heaven is other people—and they trust that God is the best of the others.

Webb reads Joseph Smith as sayings, “God is more of a person than we are.” Thus, Webb might see Smith's precursor in John Milton who emphasized that theologians missed the whole direction of Christianity: it led not toward recessive anthropomorphism--god becoming man--but theomorphism, eternal beings becoming more fully divine through social relations in material bodily form. Webb pushes this thought to conclude that Christ's anthropophany reveals the divine pre-mortal lineage of material form *of some kind*—presumably into an infinite or timeless past.

Webb warns that Mormon thinkers should “keep in mind that our eternity is an extension of [Christ's]” . . . and that they should balance their theological audacity by humbly giving credit to the atoning Lord . . . “rather than to what we can do by our own nature.” It is true that we would be spoiled and silly children if we gave no thanks to our loving parents that paid for the trip. However, those parents desire no gratitude more than passing forward gift—taking our children on similar adventures.



The spiritual, personal sensitivity here is crucial: Joseph Smith claimed that God did count on us for expanding His joy. Smith's massive project to weld the whole human family into a loving society after this mortal life (if not before) was commissioned by Heavenly Parents. This was not an analogy. Neither we nor God could be made perfect (or complete) without all of us being made whole. Thus, it is in our power to make God weep in eternity when we reject his love. There is a parity of freedom between us that no power can alter. This inherent power of free eternal non-created persons cannot be diminished by intentional humility. Mormons say like cheeky kids what the rest of the human family knows silently: If God did not desire to bend to our power, then He never should have desired to love us and vice versa!

So Webb reminds Christians of all stripes to always remember the Son of God that broke his body and shed his blood, and suffered in a way inconceivable to us for the wrongs we have done to each other—so that we do not desire to demand eternal suffering for the perpetrators in heaven. Heaven won't be heaven unless we are heavenly people that desire to love and work together eternally. The family of God would therefore, need to be healed after the brutal experience of mortality. So Mormons believe a pre-mortal Jesus Christ agreed to take the brunt of the retributive pain we would demand of our traitorous family members, who under the press of mortal ignorance would break their pre-mortal vows of loyalty and love. When we feel the healing influence of Jesus Christ we feel a desire to bring home and forgive those who trespass against us and to desire to make recompense to those against whom we have sinned. This love of Christ is the highest of actions, and Mormons trust that humans can be filled with that love by association with the Holy Spirit to become Christlike themselves.

Webb's Critique of and Suggestion for Mormon Theology

This review has focused mainly on Webb's engagement with Mormon theology. I have been responding to his whole book as if it were designed for a Mormon in dialogue. Most of the book is not related to Mormon thought. However, his work on Joseph Smith's thought is so careful and intense that I felt compelled to dive into the whole argument trying to imagine how the Prophet Joseph might respond to Webb today. The author engages modern Mormons (and Smith indirectly) as a sincere critic. He asks:

If the Father too began life in an embryonic state, then there must be an infinite regression of divinities, which is hard enough to conceptualize, but the question also emerges of who or what is in charge when all of the gods are busy being born.

This is a regular question for Mormon speculation. One LDS answer is eternal intelligences “make do” with whomever is available because we all (in our immortal state) council with God to define the order of things – no one entity is “out there” sustaining the cosmic order. The invisible “God particle(s)” posited by sub-atomic physics still glues things together while God is on vacation.

Again, Webb writes:

These conundrums do not mean that Mormonism is “wrong.” They mean that Mormonism should look to a theory other than the multiverse to explicate its doctrines of deification and eternal progression. More specifically, a doctrine of the ubiquitous and essentially capacious flesh of Jesus Christ could provide a better foundation for the teaching of eternal progression. The heavenly flesh of Christ is one flesh, providing the metaphysical foundation for our trust in the universal laws that govern the physical world. It is also a flesh that is created by one God and belongs to one person, preserving monotheism even as it covers countless possibilities for new forms of spiritual progress. Moreover, its singular configuration is the source of a spiritual law that cannot vary across time or space. There is in this body the room Mormons need for their eternal progression soteriology. Why posit countless universes when you have everything you need right here in Christ? Like the Church, which is one body with many living parts, matter can embody many possibilities but still reflect one basic shape. There might be many gods, but there can be only one Jesus Christ.

After this helpful thinking Webb adds:

Even Mormonism’s circumvention of the established rules of metaphysics goes only so far, leaving Mormon thinkers so deeply entangled in standard theological debates that the future theological development of their church is an open question.

There is an unspoken anticipation among the Mormons for further revealed light on the relations of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit with each other and humanity. More, there are forms of God that beg to be revealed in boldness, Heavenly Parents (Mother and Father in Heaven) being the first of these, the Light of Christ given to all humans being



another akin to the Holy Spirit. Mormons wait on their prophets for such revelations. Perhaps they are not forthcoming in part because many Mormons also desire to fit more closely within the classic category of Christian traditions these days.

Why God Would Want to Be God?

Indeed, Webb understands the radical Mormon idea related to this question (implied in their Doctrine and Covenants Section 88 and elsewhere.) However, this radical freedom of God and all of us eternal persons is recognized by Joseph Smith as more than a post-modern plaything. He said that our God is a loving parent that desires the best for his children, and tellingly, “none but fools trifle with the souls of men.” Note that foolishness, not evil is derogated here. We trust our Heavenly Parents are not fools, and that their love is real. We trust God would not remain worshipworthy if He betrayed that trust. Eternal divine persons that desire free responses to their influence know they cannot trifle with each other’s honest desires. They together can play, experiment, explore, suffer, laugh, design, build, succeed or fail; but they do it with those that are in it for mutual love and joy. They are free to opt out—diminish the influence—if they were to find God or anyone else trying something that purposefully harmed others. This of course sounds like an unruly existence with no traditional God that with the snap of his sovereignty will can have his own way. This sounds like a place where to be God is actually *work*—and who wants that forever?

Mormon speculative theologians are not focused on the task of enlightening “simple-minded people” to understand that God is not simply a very powerful man (classical Christian theology). Their interest is in showing why God continues to desire to be god (and by substitution, why you and I might be enticed to be gods—or anything *forever*. Whether the Mormons know it or not they seem to be the most serious teleologists on earth—and with their optimism about their eternal personal natures, they can be passionate futurists that rarely cry at funerals. They tend to yawn at ethics, moral, political and social theories that seem shallow or stale compared to living the next moment in relations of love that require collaborative originality and loyalty in difficult and but interesting tension over what good to try next. They reserve their speculative energy for teleology.

Their prophet saw that the question of ultimate purpose, the intentional desire for an unsurpassable final goal, was the silent partner of all other human questioning and concern. Before Frederick Nietzsche (negatively, repetitively) or William James (positively, pluralistically)

named fundamental purposelessness as the problem for men and gods, Joseph Smith heard from the Source that our God's ultimate purpose is aligned with ours, namely to work for more mutual joy as a parent does for a child or friends do for each other. How that joy is attained is always open for negotiation between God and us. God and man can understand each other because they both desire to help fulfill each other's desires for abundant joy. Again, it is in the relatedness of friends that desire each other's influence and company that we understand the divine and human desire for joy.

In the simple revelation in the book of Hebrews (12:2) we see our exemplar: "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our trust; who *for the joy that was set before him* endured the cross . . ."

Looking into these words, however, we see that there is no definition of joy in itself. By the example of Jesus we are shown how friends love by giving their lives for each other. This is not altruism as a virtue. Love is not a virtue. It is a desire and action for the good of another and for oneself.

So the great Mormon insight is that the ultimate purpose of joy has no final definition. Love is not reduced to any formula. Lovers decide in creative collaborations always where their love leads them *next*. Thus eternity is an endless history of penultimate goals that can be achieved as projects aiming for joy that is measured *ex post facto*. The closest definition of joy might be the desire for joy. The desire for more joyful desire (not a final state) is the foundation of eternal life among the gods. In our section of the pluriverses Mormons worship the God whose joyful desires are enhanced by love that grows in the forms of voluntary friendships and genetic family relations. Joy and love are both ends in themselves—the former being a worthy mood that combines happiness and sadness, the latter being an active desire for mutual good influence with another person. We feel joy when we love people and they love us—eternally.

Webb clearly believes God likes being God to lead more beings to enjoy divinity:

It could be that matter's original form, from all eternity, is chaotic, and if so, what order matter expresses, and the laws that encapsulate that order, can still be thought of as the creation of God. In other words, order, if not matter itself, has an absolute beginning in the divine. Arguably, this must be the case if the divine is the goal of every creature. Divinization is a purposeful activity the course of which is determined by its end.



Mormons have difficulty with phrases like “absolute beginning in the divine.” In heavenly pre-mortal councils laws were “instituted.” While some Mormons think this means discovered outside of God, others think laws were collaboratively constructed—that the councils themselves were in order based on an infinite regression of prior constuctions—none of which being absolute. There is an idea of social agreement over the regime of law—physical and spiritual by which all in the regime agree to be governed. Mormons lean toward a notion that matter is unorganized, organized, disorganized, reorganized, transorganized, etc.

In divine/human bodily personal forms matter has a history that it retains and employs for future projects. It has a mysteriousness in its originlessness—its infinite regression of existence that has no essence, no substance other than its history of relations—remembered (reassembled) “now” as a floating launching pad for leverage to act. This is the same sensation we have on Terra Firma that is falling through space. It is firm enough to give our next step purchase. This is the way of order and law: It is mutable but because it moves slower than we do, we can use it for leverage.

B. H. Roberts, an early 20th century Mormon leader, once said that all’s love and all’s law. He seemed to understand that love needed form to be ‘real,’ however, forms for expressing love were open to change. I believe that one can coherently think love and order exist in eternal relational nominalism that allows for moral law and physical order to be expressions of intentional spiritual-material forms (bodies, minds, etc.) that are always open for negotiated change between free persuasive persons. Persons are histories identified with infinite past collaborative forms based on past purposes anticipating new original purposes yet to be. New purposes and original forms emerge from creative relationships—and social and physical forms of physical law are subject to change. Spiritual-material stuff and the way it behaves is persuasively malleable—allowing infinite variety of forms and experiences.

Mormons can ask the cheeky question: why would anyone desire to become as God is? The answer lies in knowing “our” God and Jesus Christ. There is a hint in Hebrews 12:2: “for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross.” And the Book of Mormon explicitly claims that “Man is that he might have joy”—and other Mormon scripture calls God the Man of Holiness whose main business is bringing about the happy eternal lives of men and women. Eternal lives imply the quality not the extension of social relations. Eternal lives are a mutual gift of joyful friendship that is pro-creative—it is going to work on something wonderful, challenging, surprising with people you love. Building *new*

“worlds” together for their beauty and variety and as a place to expand loving interpersonal relations. The Mormon temple “endowment ceremony” teaches that God organizes new worlds with colleagues for the beauty and variety of them as well as for new testing experiences for the inhabitants that choose to try themselves out there.

Webb understands Mormon thinking very well, pushing it to similar ends that Mormons do:

If God has a spiritual-material form, and so do we, then no matter how close we come to God, we will still be ourselves; indeed, the closer we come to God, the more we will be endowed with the spiritual matter that we share with God. We will become, that is, gods. And if heaven is spatially located, there will not be room in it for countless gods. That is why the saved will have to venture out on their own, and what will they do with all of their power if they do not create worlds of their own? To see these points, begin with a simple question. If we advance in knowledge of and unity with God in the afterlife, how can we remain the same limited creatures.

As in group therapy, patients calm down when they feel understood, I relax when I read the above written by a Roman Catholic. He might think I am nuts or damned, but somehow that’s fine because I just like the way he seems to “get” me.

As to purpose, the God that Loves is free and as such defines His purpose by the way He chooses to live: He acts to build more joyful life with an expanding number of friends. That purpose of mutual joy has never been trumped. But there is no final explanation of why living forever as loving friends yields joy. Nor is there a prescription for “what friends do” forever. As I defined earlier the ultimate purpose for joy is joy, for love is love. The penultimate purposes—collaborative, original, creative projects—are the main events of eternity that describe what love does for joy, and joy brings to love.

Thus Mormons can speculate that councils in heaven will decide the artful agenda in celestial worlds to come. God is a collaborative King of kings, not a pontificating king of creatures. Heaven is a democracy of royals. Heavenly Parents have family councils. Heaven is a lovely place where wars can still occur in the freedom of eternity.

The great Christian myth of War in Heaven is emphasized by Mormons because they believe angels are humans and the pre-mortal war was between our brothers and sisters in the presence of God. Conflict over differences, envy and anger, these also are heavenly facts of eternal lives of freedom and love.



When it is clear that love is *the way* God desires us to become as He is—to love as He loves, then the divisive world of comparison, hierarchy and conflict makes sense. It is elegantly designed to grow and temper love in the social crucible. As the ill-fenced Garden of Paradise and the Aborted Tower of Babel both show, God has designed this world to test our hearts in unavoidable conflicts wherein we meet aliens or traitors that do not “speak our language” on many levels. God skillfully diverts our mental attention to fights over this or that moral issue or true doctrine, only as means to discover where hearts really are when we are not faking it for an obvious audience. The main event the angels observe in suspense is in the heart facing the rival. What do we desire for our adversary? How will we treat our opponent? All of the Bible is a set up for this question that provides the divine litmus test of real love.

Webb describe God’s power and divinized humans in this way:

Boredom is certainly not one of the problems with the Mormon view of the afterlife. Mormonism reasons that if we share in God’s power in the next life we will not be powerless, and power without the occasion to use it is power in name only. Indeed, if we have authority over the angels, what will we be able to do with that authority?

Though it would seem from here that eternity is in danger of certain boredom, some would risk experiencing hellish worlds to avoid a final finished perfection that is known so well that to experience it is no longer interesting. Boredom is hell in heaven like suspense is hell on earth. In heaven surprise is the scarcest and most valuable commodity. When the veil is lifted from our mortal sojourn, and there is clearly no risk of losing life, the risk of losing love takes center stage. We have only our loving attention to use as barter for the blessing from another’s heart.

Webb implies that as heavenly persons authority to command angels is something worth using in active creativity. I will spin this in Mormon fashion. Hannah Arendt taught that authority was vested by the will of those who granted it to a leader. It was always bottom up, not top down. This is also the Mormon idea of divine authority. Joseph Smith said we grant authority to God when we emulate him. He has no power over our eternal souls except loving persuasion. Thus Christ’s authority derives from his loving persuasion that was stamped with his willingness

to die for those he claimed to love. Smith said the same stamp is required for all friends who claim they love each other. Now, how do eternal beings ‘die’ for each other? Here the whole design of earthly mortality can be seen as a dramatic set to create a temporary reality of death for all of us immortal persons to prove our love by “giving our lives” for each other in one way or another. God’s technical power is unimpressive—anyone can learn it. However, God’s persuasive love (most fully disclosed in Jesus Christ) is the most powerful thing in the pluriverses (so far). So, power comes at cost for God. Building worlds requires building relationships of loving collaborators, more than building mountains and lakes or new laws of physics or whatever. Worlds are constructed of people who come together to entrust authorities to lead them in new experiments.

Webb’s Christological Conclusion and Mine

Webb writes,

Mormonism speaks straight to the heart with the clearest of proclamations about the believer’s longing for intimacy with Jesus Christ. Mormonism can be a controversial topic for many non-Mormon Christians, but I have come to the conclusion that no theology has ever managed to capture the essential sameness of Jesus with us in a more striking manner. At the heart of Mormon cosmic optimism is the idea that the incarnation of Jesus was not an afterthought to creation or a contingent response to an accidental fall of humanity into sin. Christ embodied is the center of the cosmos; he lived as we do before we were created to be like him.

Of all the branches of Christianity, Mormonism is the most imaginative, and if nothing else, its intellectual audacity should make it the most exciting conversational partner for traditional Christians for the twenty-first century. Mormonism is ready to be discovered by the rest of the Christian world and that its exploration will be the next great adventure of creedal theology.

If my tone has not told on me already, I have loved reading Webb. He says, “Not what we have—our legal titles and our rights to dispose of what we own—but who we love through acts of self donation defines and determines us.” Indeed, and as Jesus said on the mount, more than our friends and families and tribe members, it is how we feel about and treat our rivals and adversaries that *most* defines and determines who we become. There is no question that Webb is a devout Roman Catholic who is not persuaded by the Mormon claims to be the only true rival of Catholicism or any other faith. Mormons and Catholics are theological



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and ecclesiastical rivals who do not honor each other's sacraments and who have deeply criticized each other over the years.

Webb has treated his religious critic (Joseph Smith) in a way that God and Joseph would approve I do believe. Mormons are a tiny group, often disregarded by theologians, in a world dominated by traditional Christians. Therefore Webb's serious exploration and appreciation of Joseph Smith's provocative revelations is unusual and exciting to a Mormon reader who feels understood. Webb has earned his critical authority with me and I believe Mormons will come to trust him even when he says we are wrong.