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RESPONSE TO CHARLES RANDALL PAUL

Stephen H. Webb

Department of Religion, Wabash College

I am very grateful to Charles Randall Paul for his careful, engaging, and encouraging response to my book. My reflections on his response take the form of the following essay, which I gratefully dedicate to him.

Modernity is another name for the crisis that begins when the supernatural is severed from the natural. This breakdown is so thorough that no area of society has been left untouched. Whatever its origins (and various theories blame many candidates, including the decline of metaphysics, the ecclesial fragmentation of Christianity, the rise of nationalism, the ideology of consumerism, and on and on), its consequences are clear: The modern world provides no room for a meaningful connection between human fulfillment and religious discipline. At the heart of the crisis is the meaning of knowledge. The success of science in the mastery of matter has led to the triumph of a materialistic view of the world over all competitors. That triumph is fueled by technology's seductive and monopolistic promises to alleviate the human condition by enabling people to live longer and enjoy life more fully. These promises put religion in an awkward position. How can Christianity criticize the unlimited ambition and godless arrogance of secular humanism without looking like it is just saying no to the universal desire for a better life? By rendering religion otiose and obscure, education and piety become strangers who have nothing to say to each other. With religion marginalized and privatized, believers find it hard to grasp an intrinsic relationship between religious rituals and everyday habits. Worshipping God becomes inconceivable as the primary ground of human flourishing. In moral terms, the more modern people become the less natural the natural law looks. Perhaps the most striking theological aspect of the crisis is the common assumption, even among the very devout, that the promise of heaven is irrelevant to the pursuit of happiness here and now. For modern Chris-

tians, heaven is unimaginable, while hell is unthinkable; the afterlife is barely more than an afterthought.

Roman Catholicism has fought a stalwart battle against modernity, but the case can be made that its only serious competitor in trying to heal this breach is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormons conceive of all life, from the heavens above to the earth below, as governed by one common law of spiritual development and material transformation. Time has no limit no matter which direction, past or forward, you look, and space too is unbounded, with new and unimaginable worlds yet to come. Through this grand and unfathomable scheme, the faithful can advance from strength to strength, with God ever before them but never in an absolutely transcendent beyond. All that people love here and now will be preserved and enhanced in worlds without end. The more we come to know ourselves, Mormons wager, the more we will realize that our bodies are destined for a glory that our minds cannot comprehend. Nature is already thoroughly supernatural right down to the smallest atom, and the supernatural is nothing more than nature in its most intense and concentrated form. In the next life, the supernatural will become our second nature, so that the deeper into the divine we go, the more we will become who and what we already are, right down to our most basic bodily functions. Heaven never looked so beautifully ordinary.

Celsus called Christians a *philosomaton genos*—a flesh loving people—because Christians wanted to take their bodies with them to the afterlife.¹ If we take Celsus's definition to heart, then Mormonism is the most characteristically Christian movement of all Christianities. The afterlife is more life for Mormons, not another kind of life altogether. The result is a Christian movement that is as fantastic and inventive in its rituals and doctrines as it is simple and even simplistic in its hopes and dreams.

Can Mormonism articulate a theological platform with enough intellectual coherence to support these ambitions? On the face of it, Roman Catholicism has the obvious and overwhelming advantage of being guided by one of the most systematic thinkers in the history of philosophy. Thomas Aquinas was as clear and careful in his appropriation of Aristotelian logic as Mormonism is carefree of philosophical jargon and colorful with concrete images. But before we rush to the judgment that Aquinas would surely win any and every debate against a whole team of Who's Who in Mormon theology, we need to think through Aquinas's central metaphysical commitment to immateriality.

In my book, I develop my own version of Christian materialism by defending the idea that Jesus Christ brought his celestial flesh down with him for the incarnation. I call this Heavenly Flesh Christology. Aquinas knew about this idea, took it very seriously by giving it exacting attention, and utterly rejected it. Aquinas thought the body of Christ could not have descended from heaven because the Son of God was not



in any place from which he could descend. “One can say pertinently of the Word of God that He descended, not by some local motion, but by reason of the union to a lower nature.”² The Word occupied space for the first time when he became incarnate. If it moved to occupy that space, then it would have withdrawn from a previous place, but such a thought is frivolous given God’s omnipresence.³ Yet Aquinas accepts the idea that Christ ascended to heaven in the form of his resurrected body: “To ascend into heaven plainly belongs to Christ.”⁴ This asymmetry is inelegant at best, given Aquinas’s systematic ambitions, but it also indicates a bothersome inconsistency in the life of the Son. What Christ is at the end of time is utterly distinct from what he was from time’s beginning. To maintain the coherence of his immaterialism, it seems, Aquinas must sacrifice consistency in the life of Christ.

Aquinas’s metaphysics keeps the spiritual and the material essentially separated, but Christ’s resurrected body awkwardly straddles the fence. The same can be said for our own resurrected bodies. Aquinas knew about theological positions that try to imagine how material bodies can become a finer grade of matter so that they are, in effect, transformed into spirit. He vigorously denied that this is possible. “Things do not change into one another unless they have matter in common.”⁵ Our bodies in the afterlife will not be spirit-bodies. Neither will they be comprised of a celestial substance, because Aquinas thinks that celestial bodies, following Aristotle, are perfectly spherical and, besides, celestial bodies do not change and thus do not have tangible experiences. Our resurrected bodies will be higher than celestial bodies, yet they will be bodies that “one can handle, composed of flesh and bones.”⁶ We will be resurrected as flesh and bones human beings—only without the corruption that belies our bodies in our sinful state.

Does Thomas’s position make sense? Let me raise several questions. First, if God the Father is beyond all space and unable to move from one place to another, how could Christ reign in heaven in his glorified body while sitting at the Father’s right hand? Of course, one can say that such language is metaphorical, but the metaphor in this case must point to a real place—heaven—if Christ rules it and we, in our resurrected bodies, will worship him there. If heaven is material in some way, what form will God the Father have in it? Second, is Christ’s resurrected body a merely temporary and tentative form of his divinity, or is it really who he is? Could it be something that he might give up some day, shrugging it off like an old set of clothes? Or is it the case of “once incarnated, always incarnated?” The dilemma I am trying to expose in this set of question is the following: If Christ really is joined to his body in heaven, and he does not experience it as some kind of restraint, then it must be an

aspect of his nature, yet how can that be the case for Thomas, who has defined the Word as essentially (but not, evidently, eternally) immaterial? Third, and related to the second point, if Christ's heavenly, resurrected body is a glory to him, then how is the Son not more than the Father—unless, that is, the Father himself is also material in some way? Moreover, if the Son increases in glory as he becomes embodied, what does that say about Thomas's understanding of divinity as unchanging? Fourth, if immateriality is the true nature of the Son, then his visible presence in heaven will not reveal God to us. Heaven will not be an eternal state but a halfway house toward more intense and greater (a more immaterial!) participation in the divine. We will need to transcend heaven in order to know and worship God more fully. Doesn't that mean, however, that we will need to get "out" of heaven in order to get "into" the divine? Isn't there something wrong with a theology that seems to suggest that we will need to be saved from heaven?

Aquinas opens up these kinds of questions because, on the face of it, he appears to both accept and undermine the absolute gulf between immaterial spirit and physical bodies. God is not material, and yet the Son's reign is embodied. Matter and spirit cannot be mixed together, yet our resurrected bodies will be superior to the stuff of the stars (the objects that occupy the celestial region). Our bodies will be perfectly agile, he says at one point, and thus not limited by space. He makes this point in response to critics who wonder how our bodies will be able to pass through the celestial bodies of the stars. "For the divine power will bring it about that the glorious bodies [our resurrected bodies] can be simultaneously where the other bodies are."⁷ That this is no minor point is demonstrated by the evidence he posits for his claim. The resurrected Christ, he reminds his readers, was able to pass through shut doors (John 20:26).

The idea of physical entities that can occupy a space already occupied by another entity is nothing new to the bizarre world of modern physics, but it certainly defies the logic of Aquinas's Aristotelianism. The question naturally arises, then, if Aquinas has not shifted the ground of his criticism of Heavenly Flesh Christology. If our heavenly bodies can move in apparently miraculous ways, defying the laws of gravity and the limits of time and space, then why couldn't Christ have had a body that he brought with him when he came down from heaven? Will we have bodies in heaven that are superior to the form Christ had before he was incarnate?

A Thomist will respond that the pre-existent Christ existed prior to the creation of time and space. Therefore, he did not need to have a body that could both transcend and occupy a place (or occupy multiple places at the same time). Two problems remain. First, Christ must have had some form (he was a person who shared the divine substance with the Father and the Holy Spirit). Isn't a form that can be somewhere as well as everywhere greater (better than) a form that can be everywhere



because it is nowhere? Why wouldn't the Father want the Son to have a body like that? Second, why would God create a world full of bodies before giving Christ one? Once time and space are brought into being, and place becomes good (it is good to be in a specific time and place), wouldn't the Father first give this good to the Son? Is the incarnation the first "movement" that the divine experiences? That seems unlikely, given God's involvement in the world prior to the incarnation, indeed, God's physical appearances to many of the Old Testament prophets. To take but one example, who was walking in the Garden of Eden if God had no body before the incarnation?

Now, it is one thing to criticize the classical theism as represented by Thomas Aquinas, but it is another thing to overthrow that tradition altogether. Those who seek to undermine it need to be reminded of its staying power, its intellectual beauty, and the formidable logical power of its many defenders. Indeed, in my lifetime, the number of classical theists has been growing, and their critics only make their arguments stronger. Any Christian should enter into these debates with strong doses of humility, if not fear and trembling. Blake Ostler and David Paulsen, in this respect, can serve as role models for all of us who dare to go down this path.

Since I want to pursue a way around immaterialism that strictly follows a Christology as maximal as possible, let me raise some of my hesitations about Mormon thought. More specifically, I want to reflect on what I call three aporias of Mormon theology. These aporias, which concern God, man, and nature, are more than creative tensions but less than outright contradictions. All of the aporias have to do with the fascinating way that Mormonism affirms both radical freedom and a thoroughgoing materialism. They are genuine puzzlements that appear to leave thought at an impasse, yet they emerge from the consistent and through examination of convictions that are indispensable to Mormon metaphysics. As the etymology of *aporia* suggests, they reveal no safe passage in the realm of theory even as they persistently invite further meditation.

The first *aporia* concerns the relation between a radical voluntarism in Mormonism's view of God and its commitment to an eternal law that governs both spirit and matter, both God and everything else. The coherence of each of these ideas, considered independently, is, of course, open to debate; good arguments can be made for and against them. Their combination, however, is deeply problematic. If God's nature is one of absolute freedom, then God does not have a nature at all. Mormon speculation about God makes this absolutely clear. God is who he is precisely because he has exercised his freedom in the most maximally creative

manner. What, then, is the eternal law to which God's freedom conforms? If it is a rule to which he submits, how could his freedom be maximally creative? What further complicates this problem for Mormon thought is that the eternal law is not simply the regularity inherent in physical matter. It is something imposed on matter, and thus its origin lies in the act of a free agent. Yet this law cannot be something that God gives to himself. It is not, therefore, his nature; it remains ultimately alien to him, since he is free to choose to follow it. The law, it seems, is something like a God above God, an impersonal karma that regulates all action, physical and spiritual. If so, then God is not nearly as free as Mormonism suggests.

The second aporia concerns Mormonism's optimistic anthropology and its continuity view of the afterlife. The pre-existence of the human soul as well as divinization are central tenets to Mormon belief, but if we descended once from a superior realm we can do so again (and again). This is especially true if the afterlife is going to be more of this life, richer and better but not qualitatively different from what we already are. In other words, is there enough transformation in the Mormon view of heaven to justify its optimistic anthropology, or is heaven so much like earth that Mormons end up with a cyclical, rather than linear, cosmology? The answer seems to be obvious: the making of gods is a process of elevation that necessarily entails demotion as well. Up is not the only direction intelligences can go. But if this is the case, how is Mormonism justified in holding to such an optimistic anthropology?

This aporia can be sharpened by comparing Mormon social theory with its critique of dualism. All dualisms of any kind begin in the ultimate dualism of spirit and matter, and critiques of dualism typically aim to reveal a pervasive unity that overcomes that division. Mormonism, however, has a social theory that is radically at odds with any sense of a unifying substance that bonds all people (and all things) together. Even God's relationship with us, as Randy Paul makes clear, is determined by a free act of the will that is motivated by nothing other than enjoyment and desire. God is thus "free to opt out," Paul says, as are we. Everything depends on the steadiness of his (and our) purpose. Only constantly renewed dedication and hard work can keep social (and material, as we will see) disintegration at bay. Freedom here has no shape or form, and it also has no real goal (in Paul's words, it "has no final definition"). Mormonism is thus dangerously close to treating freedom as little more than power. One might hope, of course, that this power will be used, by God and people alike, creatively, but if freedom is an end in itself, then its destructive exercise could be just as enjoyable as its creative. Without an ultimate good, a final goal, a body, we could say, that is the source, structure, and goal of all bodies, freedom cannot justify Mormon optimism about man.

The third aporia concerns the relationship between matter and divinization. Mormons view matter as eternal and thus, relatively speak-



ing, unchanging, but they view humans as material beings who undergo significant, indeed unimaginable, changes. To understand how problematic this is, we need a brief overview of the metaphysics of matter. The orthodox Christian doctrine that God created matter out of nothing, while impossible to picture and quite possibly impossible to understand, served to save the dignity of matter from the malady of various dualisms that plagued ancient philosophy and religion. Putting an absolute beginning on matter made it not only good (its origin is in God's will) and knowable (it is finite) but also absolutely subordinate to the divine will.

What is new about Mormonism is not its belief in the eternity of matter. The ancient Greeks shared that belief, but they could not go beyond equating the eternity of matter with an unbounded chaos. Mormonism is also not new in subjecting the divine to the basic laws that govern the material world. The Greeks too could not grasp how God could be exempt from the eternal law, which is why the God of Plato and Aristotle is like a mind that cannot be bothered with his body. The Greek God is different from the Mormon, of course, in that his activity is one of self-contemplation rather than self-surpassing creativity, but in both cases God is not infinite and thus is essentially *not* mysterious. It was Christianity, not Plato, who made God infinite. Both Greeks and Mormons reject the infinity of the divine without simply reducing God to the world, but they do so in different ways: the Greeks could contrast God to the material world only by making God immaterial, while Mormons locate that contrast in God's capacity to use matter for ever greater states of enjoyment and loving relations. In any case, Mormon theology on these issues is actually as close to Platonism as it is to the early Church Fathers.

What is new about Mormonism, then, is its combination of the eternity of matter and the idea that God himself is material. Matter is thus both chaotic (eternally in need of being formed, organized, and shaped—this is the Neo-Platonic side of Mormonism) and good (it is the very stuff of the divine—this is, with different justification, the Christian side of Mormonism). That matter is both chaotic and good is surely as good a candidate for an *aporia* as it gets. One could say that Mormonism thus wants to have its (very material!) cake and eat it too: it wants all the rights and benefits belonging to the early Church's achievement in overcoming the Platonic heritage (of dark, mysterious, and somewhat evil inclining matter) while having nothing to do with the doctrine of creation out of nothing.

Let me be a bit clearer. When Mormons are being Neo-Platonic, they treat matter as force or energy that is in dire need of control. For

Plato and his Neo-Platonic heirs, matter is of questionable ontological moral status. It exists only in a state of pure potentiality; it *is* insofar as someone makes something of it, and it resists being made into anything of lasting permanence. Consequently, matter must be continual made and re-made. Mormonism agrees with this view when it asserts, in Randy Paul's words, that matter is "instrumental." It is only what we make of it, and if we do not make anything of it, then it is very close to being nothing at all.

This instrumental view of matter leaves a trace of dualism between mind and body lurking within the heart of Mormon soteriology. How can we progress to becoming more like God, to the point of sharing God's power and even, in a sense, becoming gods ourselves, without having our intelligence outstrip our bodies? Already in this life and on this planet scientists are trying to overcome every limit to the project of being able to make matter whatever we want it to be. When people become gods, won't they complete this project by being able to exercise complete mastery over everything, including their own bodies? If so, then we are not reducible to our bodies, and heaven will be more than just an infinite series of meetings, councils and family gatherings, with plenty of time for lovemaking and recreation. Heaven will be, well, a material place that will become increasingly immaterial.

Those are the implications of Mormon belief when Mormons are being Neo-Platonic. When Mormons are being more Christian in their view of matter, they affirm its goodness, but they actually go much further than creedal orthodoxy on this point. By attributing matter to the divine, they also end up thinking of matter as having its own motion and, within that motion, its own direction. Matter moves inordinately toward the divine on its own accord ("desire is inherent" in it, Paul says), since it is ruled by the same law that governs God and us. Matter, after all, is just another name for everything and anything. Even souls and angels, let alone God himself, are merely organizational forms of matter too complex (or too perfectly and uniquely singular) for us to presently be able to analyze. If this is the case, then what is the potential for divinization that is born into matter? And what is the spirit-matter substance that matter is capable of becoming? Why not just call that spirit-matter substance an immaterial substance? If matter has the potential for self-transcendence, at what point does matter become something different from itself? And why are free agents needed to actualize that potential? Why doesn't it happen automatically on its own?⁸

If I had time, I would like to show how these aporias can be resolved by reference to the eternal body of Jesus Christ. Regardless of whether I am right about that, one of my goals in all of my work in this area is to show how Roman Catholicism and Mormonism need each other in their respective attempts to articulate a way of thinking and promote a way of living that honors and follows Jesus Christ. (The lucid response of Charles Randall Paul to my book only confirms me in this conviction,



and I am grateful for his words, especially his careful, helpful and informed attempts to draw distinctions between my work and the Mormon faith.) Indeed, with the spectacular collapse (both intellectually and socially) of liberal Protestant attempts to minimize the divinity of Jesus by moralizing his life, what two Christian traditions have more in common? I am leaving out Eastern Orthodoxy in these remarks, of course, because it would take too much time to fit it into this story, although it should be noted that Orthodoxy might point in interesting ways to a middle ground between Roman Catholicism and Mormonism on many of these philosophical and theological issues.

When I say that Catholicism and Mormonism have much in common, I mean not only the love of ritual, the affirmation of the holiness of space (the desire to worship in holy places), the robustly conservative moral traditions (especially a commitment to a complementary view of the genders), the respect for authority (especially in its role as an ongoing, institutionalized and living voice), and the sense of a community of believers that transcends the limits of time to include the dead. I also mean the core commitment that Christ initiates, instantiates, and consummates the transubstantiation of matter, so that our hopes and dreams for fulfillment in God include all of who we are. For the Roman Catholic, transubstantiation is dramatized in a quite literal way in the Eucharist, where the bread and wine become the first fruits of the eschatological economy of Christ's abundantly capacious body. Catholics can easily misread Mormonism, since they treat the Eucharist as a common, ordinary and token meal, hardly more than a symbolic and visible lesson of invisible truths. It has taken me some time to realize just how far Mormonism is from a Zwinglian and memorialistic/subjective reduction of the Lord's Supper. Mormons can take communion for granted because they read transubstantiation into the cosmos as a whole. Matter itself is bursting with transubstantiating power. The risk of the Catholic version of transubstantiation is an arid and formal ritualism, while the risk of the Mormon version is a vague and abstract cosmology that does little more than justify sentimental moralisms about the eternal validity of marriage. Mormonism needs Catholicism's Christological intensity and philosophical density while Catholicism needs Mormonism's expansive imagination and evangelical exuberance. They need each other to renew and reshape the Christian hope for Christ's return in all his bodily beauty. The need for that engagement, from my perspective, is the providential meaning of the teachings of Joseph Smith.

¹ Georges Florovsky, *The Gospel of Resurrection* (Athens: The Student Christian Association of Greece, 1951); http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/gospel_resurrection_florovsky.htm, accessed Jan. 14, 2012. Celsus also thought that Christians believed that God has a body and that he brought that body down with him when he descended from heaven. See R. Joseph Hoffmann, trans., *Celsus on the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 77. Plato, he says, would never have thought such a thing.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Four: Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O’Neil (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 166 (Ch. 34).

³ *Ibid.*, 156 (Ch. 30).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 166 (Ch. 34).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 322 (Ch. 84). Notice that Thomas makes his arguments against the continuum or convertibility of spirit and matter by drawing exclusively from what is known about natural phenomenon from an Aristotelian point of view. His position on this point is strictly grounded in natural philosophy.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 321 (Ch. 84). For Thomas’s argument about celestial bodies, see 323.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 328 (Ch. 87).

⁸ Paul says at one point that Mormons are “the most seriously teleologists on earth” and that Mormons “reserve their speculative energy for teleology.” I am surprised that I do not find more Mormon engagement with emergent theories of biological novelty and the various discussions about intelligent design. Mormonism obviously leans toward the former (that matter’s chaos can become self-organized from within, so to speak), but I suspect that a Mormon version of emergentism would have an explanation of that phenomenon that creatively draw from the theoretical commitments of intelligent design.