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Abstract Review of *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (2000), by Sterling M. McMurrin.

The Gospel and the Captive Woman

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> And when thou goest forth to war against thine enemies, and the Lord thy God hath delivered them into thine hands, and thou hast taken them captive, And seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and hast a desire unto her, that thou wouldest have her to thy wife; Then thou shalt bring her home to thine house; and she shall shave her head, and pare her nails; And she shall put the raiment of her captivity from off her, and shall remain in thine house, and bewail her father and her mother a full month: and after that thou shalt go in unto her, and be her husband, and she shall be thy wife. And it shall be, if thou have no delight in her, then thou shalt let her go whither she will; but thou shalt not sell her at all for money, thou shalt not make merchandise of her, because thou hast humbled her. (Deuteronomy 21:10–14 KJV)[1]

1. This scripture and its interpretation, along with the title for this review, was taken from a sermon by Harvard political scientist Harvey C. Mansfield entitled "The Captive

Review of Sterling M. McMurrin. *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion,* with a biographical introduction by L. Jackson Newell and a glossary of terms by Trudy McMurrin. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000. xxiii + [iii–xii] + 151 + 31 pp. (book is not paginated sequentially). $14.95.

> Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown.[2]
>
> What provokes one to look at all philosophers half suspiciously, half mockingly, is not that one discovers again and again how innocent they are—how often and how easily they make mistakes and go astray; in short, their childishness and childlikeness—but that they are not honest enough in their work, although they all make a lot of virtuous noise when the problem of truthfulness is touched even remotely.[3]

When the editors of the *FARMS Review* asked me to comment on Sterling McMurrin's *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion,* it took me back to my initial encounter with the essays in this volume. I first read McMurrin's essays on the philosophical and theological foundations of Mormonism over twenty-five years ago when I was an undergraduate at Brigham Young University.[4] At the time I was beginning to take an interest in philosophy, leaving behind my law school ambitions, much to the dismay of family and friends. To further my philosophical interests I wanted to read anything that would broaden my understanding of the history of the Western intellectual tradition. In addition, I was also curious about how my faith was connected to this larger tradition. It was my belief then, and is now, that Mormonism was not to be understood as just an extension of this tradition but that it also offered a unique lens through which to view the meaning and significance of this tradition. It was while in

Woman," *Claremont Review of Books* 4/3 (2004): 65, available at www.claremont.org/writings/crb/summer2004_toc.html (accessed 4 May 2006).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche,* trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York City, NY: Modern Library, 1968), 202.

3. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* 203.

4. *Theological Foundations* was originally published in Salt Lake City at the University of Utah Press in 1965.

the grip of this mood that I was first directed to McMurrin's essays on Mormon theology.

While McMurrin's essays were difficult to wade through for a beginner, they were not without rewards. They were rich in detail about various philosophical and theological schools of thought, and McMurrin offered interesting accounts about the parallels and disagreements between these facets of the Western tradition and Mormonism. In addition, the essays also situated Mormonism within the politics of the nineteenth-century American cultural debate, arguing that it was not only born of the tensions of this debate, but that this debate had an ongoing influence in determining the development of Mormonism as a religious movement.

However, as I read these essays, I could not shake the thought that McMurrin had also missed something important about Mormonism. What was central to McMurrin's account of Mormonism was that it represented a progress toward the ideals of the Enlightenment as one finds them in Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) or Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94)—that is, in the triumph of reason over superstition and prejudice in the service of liberal democratic ideals. McMurrin sees Mormonism in strictly political terms, theology being one of the vehicles through which political ideals are realized. Mormonism represents a step beyond the antiliberal ideals of traditional Protestant and Catholic theology—that is, it includes a rejection of original sin, Greek metaphysics, salvation by grace, and so forth, toward a more humanistic conception of God and man that can be made consistent with liberal politics (TF, p. 37).[5] But the parallels that he argues for in these lectures, while interesting, failed to account for the claims of Mormonism to stand apart from the Western intellectual tradition in some fundamental and important ways. By looking at Mormonism through a twentieth-century philosophical lens, he had ignored the

5. Throughout this review parenthetical references are to the two essays contained in McMurrin's volume. TF refers to the essay, "The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion," 1–151. PF refers to the essay, "The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology," 1–31. The pagination of the second essay begins anew after the first essay. A citation to the "foreword" refers, of course, to McMurrin's foreword to the two essays (pp. [ix–x]).

richness of the historical context within which Mormonism entered the world, a context in which Mormonism was not simply a passive recipient of whatever intellectual influences were impressed on it. Joseph Smith's claim that the heavens were once again open, that God spoke to his children once again through prophets, set it at odds with the prevailing epistemological, metaphysical, scientific, and even moral views of the world.

For this reason, I believed that McMurrin failed to appreciate the way in which Mormonism, even today, challenges the certainty of our contemporary secular self-understanding and the narrative forms that such certainty takes. In order to see that, he would have had to take seriously the historical context that he bracketed out in his essays, a context that stretches back beyond even the primitive Christian church. One other aspect of these lectures struck me as odd at that time. I noticed then that McMurrin did not speak much of the Book of Mormon and its role in Mormonism, with its challenges to the reigning philosophical and theological schools of the time. Now, after nearly twenty-five years, I think that I understand these essays better, both in terms of appreciating their richness of detail and also in terms of what they failed to capture about Mormonism and the challenges that it offers those who take philosophical and theological questions seriously. In what follows I will examine McMurrin's account of Mormon theology and set out what I see as the limits of his approach. At the same time, I hope to raise some concerns about both the possibility and the desirability of a Mormon theology.

In order to provide a presumably objective basis for his analysis of what he thinks of as "Mormon theology," McMurrin begins with an investigation of the metaphysical principles and concepts presupposed in the foundations of Mormonism (PF, p. 6). Beginning in this fashion has two advantages. First, McMurrin assumes that while it is true that Mormonism has its origins in a concrete historical context, only by seeing its underlying principles and concepts detached from that context is it possible to understand the meaning and significance of Mormonism, especially if we are to understand its connections to the larger Western intellectual tradition. Then, an analysis of those

underlying principles and concepts will allow us some way to set limits to and provide directions for our understanding of Mormonism. That is, we can avoid arbitrary and loose interpretations of Mormonism by defining the terms that give meaning to it. McMurrin grants that

> Mormon theology developed for the most part within concrete historical contexts and was not derived from the metaphysics. And yet although it is not chronologically prior, the metaphysics by its very nature has a kind of logical priority over the theology. For although the theological doctrines are not necessarily deducible from the metaphysical principles, the metaphysics once defined sets the limits for and in a sense indicates the direction of theological development, for the strong intellectualistic tendencies of Mormonism guarantee a continuing effort to rationalize the theology on philosophical foundations. (PF, p. 6)

McMurrin initially connects Mormonism to the Western tradition by noting that it shares much in common with the naturalistic tendencies of ancient Greek thought (TF, p. 2). According to McMurrin, Greek naturalism is the view that not everything that exists is the product of divine creation. While the gods may have created this and that, the order of existence is independent of the gods (TF, p. 2). The Greeks, then, deny the existence of what we now call the "supernatural" as it is understood in traditional monotheistic religious traditions. Mormonism also denies that the order of existence is fully dependent on God. While God did create this world, this creation was done by organizing the elements that already existed. This is an important point, according to McMurrin, for it means that Mormonism denies an essential distinction in the Western tradition, the distinction between the *supernatural* and the *natural*. As evidence of this, McMurrin notes that Mormon writers tend to discuss miracles not as a suspension of what are now thought to be natural, physical laws by a supernatural being, but as natural events fully consonant with physical laws. They appear miraculous because of our limited knowledge of these physical laws (TF, p. 2). Thus, an investigation of

the metaphysical foundations of Mormonism brings out something truly progressive in Mormonism, the reduction of the supernatural to the natural, or at least a blurring of this distinction.

On the basis of this reduction, McMurrin then argues that the elimination of the supernatural leads to a denial of the distinction between necessary and contingent beings (TF, p. 3). Philosophers distinguish necessary beings from contingent beings in that the existence of the latter is dependent on the former. For contingent beings, it is possible that one can think of them as not existing. For example, an existent person, tree, or any material object could be imagined to not exist. However, in order to explain why there is something rather than nothing, some metaphysicians, among them some Christian thinkers, have argued that there must be some being whose existence is necessary. In other words, it is not possible to explain anything unless there are those beings that cannot not exist (TF, pp. 3–4). For this reason, traditional Christian theology has distinguished God from human beings in terms of the fact that the existence of God must be understood as necessary if there is to be an answer to the question about existence—that is, why anything exists. Human beings are understood to be contingent, because their existence is dependent on God.

McMurrin notes that Mormonism offers an interesting twist to this traditional problem. One would think that if there is no realm above that of the natural realm of beings, if the order of existence does not depend on God but in fact includes God, then there is no need for any being whose existence is necessary. Both the divine and the human would be on even footing, ontologically speaking. Both would be contingent beings. Mormonism, however, does away with the notion that human beings are contingent. Both God and human beings are viewed as necessary because no one else is responsible for their being. Human beings, in one form or another, have coexisted throughout eternity with God.

> But to return to the idea that the world is not created in the ultimate sense, the Mormon scripture *The Doctrine and Covenants* states the matter succinctly, "The elements are eternal. . . ." This is taken by Mormon writers to mean that the

> basic constituents of which the world is composed are without beginning and without end and are therefore uncreated. More than that, Joseph Smith elsewhere advanced the idea that also among the uncreated, beginningless, and endless entities are human souls or spirits, which he referred to as minds or intelligences. It was clearly his view, and one accepted in the Mormon Church, that whatever is ultimate and essential in the human soul is self-existent. (TF, p. 3)

For McMurrin, Mormonism then is set apart from traditional Christianity in its denial of a vast separation between God and human beings. Mormonism "is a naturalistic, humanistic theism" (TF, p. 3).

Having established these points, McMurrin then goes on to argue a most important claim, that Mormonism endorses a pluralistic and materialistic metaphysical conception of the world. For those who engage in what they call metaphysical speculation, one of the most important questions has to do with the nature of reality. Is it composed essentially of one substance or many substances (TF, p. 8)? Traditional Christian theology has usually answered this question in terms of a dualism of substances. There is the simple, absolute, infinite substance, God, which has made all things possible through a creative act. Finite or contingent substance is dependent upon God for its existence or reality. The emphasis on the necessary nature of the divine substance means that the dualism embraced by traditional Christianity is a weak pluralism (TF, p. 9). Mormonism, however, embraces a more robust pluralism. This means that reality at various levels is pluralistic, whether one is speaking about God, the relationship between divine and human beings, or the nature of a person's spirit or soul (TF, pp. 8–9). For example, traditional Christianity views the Godhead as both one in substance or essence and three in person; this is the notion of the Trinity common to Catholicism and Protestantism. Mormonism, though, views the Godhead as three separate persons, two of whom are physical beings (PF, p. 8). But what is most important for McMurrin is the fact that Mormonism's commitment to metaphysical pluralism endows individual human beings with a central status, which in turn provides human beings with a sense of dignity.

> A more interesting pluralistic element of Mormon thought is the belief that the individuality of a human person is guaranteed by the fact that the "intelligence" which constitutes his essential nature is an uncreated and underived and therefore an ultimate constituent of the universe. On the Mormon view the world is a composite of particular persons, things, and events, and these can in no way be interpreted simply as aspects, facets, or expressions of one all-inclusive solitary reality. For the Mormons, individuality is a given and guaranteed fact of the structure of being and the universe is a pluriverse. This is not to say that it is necessarily a disordered collection, or that the persons, events, and things that compose it are not importantly and perhaps even organically related to one another. It is to say rather that the relations that obtain among the entities that compose the world are external to those entities, that the being of particular objects or events is autonomous. The mystery of existence attaches to the individual taken in and of itself, for its being is in its uniqueness as an individual, and not in its function in a system or in its expressiveness of a larger whole. (PF, pp. 8–9)

It is important to note at this point, however, that McMurrin qualifies this pluralism because he believes that Mormonism also endorses what he calls a materialistic view of the universe. This means that there is a sense in which there is a monism of sorts. Everything in existence, including God and human beings, is material. But in elevating human beings to the status of necessary beings, their being is determined by their individuality. Thus, Mormonism embraces the nominalist views that are characteristic of modern thought. This last point cannot be emphasized too strongly, for it is what allows McMurrin to refer to Mormonism as part of the modern world in terms of its basic concepts and outlook.

> It is not possible, therefore, to describe for Mormonism the relation of the ways of knowing to the nature of reality with anything like an explicit thesis. But it is possible to say that

> Mormonism in its philosophical inclinations participates strongly in the empirical attitudes that are characteristic of recent and contemporary thought. It acknowledges the claims of scientific method—a combination of empiricism and qualified rationalism—and it even exhibits sensory empirical leanings in its references to revelation. It can at least be said that a common-sense empiricism seems to be not unrelated to the explicit pluralism of Mormon metaphysics. (TF, p. 11)

Now I want to further consider in what sense Mormonism can be said to hold a materialist view of reality. This is, again, a rather surprising twist because materialist metaphysical theories traditionally deny the existence of God and the soul—they tend to reduce everything to matter in motion. The reason for this atheism is found in the mechanistic interpretation of matter and the determinism that results from this conception of matter (TF, p. 44). According to this view, cause and effect can only be understood in naturalistic terms. In addition, if something cannot be experienced through the senses, then there is nothing regarding it to be known or explained. There can be no cause or explanation of something without being able to empirically verify it. Material effects must have material causes. Because God is not material and cannot be known empirically, at least according to traditional theology, God cannot cause anything in the world or be explained by the effects of any of his actions in the world. This mechanistic interpretation of nature made possible a unified conception of the sciences in the nineteenth century that linked together the physical and biological sciences and held out the promise of eventually subsuming the social sciences (TF, p. 44).

The materialism that Mormonism embraces is radically at odds with the mechanistic interpretation of the sciences. This is because Mormon writers have resisted the mechanistic and deterministic implications of materialism by advancing views that are Newtonian, but that are also panpsychistic (TF, p. 45). McMurrin offers the writings of Orson Pratt as the best example of this Mormon materialism. Pratt held that "reality is material and atomistic," but also that atoms possess "powers of intelligent action and self-direction."

These atoms "constitute an intercommunicating community" that freely follows the dictates of the divine will. This might sound a bit far-fetched, but McMurrin sees in this crude theory of Pratt's an anticipation of Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty (TF, p. 45). The point is that Mormonism's embrace of materialism anticipated the twentieth-century views of indeterminacy as found in relativity physics and quantum mechanics (TF, p. 46). Thus, there is no necessity to link materialism to a mechanistic and deterministic interpretation of nature. "Granted that Mormon orthodoxy demands a materialistic metaphysics, there is certainly nothing about it that necessitates allegiance to a scientifically obsolete approach to the nature of matter and the structure of the natural universe" (TF, p. 46).

It is important to note a tension here in McMurrin's claim that Mormonism embraces both pluralism and materialism. For if reality is fundamentally composed of matter and only matter (however this is understood), then we have a monistic view of the nature of things and not a pluralistic one. The resolution to this conflict is found in the metaphysical doctrine of nominalism. In its descriptions of the world, Mormonism has always emphasized the concrete and the particular (TF, p. 40). It holds that only what is physical and concrete is real (TF, p. 41). One can see this in the Mormon doctrine of God, with its denial of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity in favor of the view that the Godhead is found in three distinct beings, two of whom are embodied.

> The Mormon doctrine is tritheistic, asserting the ontological independence of the three divine persons, a doctrine traditionally declared heretical. This anti-trinitarian position is consistent with the nominalistic position that only particular objects and events have reality. It is sometimes found associated with nominalism in the history of Christian philosophy because a nominalistic metaphysics necessarily denies the possibility of a universal substance over and above the particularity of the three members of the Godhead. The term "God" is not commonly used in Mormon discourse as a synonym for "Godhead," for in Mormon terminology the latter designates

> no subsistent entity but rather is a collective name for referring to the three divine persons taken as a unity, where the ground of that unity is not a relation internal to their being that dissolves their ontological independence but is rather an external relationship involving total agreement in will and purpose. (TF, pp. 41–42)

On the basis of the commitment to such notions as pluralism, materialism, and nominalism, it is clear why Mormonism is considered by its critics to be a radical break with traditional Christian theology or what is now called classical theism. Where this traditional theology sees God as separate from his creation, Mormonism places God squarely within it. The consequences of this view are far reaching. For if God is not "wholly other," then he is not absolute and infinite. According to McMurrin, the pluralistic nature of Mormon theology means that God is "a being who is conditioned by and related to the world of which he is a part and which, because it is not ultimately his creation, is not absolutely under his dominion" (TF, p. 29).

But where traditional Christian theology would see heresy, McMurrin sees a significant stage in the history of religious thought. If religion is the "progressive attempt" to explain the divine, then it must do so in terms of the concepts and ideas of the world in which it lives. In other words, religion is a reflection of the time in which it lives. Mormonism reflects its time and place by drawing on both its Enlightenment and American heritages to supply it with its ideas and concepts. From the Enlightenment, Mormonism has received its materialistic, pluralistic, and finite view of God and the universe, a view tempered by the sciences themselves. From its American heritage Mormonism has embraced the idea of moral agency and hence stresses moral responsibility. Thus, McMurrin refers to Mormonism as "a modern Pelagianism in a Puritan religion" (foreword, p. [x]). To see the full implications of this, one must turn to McMurrin's discussion of the problem of evil.

The idea that God is not simple, absolute, and infinite has implications for the problem of evil. The problem of evil has long haunted the religious believer. It is an intractable problem for any theology that

considers God absolute and infinite, for it is impossible on that supposition to escape the conclusion that in some way God is responsible for evil. However, this turns out to be a particular strength of Mormon theology. "Here the concept of the free will of the uncreated self joins the non-absolutistic conception of the divine power to absolve God of any complicity in the world's moral evil, the evil that is done by men. And the uncreated impersonal environment of God provides the explanation of natural evil, the evils of the world that are not the product of an evil personal will" (TF, p. 91).

Traditional Christian theology has found itself reduced to taking one of two positions on the problem of evil. The first position is found in St. Augustine's writings, where he argues that evil is the privation of good and has no reality (TF, p. 91). This idea, which also influenced Aquinas and other Catholic theologians, had the virtue that evil could not be identified as a thing that God created. In fact, evil was nothing at all. This view was then set against the Manichaean heresy that argued for two basic forces, one good and one evil, that were locked in battle with each other. The other view emerged with the rise of Protestantism, where evil was seen as something actual that had its origin in the depravity that followed from original sin (TF, p. 93). A problem with this view is that natural evil is then viewed as in some sense a consequence of human actions. God punishes people for the actions of an individual. Those who have thought through these issues have found these answers to the problem of evil unsatisfactory, as well they should.

McMurrin argues that Mormonism's view of evil is derived from the rise of naturalistic philosophy in the Enlightenment. The skepticism that was part of this philosophical movement proved too much for the literalism of religious orthodoxy. Enlightenment philosophy forced on religion the need to account for evil in the light of moral freedom. America in the nineteenth century proved to be the place where a coherent account of moral evil could be set forth. Mormonism, for McMurrin, is the fruit of that development (TF, p. 56). It sees moral evil as the result of the moral decisions that individuals make when they exercise their moral agency (TF, p. 96). Natural evil is a

consequence of the neutrality of the material world (TF, p. 96). While Mormonism cannot explain why these natural evils occur, it is clear that they are not necessarily the result of punishment for exercising our free will, or moral agency.

> It is obvious that its pluralistic metaphysics and resulting non-absolutistic theology offer Mormon philosophy a most attractive framework for the discussion of the problem of evil, the most persistent of all questions attending a theistic world view. A Mormon theodicy can describe the uncreated elementary character of the material universe as the occasion for natural evil, and can further vindicate God by assigning the responsibility for moral evil to the freedom of the will possessed as an essential property by the uncreated and underived spirits that are a "given" in the original structure of the universe. (PF, p. 15)

In addition to the problem of evil, McMurrin applies this interpretation to the atonement of Christ. As in other areas of theology, Mormonism rejects the traditional Christian views in favor of what he calls a liberal interpretation that emphasizes how Christ's passion moves human beings towards a consciousness of their sinfulness, leading to repentance (TF, p. 89). This view had its beginnings in the writings of Abelard. But it was not able to flower until nineteenth-century America in the teachings of Mormonism. What McMurrin finds important here is the fact that salvation is somehow earned or merited. The atonement makes it possible for individuals to work out their salvation and return to the presence of God (TF, p. 90). This means that the significance of the atonement is that it allows for moral agency and places responsibility squarely upon the individual for her or his salvation. It further underscores the emphasis that McMurrin places on the influence of nineteenth-century American liberalism in shaping Mormonism.

> The Mormon conception of the nature and predicament of man is rooted in more than the pluralistic metaphysics that logically supports Mormon liberalism. It is in part the

> product of the nineteenth-century spirit of enlightenment and the commitment to the expansive possibilities of human freedom that have generally characterized American thought and attitude. (TF, p. 56)

For McMurrin the Mormon idea of a God that is finite and non-absolutistic marks a significant moment in the history of Christian theology. (One wonders whether this is an absolute moment.) He views this history as "a progressive attempt" to explain God and his significance (TF, p. 37). Throughout this history, religion has had to use the prevailing metaphysical concepts available to it. In antiquity Christian writers used "the static, timeless, ultimate *being* of Greek metaphysics" (TF, p. 37). With Mormonism, though, there is no such commitment to the traditional metaphysical categories. Its world is that of the rise and progress of the natural sciences and the naturalism characteristic of nineteenth-century American thought. This in turn brings out the liberalism inherent in Christianity. Mormonism, then, by acknowledging the claims of science and the connections to the natural world, embraces a common-sense empiricism (TF, p. 11).

This common-sense empiricism is also reflected in the process of revelation that Mormons accept as authoritative. According to McMurrin, "the primary task of theology is the reconciliation of the revelation to the culture, to make what was taken on faith as the word of God meaningful in the light of accepted science and philosophy" (TF, p. 110). Thus, Mormon theology must take up the task of showing how Joseph Smith and his revelations are part of the larger American story. This narrative focuses on the importance and dignity of the individual; it is a story about the value and importance of a certain liberal temper that has marked America from its colonial beginnings down to our day, featuring the Puritans and their struggle for religious freedom, the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, the adoption of the Constitution, the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and the Civil Rights era. The American story, in its turn, is part of a larger story about how the idea of freedom and the universal extension of human rights is the meaning of history. It is through an examination of the logical and ontologi-

cal commitments of Mormonism that one can see its liberal temper and how Joseph Smith's accomplishments fit this larger human story.

One cannot help but be impressed with the scope and extent of McMurrin's account of both the Western theological-philosophical tradition and Mormon theology. Perhaps most impressive is how he fits Mormonism into the Western tradition and is able to characterize its basic features as innovations within that tradition. But one is wise to be suspicious of the ease with which McMurrin does this because the Western tradition is deep and full of surprising undercurrents and contradictions. It does not take much to pull one away from the safety of the shore and its familiar landmarks. This being the case, one should beware that there is always a cost to such comparisons. I want to turn now to what I regard as the limits of this analysis and how far away it takes McMurrin from Mormonism. For while I am personally in agreement with his characterization of Mormonism as liberal in its temper, I believe that his conception of liberalism is anachronistic. More important, I think that situating Mormonism within the Western intellectual tradition, especially nineteenth-century liberal American thought, wrenches it out of the historical context that brought it into the world. When one reflects on these two aspects of accounting for Mormonism, McMurrin's analysis turns out to be arbitrary in the sense that it reveals more about McMurrin's own politics and preferences than it does about Mormonism. Thus, it fails to provide an honest characterization of Mormonism as a religion.

The most obvious example of where McMurrin has lost sight of the shore is his characterization of Mormonism as some form of naturalism—either ancient Greek or modern naturalism. According to naturalism in general, the order of existence is independent of the divine. As I noted earlier, this view led McMurrin to see in Mormonism a naturalism that elevates human beings and brings them on par with the divine. In addition to this, it led McMurrin to claim that Mormonism is "a kind of naturalistic, humanistic theism" (TF, p. 3). This claim that Mormonism is naturalistic in its outlook is important for McMurrin's account in two senses. First, it means that Mormonism denies the distinction between the natural and supernatural (TF, p. 2). In denying

the supernatural, as understood in classical theism, Mormonism is a nonabsolutistic religion. This means that God is not independent of the creation and is conditioned by the environment or world of which he is a part (TF, p. 29). On the one hand, this means that God is not some abstract entity, such as being itself or a Platonic idea. Instead, God is seen as *a* being among other beings, in some ways finite and limited like these other beings. The other sense in which this denial of the supernatural is important for McMurrin emerges because it means that Mormonism has a commitment to concreteness that also ties its materialism to the idea of verification in the sciences (TF, pp. 40–41). McMurrin is aware that the materialism embraced by Mormonism is not like the materialism of Newtonian physics or Darwinian biology, with its mechanistic outlook (TF, pp. 44–45). But he suggests that it is possible to engage in a serious discussion of scientific principles that would confirm the Mormon conception of materialism (TF, p. 46). The reason McMurrin makes these claims is that it must be possible for Mormon intellectuals to be able to reconcile their faith with the sciences or to revise them as the situation dictates.

> So Mormon theological writing and sermonizing are more often than not replete with the vocabulary of absolutism. But, like it or not, the Mormon theologian must sooner or later return to the finitistic conception of God upon which his technical theology and his theological myths are founded. Here Mormonism reveals the radical nature of its heresy and its tendency toward the kind of common-sense liberalism that so deeply affected the nineteenth-century English-speaking world. (TF, p. 35)

But McMurrin is mistaken to see in Mormonism anything at all like a commitment to naturalistic philosophy, such as either the ancient Greeks or the moderns conceive it. For that form of naturalism, like its modern version, meant that knowledge is available to humans as such and that they were not dependent on God for that knowledge. It is characteristic of philosophy, from antiquity onwards, to hold that philosophy (or science) is the one thing needful for the

good life. The restored gospel, however, has always maintained that such a view leads human beings to disaster because it promises what it cannot deliver, a full and comprehensive view of the whole of things, such that humans can master this whole and solve all their own problems without divine assistance. There are at least some problems that lie beyond the capacity of philosophy or science to comprehend, one of them being whether God exists or not. Such problems, lying beyond reason, provide the believer with good reasons for doubting the capacity of unaided reason to comprehend the whole of things. These considerations are the grounds for turning to revelation and the prophets.

One very surprising and noticeable omission in McMurrin's essays on Mormon theology is that there is no sustained discussion of the Book of Mormon or even the foundational events of the restoration of the church. While the Book of Mormon is mentioned here and there, it is never seriously considered in its own right. Now part of this is because McMurrin himself has publicly admitted that he did not take the book seriously and that he had not even read it carefully. Why? Simply put, angels do not bring books written on gold plates. But it is certainly a mistake in a book on Mormon theology not to take into account the meaning and significance of this volume, even if one such as McMurrin does not take it for what it claims to be. One reason for not treating it in his essays is that it challenges his claim that Mormonism is a product of its time and culture. It is necessary to raise and answer this challenge to see why we should take McMurrin's interpretation of Mormonism seriously. Without a serious treatment of the Book of Mormon, these essays cannot provide a complete account of Mormonism as a theology.

Nowhere is the contrast between the gospel and naturalism clearer than in the Book of Mormon. Throughout its pages we are reminded of the centrality of this conflict between unaided human reason and revelation. King Benjamin, in his sermon, refers to the natural man as an enemy of God (Mosiah 3:19). Here the natural man does not refer to some Calvinistic conception of human beings as totally depraved. Rather it refers to that state in which human beings live without God,

depending on their own wisdom to deliver them from their troubles. Nephi tells us that human beings turn away from God "when they think they are wise," rejecting his commandments and counsels. They think they know better (2 Nephi 9:28). He also reminds us that we are cursed when we trust in the arm of flesh. Our safety and salvation lies in the precepts and commandments revealed to us through the Holy Ghost (2 Nephi 28:30–31).

This conflict is given dramatic form in the confrontation between Alma and Korihor in Alma 30. Korihor appears among the Nephites and teaches them to trust in their own wisdom. He regards the idea of Christ and the atonement for sin as a vain hope, used by society to keep people in their place (Alma 30:12–16). He tells the people that "every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17). Korihor is eventually exposed by Alma as a fraud and stricken for his disobedience (Alma 30:50–60). In my opinion, Mormon includes this episode for us to see that the naturalism of Korihor lacks any ability to reach beyond the senses and find what is truly good. Because it lacks any ability to see beyond the human, one finds that there is a desolation and hopelessness that underlies the naturalism advocated by Korihor.

In the chapters following the confrontation with Korihor, we find Alma giving us his sermon on faith (see Alma 32). There Alma describes faith not as a perfect knowledge but as a thirsting after knowledge that causes us to experiment and try out the promises made to us by God. In doing this we find that our faculties are aroused and our understanding enlightened and that our faith has grown (Alma 32:26–28). Nourishing the word of God in our hearts, living the commandments, and hearkening to the precepts revealed by the Holy Ghost provide us with that which is most precious and sweet, the hope of everlasting life (Alma 30:41–42). We are thus drawn to a realization of something higher than ourselves, a possibility of living that cannot be understood within the distinction between the natural or supernatural. The Book of Mormon continuously presents this contrast between naturalism

and the gospel in order to help us see what the fundamental choices are—to choose to trust in our own wisdom or to rely on the word of God. There is no question that its chapters are structured in order to impress upon us the choice we must make in order to live.

At this point I would like to note that I agree with McMurrin that it is desirable to eliminate the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. In doing this, I think we must see that a better contrast is that between reason and revelation or between the mantic and the philosophic, to borrow an idea from Hugh Nibley.[6] But McMurrin does not really eliminate the natural/supernatural distinction. He merely reduces both to the natural. For him it is to place God and human beings on a more equal footing, to show the kinship between the two. However, he goes beyond this to deny miracles. Having eliminated the supernatural, miracles are now understood to be events that are entirely consistent with natural physical laws. We cannot understand them because of deficiencies in our knowledge (TF, p. 2). But ultimately they can be explained according to the laws of nature. McMurrin appears to be on solid ground here, for there are a lot of Mormon writers, including Bruce R. McConkie, who would agree with this point.

I have always been perplexed that Latter-day Saints have embraced this view and never questioned it. In particular, the Saints seem not to notice that it is at odds with the teachings of the prophets in the Book of Mormon. Moroni reminds us that the record of the Nephites will come forth at a time when miracles will be denied (Mormon 8:26). If we reflect on the meaning of this passage, it surely means that we live in an age when we no longer understand miracles and the miraculous. But given the fact that the Book of Mormon has emphasized the conflict between reason and revelation, we should not be surprised at the fact that our day is characterized by a desire to explain away miracles and see them merely as explainable interventions in nature. There can be no doubt that science, technology, and the increasing rationalization of the world has dominated our world so thoroughly

6. See Hugh Nibley, "Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic," in *The Ancient State* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 311–79.

that we cannot see its reach anymore. Both science and religion desire to explain in a systematic and total way the world that we live in, including God and his relationship to his creation. In fact, the idea of a theology is to explain religion as a system of belief in order to make it scientifically comprehensible. The coming forth of the Book of Mormon, though, is to remind us that miracles are given to lead us to Christ and repentance. Only if the miraculous is possible will we be able to find our way back to God. I do not know whether miracles are consistent with the laws of nature or not. That should not be the point. Again I return to the idea of faith as we find it in the Book of Mormon, this time in the words of Moroni:

> And now I come to that faith, of which I said that I would speak; and I will tell you the way whereby ye may lay hold of every good thing. For behold, God knowing all things, being from everlasting to everlasting, behold he sent angels to minister unto the children of men, to make manifest concerning the coming of Christ; and in Christ there should come every good thing. And God also declared unto prophets, by his own mouth, that Christ should come. And behold, there were divers ways that he did manifest things unto the children of men, which were good; and all things which are good cometh of Christ; otherwise men were fallen and there could no good thing come unto them. Wherefore, by the ministering of angels, and by every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God, men began to exercise faith in Christ; and thus by faith, they did lay hold upon every good thing. (Moroni 7:21–25)

Moroni goes on to say that miracles have not ceased. Returning to Alma's conception of faith, he says that miracles are necessary to help us as we experiment with the commandments of God, testing his promises to us through our obedience to those commandments and seeking to return to him. Miracles are not to be understood in terms of nature or the laws of nature. They are given to us in order to strengthen our faith and lead us to repentance. They are the evidence

we need of things unseen. Naturalism, with its emphasis on reason as the one thing needful for the good life, puts us at odds with God and his ways. It is clear that McMurrin has drifted away from the foundations of Mormonism when he argues that it is a naturalistic, humanistic theism. What he has done has transformed Mormonism or reinterpreted it as a product of the human mind or a cultural artifact. It is no longer to be understood in terms of a conflict with revelation. It must be reconciled with reason and made consistent with the expectations of a modern liberal democratic society.

> The primary task of theology is the reconciliation of revelation to the culture, to make what is taken on faith as the word of God meaningful in the light of accepted science and philosophy. Mormon theology has in the past pursued this task with some consistency and at times with intellectual strength, and certainly with a stubborn independence and indifference to criticism from traditional thought. (TF, pp. 110–11)

Such a view of Mormonism no longer understands the context within which it came into the world. It has discounted the historical in favor of finding its logical or ontological underpinnings, as if such underpinnings were independent of history. Now McMurrin has reasons for looking past the historical to the logical and ontological underpinnings. It is because he believes that to take Mormonism's historical claims seriously is to give in to those social and religious conservative forces that would rob Mormonism of its philosophically progressive character. In place of that progressiveness there would instead be an irrationalism that would only drain Mormonism of strength and vitality (TF, p. 111). McMurrin sees the orthodox side of Mormonism, which has been dominant throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, as a retreat back into the Calvinism against which Mormonism rebelled in its early years (TF, p. 67).

However, McMurrin has failed to see that Mormonism is as much a rejection of nineteenth-century American liberal culture as it is a rejection of conservative Protestantism. The foregoing discussion of the Book of Mormon view of the conflict between naturalism and

the prophetic is but one example of the conflict between Mormonism and the larger liberal culture. One must also see that it was the liberal culture of nineteenth-century America that was most offended by Joseph Smith, his revelations, the Book of Mormon, and the faithful Saints that he gathered together. The early Saints knew that liberal culture was just as repressive as the conservative Protestant culture. After Joseph Smith's death, Brigham Young and the Saints made the decision to move West to be free of both parts of American culture. They were looking for a place that would allow them to practice their religion, to take revelation and revealed scripture seriously.

McMurrin's attempt to assimilate Mormonism within the larger American cultural framework only serves to diminish the divine character that sustained the Mormon religion in its early years and has continued to sustain it in contemporary times. It is clear that, for McMurrin, what distinguishes Mormonism is its modern liberal temper, as well as what he perceives to be the willingness of Mormon intellectuals to bend and revise its myths in line with science and philosophy. Thus, Mormonism proves to be a part of culture itself, perhaps its highest expression, given its opposition to America's prevailing conservative Protestant culture. But, contrary to McMurrin's understanding of it, Mormonism is defined not by its so-called liberal temper or its modern origins. It is defined by Joseph Smith's first vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and other latter-day scriptures, along with the emphasis on continuing revelation. As such, this foundation is not a product of mind or culture. It is revelation and God's continuing relationship with his covenant people that define the Saints and how they understand their relationship to the world around them. It therefore stands apart from the world in which it arose, pointing to a different and higher way of life.

McMurrin's effort to situate Mormonism between the battle lines of liberal and conservative Protestantism, then, can only be a reflection of his own personal desire for what he would like to see Mormonism become. It is clear that he would like to see it transformed into an intellectual system that reflects the liberal attitude of modern America. A

thoroughly modern product, Mormonism can only reflect the culture and time in which it originated.

> Mormon theology is a modern Pelagiansim in a Puritan religion. Mormonism is a Judaic-like community religion grounded in the Puritan moral doctrine that the vocation of man is to create the kingdom of God. Its fundamentalism is rooted in the biblical literalism native to American religion. Its heresy is the denial of the dogma of original sin, a heresy that exhibits both the disintegration of modern Protestantism and the impact of nineteenth century liberalism on the character of American sectarianism. (foreword, p. [x])

There is something anachronistic about situating Mormonism in this interpretive setting—that is, of referring to it as a "modern Pelagianism in a Puritan religion." McMurrin never attempts to see whether there is some other interpretive category that would better fit as a description of Mormonism. For example, why not see Mormonism in terms of its own claims to be the restoration of an ancient faith? This would be something that McMurrin could then test against his own claim that Mormonism is a modern phenomenon. But there is no such testing of his claims. The reason for this is that in characterizing Mormonism as strictly modern, McMurrin can then fit it into the larger cultural conflict that he sees defining religion per se. However, in doing this, there is something arbitrary about this characterization of Mormonism. The effect is that this interpretive scheme undercuts the logical force of the appeal to Mormonism's underlying metaphysical notions. Because these notions merely reflect McMurrin's prejudices about religion, the turn to metaphysics seems nothing more than a rhetorical device that serves to further McMurrin's desire to make the faith of the Saints at home in American intellectual life. Thus, McMurrin fails to provide the substantive critical perspective needed to justify his conception of Mormonism as a modern American religion.

Reading these essays again raises for me a question about the need for producing a Mormon theology. From time to time there have been attempts to do so. Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, and others have tried

to produce such accounts. But they have usually tended to reflect their own idiosyncratic views about the gospel, and the Saints have never accepted such accounts as authoritative. Louis Midgley's account of theology in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* sums up well the reasons why the Saints have not been inclined to produce a speculative account of the faith that would reconcile it with science and culture.[7] The most important reason for this has been that the faith of Latter-day Saints is not grounded in metaphysical systems, but in revelations from God. For the Saints, knowledge of God and his commandments has always been tied to revelation given to prophets and apostles, as well as the Holy Ghost confirming the truth of prophetic claims to individual members of the church.

Joseph Smith's first vision, which is the founding event of the restoration of the gospel, best illustrates why the Saints have been suspicious of constructing a systematic, speculative theology. It is an essential starting point, in my estimation, for any attempt to understand the uniqueness of Mormonism as a religion and why a theological account is insufficient to capture the faith of the Saints. There, in answer to Joseph's question about which church he should join, he was told to join none of them. The reason given is what is crucial here.

> I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof." (Joseph Smith—History 1:19)

It is clear that, echoing the prophet Isaiah, the turn to theology somehow diminished and corrupted the gospel. The restoration of the gospel was to mark a turn away from such things and to establish anew that revelation is the basis for the knowledge of God and salvation. It would seem that such an event would be regarded as authoritative

7. Louis C. Midgley, "Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 4:1475–76.

in terms of whether there should be a Mormon theology. But some continue to feel the need to provide a rational and systematic account. Why? I think the answer to that question is to be found in Moroni's words of warning to us, to which I referred above (Mormon 8:26 and Moroni 7:21–25). He saw that the gospel would be restored at a time when miracles would be denied, when science and technology would so overwhelm us as to create within us the need to provide a complete and total system through which we could manipulate the world and solve human problems. As we look around us and see our world, it is clear that it is being successfully systematized and rationalized. As our technological capacities increase, our power over the world also increases, and no one seems to seriously think that we need revelation to avoid destruction. Such a world makes the claims of the restoration look like quaint frontier primitivism. It is clear why some come to see the restored gospel as a product of both the time and culture of Joseph Smith and why they see a need to revise such myths to be consistent with advances in science and culture.

Ultimately, the desire for a Mormon theology must be balanced against the consideration as to whether such a thing is consistent with the gospel and what the price of such a project entails. From the results of McMurrin's account of Mormon theology, it is clear that such an account is possible only if one puts aside revelation in order to systematically fit together what are fragmentary statements that various people use to try to make sense of Mormonism. How one interprets Mormonism theologically will depend in the first place on the philosophical presuppositions that one brings with him or her. But one must then go on to ask which of the various logical or metaphysical frameworks is best suited for the task. This is a larger philosophical issue about what ultimately is the truth of things. To situate the gospel in such an enterprise is not only ultimately fruitless, it misses the point that what is expected of us is to take seriously the commandments and precepts of God as we find them in the scriptures and in the words of the prophets and apostles (Doctrine and Covenants 1). Latter-day Saints must take seriously the conflict between reason and revelation as that is set out in dramatic form throughout the Book of

Mormon. Its counsels must dictate to us what tasks we should undertake in coming to an understanding of the restored gospel. Unless we adhere to it, we will find our faith taken from us. Philosophy will not allow revelation to have the final say in any account of Mormon things. In the end, theology is the captive woman mentioned in Deuteronomy 21:10–14. She has been given a home by certain Saints. But through long experience we have found that such marriages cannot be happy ones and will not last. For the woman is neither willing to remain a captive nor to become a woman of Israel. It is time to set the woman free and to return to the covenants that have nurtured us throughout the restoration.[8]

8. See Mansfield, "Captive Woman," 65.