Theological Method and the Question of Truth

A Postliberal Approach to Mormon Doctrine and Practice[1]

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Introduction

From its beginnings, Mormonism has had an uncomfortable relationship with theology. Unlike most Christian denominations, Latter-day Saints do not rely on a theological tradition to shape the development of doctrinal discourse, but look instead to continuing revelation through recognized authorities, religious experience, and communal practice for guidance in matters of theology. The ministry is not academically trained in philosophy or theology, and many in the tradition see little or no value in theological inquiry arguing that such an enterprise results in the bastardization of LDS beliefs by mixing doctrines of God with the philosophies of men. One frequently hears the charge that mainstream Christian theology has enslaved itself to intellectual methods that distort the truth of the gospel and a correct understanding of God.[2] For example, an important theme in LDS scholarship of late has been the critical appraisal of modernism and its continued influence in the study of religion. The term modernism is commonly used to refer to a cluster of theoretical positions including positivism, materialism, objectivism, and rationalism. Despite the historical dominance of modernist methodologies in the academic study of religion, the past few decades have witnessed a strong challenge to many of the abid-

ing assumptions of modernism by thinkers who appeal to concepts and methods that have come to be labeled "postmodern." Although a near hopelessly fluid term, postmodernism is famously characterized by Jean-Francois Lyotard as "the incredulity towards metanarratives," those modes of discourse that seek to totalize human knowledge according to a common method of theoretical reflection.[3] This importantly includes the rejection of philosophical or scientific claims to objectivity and the attendant authority of reason characteristic of much of modernism. Given Mormonism's emphasis on continuing revelation and the role of religious experience in belief formation, several LDS thinkers have utilized postmodern insights to respond to these approaches that are said to minimize, redescribe, or dismiss important aspects of Mormon thought. Because postmodern thought has opened up new ways of thinking about knowledge and truth that had for so long been dominated by a set of shared assumptions, a new way of engaging the wider intellectual community has emerged and proven fruitful in certain respects. The use of postmodernism in LDS intellectual life has been utilized primarily in the service of apologetic endeavors in the context of debates regarding scriptural exegesis, historiography, theological method, and the historicity of scripture. There is much of value in these critiques of modernism and this paper is an attempt to argue in favor of an approach to theology that shares many of these insights. I will begin by offering a sketch of this position as a response to alternative approaches within contemporary mainstream Christian theology. Second, I will address some implications of this method for LDS scholarship by examining specific works in the areas of scriptural exegesis and historiography. An important aim of the paper is to show how postliberal theology has both apologetic and critical implications that have not been adequately explored in the Mormon courtship of postmodern thought.

Postliberal Theology

Postliberal theology as a distinctive approach has its origins in the mid-1970s in the work of Yale theologians Hans Frei and George Lindeck, whose respective books *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and *The Nature of Doctrine* made a huge impact on the theological community.[4] It is influenced philosophically by the work of the later Wittgenstein and theologically by certain aspects of neo-orthodoxy, most notably the confessionalism of Karl Barth. The postliberal project situates itself between the traditional divide of so-called conservative and liberal approaches to theology that has characterized the discipline since the mid-nineteenth century.[5] Liberalism has generally been described as an attempt to reconcile the claims of modernity with Christian belief. While it has not been the case that liberal theologians have agreed on "how to reconstruct Christian beliefs in the light of modernity, they agree on the necessity of that ongoing project as the fundamental task of theology."[6] This approach has its origins in the work of nineteenth-century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and became influential in the United States in the work of William Ellery Channing and Harry Emerson Fosdick. On the other hand, conservative approaches tend to harden the divide between science, reason, and the Christian gospel and emphasize traditional doctrines of Biblical inerrancy and literalism against what Walter Lippmann called "the acids of modernity."

Postliberal theology accuses both liberal and conservative approaches of being enslaved, to varying degrees, by modernist assumptions. Hans Frei, for example, has argued that conservative approaches to biblical interpretation, in their reliance on traditional propositional-realist accounts of truth, are as much a product of modernist thought as their liberal counterparts. According to this approach, "the metaphors and narratives of scripture carry meaning as religious truths only if they are restated in propositional form."[7] George Lindbeck describes this approach as the attempt to under-

stand religious beliefs and doctrines as "informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities."[8] Hence, both the truth-value and meaning of religious doctrines are ultimately determined by their correspondence to the reality they seek to describe.

This approach is well represented in the tradition of systematic theology and Anglo-American philosophy of religion. A paradigmatic example of this position in evangelical theology is the influential work of Carl F. H. Henry, who argues that biblical narratives and metaphors must be grounded in clearly stated propositions.

> Christianity's very claim to truth collapses unless truth can be affirmed of certain core-propositions inherent in it and integral to it. If the logical-propositional truth of Christian revelation is ignored, and is even to be disowned, on the pretext that the efficacy of personal faith can be preserved only in this way, we shall needlessly and disastrously sacrifice what superbly distinguishes Christianity from other religions, viz., the truth of certain specific propositions that cannot be affirmed by rival faiths. . . . Faith divorced from assent to propositions may for a season be exuberantly championed as Christian faith, but sooner or later it must become apparent that such mystical exercises are neither identifiably Christian nor akin to authentic belief.[9]

This position is also to be found in the work of Latter-day Saint thinkers and their interlocutors. For example, two papers presented at the 2003 Mormon theology conference at Yale University argued explicitly for a propositional-realist method of inquiry.[10] In "The Future of Mormon Philosophy," Dennis Potter argued for its appropriateness by claiming that apologetics and the exclusiveness of Mormon claims require such an approach. Drawing on Rudolf Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions, Potter states that "internal questions are asked within the context of a practice, form of life, or language-game," while external questions "are questions about the relationship between our practices and/or language-games with external reality."[11] The point of his paper is to

argue that the propositional-realist approach, which focuses on external questions, is in a better position to explain the exclusiveness of Mormonism. "When confronted with the fact of diversity, Mormons respond by saying that all religions have some truth, but that there is only one true church. This is a claim that necessarily compares practices with practices, an external question. Hence, our exclusivism entails Realism."[12]

Another advocate of a propositional approach is Paul Owen, an evangelical Christian theologian and friendly interlocutor for Mormon philosophers. Owen argued, similarly to Potter, that Mormons need a systematic theology to enter into genuine and meaningful dialogue with other faith traditions. He states:

> After all, it was Joseph's desire to overcome the chaos of multiple theological traditions that were making incompatible claims, all at the same time pronouncing themselves as the guides of religious truth. . . . The question that plagued this young man was not, how can religious truth be systematized; but which version of systematic doctrine is objectively true, and how can I know it?[13]

Potter and Owen agree that the most appropriate way to address the question of religious truth is to compare doctrinal beliefs (or sets of beliefs) with reality, and this is presumably done by means of subjecting incompatible beliefs to some objectively valid method of adjudication in order to establish correspondence with reality or lack thereof.

Implied in this approach is the idea that religious beliefs and doctrines have the epistemological status of hypotheses. But to meaningfully call something a hypothesis requires that there be some agreed upon method for its confirmation, and this is precisely what is lacking across religious lines in the effort to determine the truth of the matter. Hence, the appeal to "reality" in settling disputes leaves both parties with a set of beliefs and yet without a context of adjudication, which leaves the concept of reality employed to settle the dispute as a meaningless philosophical

abstraction. This is seen in the practice of what D. Z. Phillips calls "philosophy by italics."[14] According to Terence Penelhum, a person advocating a realist position "would hold that the supernatural facts which he thinks faith requires must indeed *be* facts for faith to be true, so that if they are not facts, but fantasies . . . then faith is unjustified."[15] But from a philosophical standpoint, of what theoretical value is italicizing the word "be"? Examples abound in the literature in which someone will assert that faith is empty unless God *actually* exists, or that God's existence is a *fact*, or that God is *there* to be worshipped. The point is that emphasizing these words does not do any theoretical work. In fact, far from clarifying matters, it appears to me that the need to italicize these words actually reveals their questionable status. For this reason, the so-called "external questions," especially when applied to theological questions, are idle, and hence meaningless. Far from Mormon apologetics requiring realism, I would maintain that the realist approach serves to obstruct productive dialogue across theological boundaries. How does the appeal to objective reality aid in the discussion as to whether or not God has a body? "Well," one might say, "there is a fact of the matter as to whether God does or does not have a body." But where would the conversation proceed from there? Any appeal to the "sober facts of the world," to use Alvin Plantinga's phrase, will be necessarily informed by the criteria of truth and meaningfulness present in the specific faith-tradition of the interlocutors. Consider the following quote from Peter Winch in his essay "Understanding a Primitive Society":

> Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language. . . . We could not in fact distinguish the real from the unreal without understanding the way this distinction operates in the language. If then we wish to understand the significance of these concepts, we must examine the use they actually have in language.[16]

In short, what counts as correspondence to reality can take as many different forms as there are different uses of language. Hence, what correspondence *means* cannot be assumed prior to an investigation of its employment in a particular context; nor can the concept of reality be usefully severed from the epistemic practices through which it is understood.[17] Carl Sagan and Jerry Falwell may agree that reality is what it is independent of human beliefs, languages, and practices. However, despite the fact that they employ the same words, they mean distinctly different things because their beliefs in this regard are tied to entirely different conceptual communities. These criticisms should not be mistaken for a metaphysical thesis in the service of a certain type of nihilism; rather the argument presented here is a grammatical insight regarding the status of propositions or beliefs in their appeal to reality.

The propositional-realist may retort that this issue has nothing whatsoever to do with the status of reality itself, but rather with differences as to how it is conceived. It does not follow from a diversity of beliefs, they may add, that there is no objective fact of the matter. I would rejoin that the very employment of this concept in the service of a philosophical resolution is empty and meaningless because it cannot be filled in apart from referential practices that may fundamentally differ depending on context. To continue to appeal to the "facts" or "reality" or the "world" as the arbiter of truth once this insight is recognized is an exercise in theoretical futility. In short, to separate the ontological status of reality from its grammatical status in language results in a vacuous distinction for purposes of inquiry. As Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, "Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a *world* at all. . . . [F]or there is no point of view outside the experience of the world in language from which it could become an object."[18] However, this is precisely what is implied in propositional-realist conceptions, most of which rely on a correspondence theory of truth in which the appeal to reality functions as little more than a metaphor for the hope of res-

olution between diverse belief systems. It has no content of its own and is thus made sublime in the interest of theoretical convergence.

Despite the attempts of very talented philosophers, I do not believe that the different variants of philosophical realism have escaped the difficulties described above.[19] For this reason, if the appeal to objective reality is a theoretically misguided enterprise analogous to greyhounds chasing wooden rabbits, we need to look elsewhere for a method adequate to the task of theological inquiry.

Postliberalism and The Task of Theology

George Lindbeck summarizes three problems with the propositional approach that are particularly relevant to doctrinal issues in the Latter-day Saint community:

> The conceptual difficulties involved in the traditional propositional notion of authoritative teaching have contributed to discrediting the whole doctrinal enterprise. They have helped legitimate unnecessary and counterproductive rigidities in practice because, first, propositionalism makes it difficult to understand how new doctrines can develop in the course of time, and how old ones can be forgotten or become peripheral. Second, propositionalist accounts of how old doctrines can be interpreted to fit new circumstances are unconvincing: they have difficulty in distinguishing between what changes and what remains the same. Third, they do not deal adequately with the specified ecumenical problematic: how is it possible for doctrines that once contradicted each other to be reconciled and yet retain their identity.[20]

Drawing on the distinction between what he calls "extratextual" (read realist-propositional) and "intratextual" approaches to religious doctrines, Lindbeck argues in favor of an intratextual account for which religious meaning is located within the symbolic relations of the community rather than being severed from it. "Thus the proper way to determine what 'God' signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its

propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly."[21] This amounts to a kind of conceptual ethnography with regard to religious beliefs and practices.[22] One must look to see how concepts function in relation to one another in order to render them meaningful for purposes of verification and correspondence. Rather than comparing scripture with a non-scriptural concept of reality, "intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework. . . . It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text."[23] The importance of this approach lies in the recognition that both the truth value of religious claims and the criteria for establishing their truth are necessarily tied to the practices of particular religious communities in their relation to text, ritual, etc. Because religious communities make contrasting claims about the nature of reality and possess incompatible methods by which their truth is established, the task of the theologian is to offer a faithful account of the doctrines, rituals, and norms of the community in how they function in relation to one another. In doing this the aim is to provide a coherent and meaningful account of how this community understands reality. Lindbeck quotes Clifford Geertz approvingly as follows: "What the theologian needs to explicate 'is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.'"[24] This requires waiting on the lived practices of the community to show the meaning of doctrine, ritual, and scriptural text rather than imposing a theoretical method that distorts their character. Hence, religions can be understood as sets of shared linguistic and ritualistic practices that show the character of the absolute and the nature of human life. To understand a religion is not to understand a set of propositions. Rather, it is akin to learning a language. One becomes competent in the various ways in which words and actions are tied together in the various practices of religious adherents.

For example, appropriate distinctions between literal, figurative, and metaphorical applications of scripture can only be understood by means of their use in a community of believers.[25] In fact, Joseph Smith describes his own religious crisis as a problem of which criteria to apply to biblical interpretation.

> In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and *how shall I know it*? . . . for the teachers of religion understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.[26]

The direct appeal to the Bible, as we have seen from the history of Christianity, has not yielded consensus on the meaning of scripture. Martin Luther and other reformers were confident that a direct appeal was possible and could result in consensus, if not unanimity, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. However, one lesson of Christian history is that the guidance of the Holy Spirit was itself understood in divergent ways resulting in the variety of Christian communities we observe today. From the standpoint of an intratextual approach, without the practices of the community in relation to the text, one would not know where to begin in terms of determining the propositional status of the passages in question. Evangelical Christians appeal to, among other factors, a long tradition of established Christian practice as carrying authoritative weight in matters of biblical dispute while Latter-day Saints appeal to continuing revelation by means of recognized authorities. Both communities appeal to the witness of the Holy Spirit as confirming the legitimacy of the criteria in question. Where does one go from here? Wittgenstein states that:

> Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic. I said that I would 'combat' the other man,—but wouldn't I give him reasons?

> Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)[27]

It is not that religious communities are without recourse with regard to scriptural and theological interpretation, but, as with Joseph Smith, disputes are very likely to develop into disputes over *criteria* for establishing *how* to read scripture rather than over specific content.[28] The point is to illustrate that one must ultimately appeal to a communal practice for guidance and that appeal to the text *itself*, the world *in-itself*, or the historical *facts* is an exercise in futility.

Criticisms of Postliberal Theology

Nancy Murphy and James McClendon summarize the task of the postliberal theologian well:

> The question of truth arises in two ways in a cultural-linguistic approach. One is that of the consistency or coherence of each part of the system with the rest—first-order community practices and beliefs must be consistent with second-order theological and doctrinal statements and vice-versa. Such consistency measurements are intrasystematic or "intratextual." Second, one may raise a question about the "truth" of the religion itself, but this is better expressed as a question about the *adequacy* of the system as a whole to conform its adherents in the various dimensions of their existence to what is "Ultimately Real."[29]

This emphasis on internal coherence and meaning has led to vigorous debate regarding the merits of postliberal theology as the means of overcoming the conservative/liberal split that had come to dominate Christian theology. Since its introduction to the Christian community, postliberal theology has been accused of many things including antirealism, protectionism, relativism, fideism, and conservatism. Both first and second generation postliberal theologians have responded to these accusations differently and with varying degrees of effectiveness.[30] However, one very

serious concern from both a theoretical and practical perspective is that postliberal theology isolates Christian beliefs such that they become cut off from broader intellectual and ethical discourse. The result is that Christian belief is forced into a conceptual ghetto where it is insulated from criticism. One example of this criticism is found in the work of David Tracy, who in his very influential book, *The Blessed Rage for Order*, argues that:

> [C]ontemporary Christian theology is best understood as philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human existence and the meanings present in the Christian tradition. . . . Therefore, Christians cannot appeal simply to the Bible or distinctively Christian experience or the Christian tradition; they have to show what they say at least addresses questions and makes some kind of sense in terms of experience all human beings share, and they have to be willing to submit the "cognitive claims" they make to investigation by the methods of philosophy. . . . [31]

For Tracy, postliberal theology does not meet these conditions and risks rendering theological voices irrelevant in public discourse on important intellectual and social issues. This charge of fideism has been leveled by others including James Gustafason, who maintains that "the practical theology of 'postliberal' Christianity has to do one of two things: either a) show the falsity or at least inadequacy of nonbiblical explanations and interpretations of events or b) become explicit about the relationships between biblical theological interpretations of the events to those which are not explicitly biblical."[32] William Placher, in his book *Unapologetic Theology*, responds to these charges by arguing that the appeal to common theoretical or experiential grounds may actually serve to distort the character of the beliefs in question.

> All that we ever have is the common ground that happens to exist among different particular traditions. If I am right, then *pretending* that some such contingent ground is in fact a provable universal standard of human morality [or absolute truth or human rationality] is a dangerous business:

socially dangerous because it dismisses all those who do not share one set of cultural norms as primitives to be forcibly educated or lunatics to be locked up, and theologically dangerous because it turns into a form of idolatry in which these cultural standards become the norm according to which we judge our faith.[33]

Getting someone to see the world in a new way does not require the appeal to a common rationality or universally shared human experience. Rather, it is more like helping someone appreciate the rhythm in a song they could not pick up on their own, or recognize a pattern in a painting that was hidden from their view. There is an aesthetic quality to our understanding of the world that is often overlooked in the attempt to capture and understand the meaning and application of religious beliefs.[34] Placher states, "A Christian sees the universe as the creation of a loving God. A Buddhist sees a pattern of striving and suffering, to be escaped only by enlightenment. An atheist, perhaps, sees a different pattern. . . . For most observers, some features come to the foreground, and the whole patterns itself around them."[35] Within this approach, interreligious dialogue would consist of the sharing of "patterns" wherein absolute claims about the nature of the whole would certainly be proffered, but they would not be made by means of an appeal to a common theoretical method. Absolute truth is relocated *in* the pattern of phenomena.

For this reason, the rejection of metaphysical realism or epistemological foundationalism does not entail that religious believers cannot make absolute claims. The acknowledgment of the relativity of criteria does not end in the denial of religious truth. Rather, it takes away the false foundation upon which both religious beliefs and criticisms of religion have traditionally rested. It serves to give perspicuous representation to their function in the life of the religious community with no attempt to unify religious practices within a philosophical method. Utilizing Wittgenstein's later philosophy, postliberal theologians argue that the meaning of absolute truth claims can only be understood from within a particular form

of life.[36] On this account, conversion from one religion to another is to appropriate a different form of life, a different way of looking at the world. It is the appropriation of the relations, distinctions, concerns, passions, commitments and attitudes befitting another way of living life. Sue Patterson summarizes the point well: "We read all truth-claims through the entire Christian form of life but not as requiring a justification from beyond that form of life, for there is no beyond in this world and whatever may await us eschatologically will also take place in Christ."[37]

Postliberal Theology and Mormon Studies

The attempt to develop a coherent doctrinal account that is adequate to its own categories is an important undertaking and one I would argue requires further exploration in Mormon studies. For this reason, the last section of this paper will consist of a brief examination of two approaches to LDS scholarship that share important features with the arguments presented above. An important aim of this section is to raise questions and explore some ramifications of other theoretical treatments of Mormon belief and practice. It is important to note that the intratextual theological method is not to be mistaken as an apologetic defense strategy. There are critical as well as apologetic implications for LDS doctrine that require more careful study.

Scriptural Interpretation

James Faulconer's essay, "Scripture as Incarnation," argues in favor of an approach that understands scripture as "an enactment of history rather than a representation of it."[38] He describes modernist approaches to history and scripture as maintaining that historical events and religious objects exist independently of their meanings as they are expressed in the language of the community. In this view, religious texts are judged according to their descriptive abilities with regard to the events or objects in question. Faulconer points out, however, that:

> If, as modernism suggests, the words that refer to God and divine things were mere signs, tools for thinking *about* or referring *to* something else, then for them to function as signs, we would also have to have direct access to the referent, to God, which is impossible. Merely referential signs require that what they refer to be available to the person who understands them.[39]

Furthermore, the analysis of a narrative in the interest of such a separation often results in an irreplaceable loss of religious meaning. In Faulconer's account, the meaning of scripture goes far beyond its referential function. Thus, it should not be read as a series of propositions about a chronology of discrete events. Rather, it is more like a poem in which the truth is *embodied* in the narrative such that the meaning of a story or the significance of events in relation to one another serves religious ends. In this account, the use of symbols in the practices of religious community is what it means to speak of religious truth. Faulconer states that " . . . to say that scripture or an ordinance is an incarnation is to say that in the material existence of these things—as scripture and ordinance rather than as abstracted to merely so-called objective qualities— we are given an orientation to the world: relations to things, meanings and values of things, the existence and non-existence of things."[40] The sacred is thus revealed in the symbolic ordering of scriptural narrative and other ritualized forms of religious discourse and practice. A critic may respond by asking "symbolic of what?" Doesn't the same argument used against words as mere signs apply to language as symbolic ordering? Must not there be a literal reality that allows one to see the symbols precisely as symbols? The idea of scripture as incarnation, however, is to problematize the literal/symbolic disjunction. "For premoderns, reading the story of Moses and Israel typologically, figurally, analogically, or allegorically is not what one does *instead of* or *in addition to* reading literally. Such readings are part and parcel of a literal reading."[41] The significance of the events as part of a sacred story is what gives

them relevance precisely as scripture. Thus, by reassessing how we approach the text, we can presumably avoid the theoretical crisis involved in subjecting it to rational modes of discourse that do violence to depth, richness, and religious significance of the narratives we find there.

"Scripture as Incarnation" is a valuable contribution to the divide between the simplistic literalism and the dismissive naturalism that has come to characterize much of the work on Latter-day Saint scripture. Faulconer's work here and elsewhere represents a theoretical advance beyond most of the literature on these issues by raising challenging questions that deserve more careful attention. Nevertheless, I believe there are subtle weaknesses in his argument that point to even deeper issues as we strive to do justice to the meaning of the text. For example, in the latter part of his essay, Faulconer qualifies his position by pointing out that his approach

> . . . is not to deny that the scriptures tell about events that actually happened. They are about real people and real events. What I propose is not a way to reduce the premodern understanding of history to a modern view, to one that denies the historicity of scripture by taking scripture to refer to a transcendent, nonhistorical reality by means of only *seemingly* historical stories. Premodern interpreters of the Bible understand the scriptures to be about actual events. For them, what the scriptures say includes portrayal of and talk about real things. However, premodern interpreters do not think it sufficient (or possible) to portray the real events of real history without letting us see them in the light of that which gives them their significance-their reality, the enactment of which they are a part—as history, namely the symbolic ordering that they incarnate. Without that light, portrayals cannot be accurate.[42]

The major point of his argument is meant to show that one cannot separate "real events" from their significance as part of the symbolic ordering of the narrative in which they occur. This appeal to the real, as he indicates, is intended to defend against his view being confused with an account of scripture in which the narratives

of scripture are reducible to moral archetyes or instructive myths. According to the latter approach, " . . . scriptures are not about historical truth, they are about religious truth, these people argue. Thus, according to them, though scripture takes the guise of history, it is actually about something else, such as a transcendent or archetypal reality."[43] While it is important for Faulconer to distinguish his approach from an archetypal account, it appears as if the way he is using the word "real" in the above quote has subtly slipped back into its modernist use that his whole argument was trying to avoid. In other words, the grammar of "actual" and "real" has shifted from *real only within a symbolic ordering narrative* to *real within a wider common sense use* that could be understood outside of the narrative. This can be seen by comparing the above quote to a point made earlier in the essay where he is arguing for the theoretical vacuousness of "bare events." Faulconer states in a footnote that " . . . reference is inherently unstable, not only in its inability to be explained by any theory of reference, but also over time. As the context of an event changes over time (and the event has temporal as well as momentary context) *so too does the event. . . .* "[44] If this is the case, then reference to "real events" and what "actually happened" has lost its theoretical purchase. An account in which reference is "inherently unstable" cannot talk about "real events" without reference to the particular way in which those events are taken up in some narrative or other as it is understood *at a particular time.* The ship has sailed as they say and there is no tether back to the "actual" or "real" that has any application outside of this unstable, temporally evolving symbolic understanding. Thus, the appeal to the historicity of scripture must be severely qualified in a way that renders problematic most LDS appeals to a commonsense conception of historicity as do several of the essays in the volume in which Faulconer's essay appears.[45] Hence, far from providing a philosophically sophisticated defense of their use of historicity, "Scripture as Incarnation" actually serves to undermine their attempts to offer the robustly realist account of the

events reported in scripture. Although it provides an excellent critique of the methodological presuppositions of the modernist approach, it also serves, perhaps unwittingly, as a critique of the accounts presented in most LDS apologetic defenses of the historicity of scripture.

Historiography

In his essay, "Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations: A Critique of the New Mormon History," David Bohn calls into question the methodological approach of historians who believe (1) that the Mormon past consists of a series of facts or events that could be assembled in such a way so as to recreate the past "as it really was," and (2) that scholarly detachment is possible and desirable in the interest of faithful recreation of the Mormon past.[46] He describes the situation as follows: "The detachment or neutrality called for by apologists for the New Mormon History rests on the assumption of a certain transparency in understanding the past; it demands a presuppositionless or objective vantage point—one above passion and polemic—which, we are told, allows the reality of the past to reappear as it really was, uncolored or undistorted by personal longings and biases."[47] Utilizing the insights of hermeneutic thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Bohn attempts to show that this kind of scholarly objectivity is impossible to achieve and is thus a misleading ideal for those who attempt to write history, religious or otherwise. Every historian, he asserts, brings to the data a set of biases, assumptions, methodological ideals, and scholarly conventions that necessarily affect the way in which the past is presented. This approach is based upon the idea that there is a necessarily interpretive aspect to human experience that shapes the way in which we understand ourselves, our environment, and our past. This interpretive "horizon" is informed by the structure of our language and the conventions of our culture. These "prejudices" are not barriers to understanding, so the argument goes, but are its necessary preconditions. Because there is no

such thing as a state of being free from prejudices, to see them as barriers is to misunderstand how it is we come to understand anything at all. If this account is correct, then the idea of the neutral and objective vantage point from which to understand history is a chimera based upon a misleading picture of human knowledge. Bohn states, "Clearly, efforts of historians to ground their conceptual language objectively on claims to having discovered a universal methodology, underlying laws, core social structures, or essential human nature fail to own up to the historically situated conventions that make possible and necessarily prejudice their historical accounts."[48] The implication is that there is a necessary "emplotment"[49] that structures the historical narrative and gives it meaning according the values, ideals, and aims of the narrator. This situation applies to secular approaches to the Mormon past as well as those which acknowledge the reality of angels, visions, and prophetic gifts. Bohn accuses the new Mormon historians of an emplotment based upon naturalistic assumptions regarding human nature, the source of religious experience, and the influence of environmental factors on religious ideas and practices. For this reason, he characterizes this approach as "revisionist"[50] in that it does not provide an "authentic" account of the Mormon past as told by those who experienced it. Instead, secular theories serve to structure the story in ways that are repressive of, and hostile to, "language that is open to the sacred and sympathetic to belief."[51] For this reason, Bohn believes that, because traditional Mormon historians work within a horizon of belief that does not seek to hide their biases and commitments, theirs constitutes a more "honest and straightforward approach" that "seeks to authentically re-create our common past."[52] By using categories and causal relations internal to LDS belief and practice (i.e. those that are faithful to the experience and self-understanding of the Latter-day Saints), Bohn believes that traditional histories are more accurate and meaningful and ought to be free of many of criticisms brought to bear by the new Mormon historians.

There is certainly much to be valued in Bohn's approach. He calls our attention to the dangers involved when, as we saw above, alien forms of discourse and their methodological presuppositions are used to characterize a faith tradition with its own criteria of intelligibility that are mediated in the life of the community. Nevertheless, important broader questions remain regarding the implications of Bohn's account of Mormon studies. For example, if Bohn's appeal to universal hermeneutics is correct, and the use of external theories and categories in accounting for Mormon history does violence to the narrative, this has important implications for LDS scholarship in a variety of disciplines in that one may give pause regarding the value of the natural and social sciences, literary criticism, textual analysis, etc. to the extent they reflect on scripture, religious social practices, etc. In more pointed terms, Bohn's universal hermeneutic appears to destabilize the moorings upon which talk about cause and effect in history rests such that the application of his theory, if applied consistently, could serve to undermine other areas of LDS apologetics that utilize the methodological assumptions of secular scholarship in the service of, for example, demonstrating the historical plausibility of the Book of Mormon or the textual integrity of the Bible.[53]

In response to the apparent fideism implied in his arguments, Bohn qualifies his position in a way that raises crucial questions regarding the utilization of secular scholarship in Mormon studies more broadly. He argues that a strictly secular or "logocentric" view of rationality,

> would deny much of the richest scholarship found in the traditions of both East and West where rational discourse worked out its arguments from within a horizon of belief. It would deny rationality to the prophets of Israel and the Rabbinic tradition in their efforts to get clear on the meaning of the *Word*; to much of what constitutes the history of philosophy; indeed to our own Mormon tradition in which we are enjoined to seek wisdom through both Spirit and Reason.

> Clearly, Latter-day Saints understand rational discourse in a much broader way. They are willing to explore all modes of discourse, even those that are blind to spiritual things in order to get clear on their past; but they realize that all "worldly" ways of understanding work within limits and are thus insufficient.[54]

So it is clear that Bohn does not reject the appeal to reason altogether, but that it must operate within the constraints of spiritual categories such that "the plenitude of reason is obtained only in a space opened up by the Holy Spirit."[55] This is certainly consistent with the scriptural mantra that Latter-day Saints "should seek wisdom by study and also by faith." The particular way this has been taken up into the curriculum and discourse of Latter-day Saints is that the criterion for choosing between the two seems to be that when the findings of reason are inconsistent with, or otherwise call into question, the teachings of the scriptures and the prophets, they are to be rejected. Elder Dallin Oaks, in his book *The Lord's Way*, articulates this position well:

> Study and reason also have an important role in learning the things of God. Seekers begin by studying the word of God and the teachings of his servants and by trying to understand them by the techniques of reason. Reason can authenticate revelation and inspiration by measuring them against the threshold tests of edification, position, and consistency with gospel principles. But reason has no role in evaluating the content of revelation in order to accept or reject it according to some supposed standard of reasonableness. Revelation has the final word.[56]

However, if reason is trumped by revelation such that rational arguments and secular scholarship are valid only to the extent they are consistent with revelation, reason ends up serving *only* apologetic ends. The problem is this: Many accounts of Mormonism suffer from the difficulty of, on the one hand, using secular categories and methods to validate a particular interpretation of history, scripture, etc., while on the other hand, rejecting this same methodology to

the extent that it yields conclusions at odds with this interpretation. This is not scholarship. In order for scholarship to maintain its integrity *as such*, the methods used must be applicable to all data under consideration and carry the same weight. Otherwise, this "scholarship" serves a purpose inconsistent with its own self-understanding and, hence, ceases to be scholarship. Scholarly methods cannot justifiably be applied in patchwork fashion that depends on what the outcome of the inquiry will be. As I have argued above, there certainly may be "internal standards"[57] by which data are selected, categorized, and assessed. However, the moment at which one appeals to an external theory or argument form reflecting on Mormon history, theology, or ritual, one must allow the theory or argument to be applied to *all* relevant data. By "relevant" is meant the set of data that would appropriately fall within that field of investigation as determined by the discipline.

One very important example is the debate regarding "environmental explanations" of human events. Robert Millet articulates the point well in his description of historical criticism of the New Testament:

> One obvious presupposition of this perspective is that an event or a movement is largely (if not completely) a product of its surroundings, the result of precipitating factors in the environment. Though it is certainly valuable to be able to look critically at the setting—for nothing takes shape in an intellectual or religious vacuum—and though it is true that many elements impinge upon a moment in history, we need not suppose a causal connection between any two factors in an environment. Simply because A precedes B, we need not conclude that A caused B; we need not be guilty of the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.[58]

As we have seen, this type of criticism is commonly employed in LDS scholarly circles as a way to preserve the religious integrity of a Latter-day Saint understanding of history and scripture against causal explanations for events that depend upon naturalistic methods of inquiry. However, this same "environmental argument" has

been repeatedly employed in LDS scholarship to argue that Christian doctrine was co-opted by Greek philosophy such that it became theologically misguided.[59] The implication seems clear. Critical methods cannot only apply in one direction and maintain any *scholarly* respectability. One must employ a kind of theoretical "golden rule" in these cases: Apply only those critical methods to others you are willing to be subjected to yourself.

Conclusion

The implications of the above arguments importantly include the idea that Latter-day Saints are theoretically justified in speaking on their own terms without the need to provide philosophical or scientific foundations for their beliefs. However, the method for which I argue also necessitates critical assessment of the coherence of both LDS beliefs themselves and second-order accounts of these beliefs by theologians, historians, social scientists, and philosophers of religion. Obviously, much more can be said on these issues. My purpose in raising them is to set before the intratextual theologian selected methodological questions that require further examination in the interest of a coherent understanding of LDS belief and practice.

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Notes

1. This paper is a greatly revised and expanded version of a presentation given at the first annual conference of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, March 2004 at Utah Valley State College.

2. See, for example, Louis Midgley, "No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon" in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001); Louis Midgley, "Directions that Diverge: 'Jerusalem and Athens' Revisited" review of *The Ancient State: Rulers and the Ruled* by Hugh Nibley, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1991); and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

3. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

4. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

5. As is the case with most academic labels, postliberal theology refers to a range of arguments with important common features having a relationship of family resemblance. There are important disputes within this scholarly

community that defy a tidy definition of the position. Hence, a statement of qualification is necessary in the interest of "truth in labeling" with regard to the arguments presented in this paper.

6.   Roger E. Olsen, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 539.

7.   Gary Dorrien, "The Origins of Postliberalism," *The Christian Century*, July 4–11, 2001, 16–21.

8.   Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 16.

9.   Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority: God Who Speaks and Shows*, vol. 3 (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1979), 486–87.

10. The conference was entitled "God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History" and was organized by Kenneth West. The papers referenced here were delivered in a panel discussion entitled "The Future of Mormon Theological Studies."

11. R. Dennis Potter, "The Future of Mormon Philosophy," unpublished paper delivered at the "God, Humanity, and Revelation Conference" at Yale University, March, 2003, 2–3. Used with permission. See Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" in *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

12. Potter, "The Future of Mormon Philosophy," 6.

13. Paul Owen, "Can Mormon Theology Be Systematic?" Unpublished paper delivered at the "God, Humanity, and Revelation Conference" at Yale University, March, 2003, 3. Used with permission.

14. See D. Z. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games," in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

15. Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), 151. Quoted in D. Z. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language Games."

16. Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Religion and Understanding*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (New York: MacMillan Press, 1967), 13.

17. See, for example, the arguments of Wilfred Sellars in "The Structure of Knowledge," in *Action, Knowledge, and Reality: Critical Studies in Honor of Wilfred Sellars*, ed. Hector-Neri Castaneda (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill

Co., 1975), and *Science, Perception, and Reality* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963); Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), and Rush Rhees, "Remarks on Reality and Religion," in *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

18. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. rev., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum Publising Co., 1994), 443, 452.

19. For example, William Alston and Alvin Plantinga offer exceptionally powerful arguments that serve to defend forms of philosophical realism. For more, see William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alvin Platinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Alvin Plantiga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). This work is the final installment in Plantinga's trilogy on warrant. See also Plantiga's *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

20. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 78.

21. Ibid., 114.

22. In addition to the philosophy of Wittgenstein, the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz plays an influential part in Lindbeck's thinking on these matters. See, for example, Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

23. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

24. Ibid., 115.

25. Familiar examples abound. Latter-day Saints often interpret Acts 7:55–56, in which Stephen reports seeing Jesus standing on the right hand of God, as evidence of the literal separateness and spatiality of the two. Mainstream Christians, on the other hand, are likely to offer a more figurative reading of the passage on account of their reliance on a traditional understanding of God as articulated in the creeds and the relative weight of the passage in relation to others. However, certain passages in the Book of Mormon seem to

imply a more traditional trinitarian understanding of God. For example, Ether 3:14 reports God saying "I am the Father and the Son." And yet, Latter-day Saints believe, as noted above, that Jesus and God the Father are separate beings. Certain Latter-day Saints thinkers have responded to this and other similar passages such that the attribution of the term "Father" in these cases applies to Jesus Christ figuratively. This ascription, of course, is not clearly gleaned from the text itself and, to an outsider, could just as easily be interpreted literally as the above biblical passages were so interpreted.

26. Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith—History 1:10, 12.

27. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. and ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 611–12.

28. This discussion raises extremely interesting questions regarding (a) the justificatory relationship between religious experience and religious belief, and (b) the criteria for establishing doctrinal authority within the LDS community. I am currently working on both of these issues and plan to present on them in forthcoming papers. For the moment, however, I must acknowledge their relevance and avoid the temptation into further digression.

29. Nancy Murphy and J. William McClendon, "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," *Modern Theology* 5:3 (1989): 191–214, 206.

30. For example, Lindbeck's description of religions as "super-propositions" amounts to pushing the issue of correspondence one level higher and is thus theoretically inconsistent with his own valuable insights. See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 63–69.

31. David Tracy, *The Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 34. Quoted in William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 155–56. It must be noted that Tracy's more recent writings offer more nuanced accounts of the "public character of theology," most notably in his distinction between fundamental and systematic theologies. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1986).

32. James M. Gustafason, "Just What is 'Postliberal Theology'?" *Christian Century*, March 24–31, 1999, 355.

33. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 168.

34. For more on this issues, see Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception on Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company), 1953; Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1993); and John Wisdom "Gods," in *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

35. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 124.

36. See Brian Birch, "The Limits of Pluralism and the Primacy of Practice: An Epistemological Inquiry into Religious Diversity," (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 272–74.

37. Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 38.

38. James Faulconer, "Scripture as Incarnation," in *Historicity and Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 30.

39. Ibid., 37.

40. Ibid. 41.

41. Ibid., 48.

42. Ibid., 44.

43. Ibid., 19.

44. Ibid., 52 ff. (italics added)

45. See, for example, Paul Hoskisson, "The Need for Historicity: Why Banishing God from History Removes Historical Obligation," and Louis Midgley, "No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001).

46. David Bohn, "Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations: A Critique of the New Mormon History," in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 231. Other essays by Bohn dealing with the same subject matter include "No Higher Ground: Objective History is an Illusive Chimera," *Sunstone* 8 (May-June, 1983): 26–32; "The Burden of Proof," *Sunstone* 10 (June, 1985): 2-3; and "Our Own Agenda," in *Sunstone* 15 (June, 1990).

47. Ibid., 230.

48. Ibid., 233.

49. This term is coined by Paul Ricoeur to describe the process of configuring events in a story to give it intelligibility and meaning.

50. Bohn, "Unfounded Claims," 248.

51. Ibid., 253–54.

52. Ibid., 249.

53. This point is made by Malcolm Thorpe in "Some Reflections on New Mormon History," in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). See pp. 271–4.

54. Bohn, "Unfounded Claims," 253.

55. Ibid.

56. Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord's Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1991), 73.

57. See Bohn, "Our Own Agenda," *Sunstone* 15 (June, 1990), 47.

58. Robert L. Millet, "The Historical Jesus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective," in *Historicity and Latter-day Saint Scripture*, 176. op. cit.

59. See, for example, Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); and James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy: Considered in Light of Scriptural and Secular History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1968).

The term theological method refers to a scientific method of studying religion. By using this method, the theological approach is not just confined to reading the Scriptures but also involves studying them and analyzing implications and nuances as well as questioning doctrines. There are different theological methods simply because reading and analysis are carried out from different perspectives according to a person's inclinations in religion. Attempts at scientific explanation of Christianity started in the 13th century. The first person to employ the theological method was Thomas Aquin...Â The Tubingen school developed a speculative historical theology and the "Theologische Quartalschrift" was founded by Johann Sebastian von Drey in 1819. 2. The Methods Of Ethics And Philosophy. 2.1 Preliminaries. Sidgwick's Methods was long in the making.Â Thus, one might, on theological grounds, hold that the moral order of the universe is utilitarian, with God willing the greatest happiness of the greatest number, while also holding that the appropriate guide for practical reason is enlightened self-interest, since utilitarian calculations are God's business and God has ordered the cosmos to insure that enlightened self-interest conduces to the greatest.Â He treats the question of the possibility of rationally motivated action as answerable largely in termsÂ The main point of such views is that conformity to such moral duties as truth-telling, promise-keeping, temperance etc Now, hereâ€™s the question â€" is this a theological truth? And if it is, then what does it tell us about other theological statements, both in the Bible and elsewhere? I welcome anyone who can show me a path with greater light than I now see.Â The things that are contained in the Apostleâ€™s Creed the Nicene Creed and the Westminster Confession, for example, are deep theological truths that have been derived from The Bible, and they are presented as concise statements ~ making it easy for the average layperson to understand. These things accurately represent what most Christians have believed throughout the centuries, and what we still believe todayâ€¦ â€œWe believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.