

Sects In The City: Mormonism and the Philosophical Perils of Being a Missionary Faith

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One afternoon while listening to Christian radio at the age of thirteen (the year was 1974), I heard a well-known Protestant Christian evangelist issue a fiery judgment against the Roman Catholic Church. I do not remember the exact words, but he spit out, with extraordinarily heightened condescension, that “the Catholic Church dogmatically affirms that it is the only one true church,” which was immediately followed by the audience’s laughter mixed with gasps. I remember that message vividly, because it provoked one of my earliest recollections of philosophical reflection, however primitive that brief moment of adolescent insight may have been.¹

What troubled me about the preacher’s words was their apparent inconsistency with what he was trying to accomplish as a preacher, namely, to convert people to the understanding of Christianity (Protestant evangelicalism) that he believed was true. You may ask, “What’s wrong with that?” Well, nothing really, since there is nothing in principle wrong with believing one is correct about a particular issue or belief and trying to convince others that they ought to embrace your point of view. In fact, the purpose of this essay is to convince you that my point of view is correct. But this clarification does not bode well for the preacher, for then he would be in precisely the same position as the Roman Catholic he condemns.

After all, the preacher is claiming that his understanding of Christianity is correct, which is what the Catholic believes about his own understanding. But maybe the preacher is just talking about ecclesiastical structures rather than dogmatic theology. Perhaps the preacher is saying that no one ecclesiastic structure within Christianity carries with it a unique authority in relation to God, the interpretation of His Word, and the carrying out of ordinances and/or sacraments (whatever the case may be). But that would only locate the disagreement at a particular point at which these theological systems disagree—ecclesiology—rather than somewhere else. It would mean that the preacher and the Catholic disagree about a particular matter—church government and its authority. To make this clear, we could say that the preacher believes that his understanding of church government and its authority—that there is no one true “church” other than Christ’s invisible body—is the one true understanding of the church and its authority.

So, it cannot be that the preacher thinks that the Catholic is wrong *because* it is, in principle, wrong to think one right and others wrong. For this is precisely the posture the preacher takes toward the Catholic: he thinks that anyone, such as a Catholic, who does not take a contemporary evangelical free church view of church government and authority is

mistaken. Therefore, the preacher is not appealing to a type of normative religious pluralism in which making a claim of exclusive truth on any matter is wrong. What then is the preacher's contention with the Catholic, if it is not a matter of principle? His contention is that the Catholic asserts a point of view that is *in fact* wrong, though the preacher makes it sound as if he is saying that the Catholic is in principle wrong *for just claiming* he is right. This is the only way to make sense of the preacher's comments in order to rescue him from the philosophical abyss of self-refutation.

The New Mormon Challenge

In January 2002, Zondervan Publishing House released the book, *The New Mormon Challenge (TNMC)*, which I co-edited with my friends Carl Mosser and Paul Owen.² It is a collection of original essays authored by some of the leading Christian scholars in their fields, such as William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, Craig Blomberg, Paul Copan, and Craig Hazen. The purpose of the book was four-fold: (1) to assess carefully and respectfully the serious work of well-credentialed Latter-day Saints (LDS) scholars that had been published in the prior ten to fifteen years but had been largely ignored by evangelical scholars;³ (2) to offer to both the Christian and Mormon communities a public example of how to conduct disagreement in a civil fashion without compromising either our intellectual integrity or our faith commitment; (3) to provide pastors, missionaries, parachurch ministers, and ordinary Christians with a resource that would be helpful in responding to LDS missionaries and friends who are trying to convert members of creedal Christian communities to the Mormon church; and

(4) to encourage Christian academics to conduct research and publish serious works in Mormon studies that touch on their areas of expertise.

Two months prior to the book's release, the Evangelical Philosophical Society (EPS) sponsored a discussion on the book at the 2001 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Denver. Moderated by Fuller Seminary President Richard J. Mouw, the panel consisted of five evangelical scholars who contributed to *TNMC* (Paul Copan, William Lane Craig, Carl Mosser, Paul Owen, and me) and five LDS scholars (David Paulsen, Blake Ostler, Dan Peterson, Steve Ricks, and Hollis R. Johnson). After President Mouw's opening comments, I said a few words about the book. I was followed by Professor Paulsen, who offered an overall assessment of *TNMC*, a portion of which I want to address in this article. Because a revised and updated version of Paulsen's essay has since been published in the LDS journal, *FARMS Review of Books*,⁴ I will examine his work in its final published form.

I single out Paulsen's comments for three reasons: (1) he is a Mormon thinker of some note and philosophical importance,⁵ having produced some of the finest work defending LDS theology including a Ph.D. dissertation under Christian philosopher George Mavrodes in the highly-acclaimed University of Michigan philosophy department;⁶ (2) Paulsen's comments appeal to normative notions of tolerance and pluralism that are deeply-rooted in both popular and elite culture and for that reason resonate with audiences that have an automatic aversion to any person or group that would transgress these notions; and (3) Paulsen's comments serve as a nice foil in helping

us better to understand what it means morally and socially to claim that one's theological tradition is true.

I argue that Paulsen's critique of *TNMC* puts him in the same position as the anti-Catholic radio preacher. Although I have no doubt that Paulsen thinks he is offering a principled critique to his adversary's point of view, I argue that he is not.

Paulsen's Argument

Paulsen offers much in his thirteen pages of commentary of *TNMC*, most of which is deserving of a detailed response. However, because there is one charge issued by Paulsen that animates much of his essay, I want to single it out for analysis. He charges the editors—Mosser, Owen, and me—with stating apparently inconsistent goals for our project. Here are the goals in question, as summarized by Paulsen:

[1] To retard the growth and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by disproving or otherwise discrediting its beliefs. . . . [2] To present this critique in a "respectful, charitable, and courteous" manner. . . . [3] To engage Latter-day Saints in genuine and "fruitful theological dialogue."⁷

Regarding goal one, Paulsen says, "the thing speaks for itself," a translation from the Latin term employed in tort law, *res ipsa loquitur*.⁸ Apparently, no extensive critique is necessary and for that reason Paulsen promises his readers not to say much about it, and reliably keeps his promise. My guess is that he thinks that critiquing another's belief system is so completely beyond the pale that no right-thinking souls need be given any reasons to support his contention. After all, what speaks for itself is not in need of being spoken for. However, Paulsen does

proffer the self-speaking thing, when juxtaposed with the other two aims, as confirmation that the book's goals are at cross-purposes. He writes that the first goal "seems strikingly at odds with the book's additional goals of engaging Latter-day Saints in genuine and fruitful dialogue. How do a declaration and pursuit of all-out war on another's faith generate good will and genuine dialogue? Nonetheless, I personally hope that this warfare doesn't diminish dialogue between our two Christian communities; I hope that it continues and flourishes."⁹

At this point I need to comment on Paulsen's use of brusque, and thus misleading, language to describe our book and its purpose. He claims that our contributors intend on "disproving or otherwise discrediting [LDS] beliefs" for the purpose of slowing, if not reducing, the size of the Mormon Church. One could look at our book in that way, if one assumes that its contributors are offering in their work nothing they believe is good and worthy for its readers to embrace in place of LDS beliefs, just as one may assess the work of Mormon missionaries who visit the homes of Southern Baptists, Anglicans, Catholics, and other Christians and conclude that their purpose is to discredit the beliefs of their hosts and slow, if not reduce, the size of traditional Christian denominations.

But I suspect that, for the LDS missionary or scholar, the foreseeable result of his work (i.e., reducing the size and/or growth of contrary religious groups), if successful, is not what animates his ambition or serves as his purpose. I suspect that the intelligible point of his calling is to offer to the world, including his neighbors and fellow citizens, a better alternative to what the Mormon knows these people

already believe about God, Christ, salvation, and the order and nature of things. That is, in the mind of the LDS advocate, his presentation of the “Restored Gospel” (as he calls it) is a gift that he offers others who he believes would be better off if they embraced it.

What I am suggesting is that Professor Paulsen, and those who employ similar rhetorical tactics, resist the temptation to think of criticism of their faith in the worst possible light and of those who offer that criticism as having the worst possible motives. For we, like the Mormons, think we are correct, and we, like the Mormons, are offering a case to our neighbors and fellow citizens, because we believe that they would be better off if they embraced what we think we have good reason to believe is “the faith, once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). As Mosser, Owen, and I write in the introduction to *TNMC*, “We invite our LDS friends to consider afresh for themselves the claims of the historic Christian faith. In both our tone and our approach, we have endeavored to present Christian orthodoxy as attractively as possible, so that the Living God might use our labors as a means of bringing biblical light and life into the arena of interreligious dialogue between our respective communities—and perhaps do even more.”¹⁰

A Critique of Paulsen’s Argument

Because the Mormon is in precisely the same position as each contributor to *TNMC*—each believes that he is right and the other wrong and offers arguments to advance that claim—that belief itself is not in dispute between us, even if Paulsen believes otherwise. Thus, my critique will concentrate on the charge of inconsistency, Paulsen’s claim that the traditional

Christian’s belief that he is right and the Mormon wrong and also offering reasons for that belief is inconsistent with respectful and fruitful dialogue with the LDS.

I offer two direct criticisms of Paulsen’s argument: Its requirement for dialogue is draconian, since it suggests that the only way to overcome the “inconsistency” charge is for traditional Christians to abandon their religious epistemology; and if Paulsen’s argument is merely an argument for “tolerance,” it still fails to establish that we are offering inconsistent aims in our book. However, the bulk of my analysis will focus on a third criticism that does not directly address the charge of inconsistency, but rather deals with Paulsen’s overall assessment of *TNMC*. I argue that Paulsen overstates, and largely misrepresents, some contributors’ use of what he believes are offensive words.

Genuine Pretending

Recall that Paulsen opines that our goal of critiquing LDS theology “seems strikingly at odds with the book’s additional goals of engaging Latter-day Saints in genuine and fruitful dialogue.” But in order for Paulsen’s correction to be meaningful, it must be a judgment that is offered as a critique of our theology and our understanding of the parameters of Christian orthodoxy and its relationship to the veracity of Mormonism. But a key aspect of a Christian’s self-understanding is that he or she participates in a rich and noble intellectual and spiritual tradition—that we are “surrounded by a cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1)—which provides us accurate knowledge of the true and living God, and that our mission is to offer that understanding to those, including Mormons, who stand outside that tradition. Consequently, for Paulsen to require

that the editors and contributors of *TNMC* purchase genuine and fruitful dialogue with the LDS, only at the price of muting our self-understanding, suggests to us that he not only would rather that we stop critiquing LDS theology, he would also prefer that we pretend that our own theology is false. This is a peculiar way to frame the complaint that your interlocutor is obstructing fruitful and genuine dialogue. After all, it is one thing to ask your rival not to critique your theology even if he thinks he has good reasons to believe that your theology is false; it is quite another to require your rival to pretend that his own theology is false and then to demand that he conclude from that charade that the subsequent conversation that ensues is *genuine*.

To make matters more epistemologically awkward for Paulsen, the falsehood of the theological position we embrace—that the Nicene Creed is normative for Christian theology and those who deny that norm are mistaken—is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for Mormonism to be the correct theological position, which is, of course, the point of view that Paulsen and his LDS brethren affirm. That is, without the discrediting of creedal Christianity, LDS theology cannot even get off the ground. But this would mean that there can be no dialogue between the LDS and creedal Christians unless the LDS remove from the conversation any mention that their theology's veracity is contingent upon the discrediting of creedal Christianity. But a dialogue between two religious traditions that requires that one side remain mute on a necessary condition for its theology's veracity does not seem to be capable of advancing fruitful and genuine dialogue.

Not Tolerant Enough?

Perhaps I have misunderstood Professor Paulsen. Maybe what he is suggesting is more modest, that we creedal Christians should approach Mormonism with a spirit of tolerance and an eagerness and openness to learn from LDS scholarship. Paulsen seems to say as much when he writes, "I do not get the impression from reading *The New Mormon Challenge* that the editors and contributors are even open to the *possibility* of learning anything from us, especially pertaining to Christian doctrine or theology."¹¹

What Paulsen is suggesting—that students of Mormonism assess their subject with a teachable spirit—is uncontroversial. It is a posture to which all of us should aspire, no matter what the object of our analysis, if we are serious about acquiring and nurturing intellectual virtue. Perhaps I am constrained by a lack of imagination, but it is difficult for me to believe that Paulsen, or anyone else, would get the impression from our book that its contributors learned *nothing* from their research and writing on Mormonism, especially since the text is a 500-page volume that takes the LDS challenge to creedal Christianity with utmost seriousness. Its authors interact with the leading lights of LDS thought and engage them as they would other scholars in their disciplines. Speaking for myself,¹² I can honestly say that I have learned much from the writings of LDS scholars, including Paulsen, Blake Ostler, and Ken Robson.¹³ Because of their sophisticated challenges to traditional Christian theism, and because of their reasonable request that we offer reasons for why we believe what we believe, I have become more conversant in the philosophical foundations of my own theological tradition and

more confident that it is the best account of the phenomenon of God found in both Scripture and philosophical reflection. Moreover, while working on my own contribution to *TNMC*—which dealt with whether LDS metaphysics can ground the moral law—I gained a better understanding of the deep connection between one’s worldview and one’s moral philosophy, and that traditional Christian theism when compared to Mormonism has better philosophical resources by which to account for the moral law.¹⁴ But if I had not engaged these Mormon thinkers, and saw their works as legitimate and important challenges to my own understanding of God and morality, I would know less than I know now. This is true tolerance: listening to one’s intellectual rivals, engaging them with a serious interest in acquiring truth, and offering to them one’s best assessment of their point of view.

Consequently, tolerance presupposes a judgment of another’s viewpoint. That it to say, I can only be tolerant of those people who I believe accept and/or advocate ideas and beliefs that I think are mistaken. Suppose I tell an LDS friend that I believe that Mormon theology is mistaken and proceed to offer my friend reasons for this belief. But suppose my friend immediately requests that I be tolerant toward Mormons in my community. If I accept this advice, and choose to be civil, respectful, and gracious to LDS neighbors with whom I have contact, while at the same time judging their theology as mistaken, it seems that I would be truly tolerant. But suppose that my friend is unsatisfied with this and claims that, despite the personal virtues I exhibit while interacting with my LDS friends, my judging of Mormonism as wrong still makes me “intolerant.” At that point, given my understanding

of “tolerance,” I have no idea what I am supposed to do. For if I change my view of Mormonism, and say either that it is not wrong or that I have no opinion (i.e., I have benign neglect), then I cannot be tolerant in any robust sense, for I can only be tolerant of those who embrace points of view that I believe are wrong or mistaken. On the other hand, if judging another’s position as wrong or mistaken makes one intolerant of that person, then the person who judges my negative assessment of Mormonism is, by that person’s own definition, intolerant. But that is absurd. For if “tolerance” means that one ought not judge a view as wrong, then it seems to be consistent with either embracing the view or having benign neglect for it. If that is the case, then “tolerance” has lost its meaning and is simply a cover for trying to shame and coerce others not to publicly (and/or perhaps privately) disagree with one’s controversial and disputed theological position. This, ironically, is an example of intolerance (as traditionally understood). So, it seems to me, that the appeal to tolerance, once we have a clear understanding of its meaning, is not only *consistent* with disagreement and critique but is actually entailed by it.

Dirty Words?

Perhaps this is not quite Paulsen’s point either. After all, he makes much of the terms and phrases employed by *TNMC* authors that he believes are unnecessarily strong. Maybe what Paulsen is suggesting is that the *TNMC* authors not employ language that may cause offense to Mormon readers. This, of course, is not an unreasonable request, one that the *TNMC* editors and authors tried their best to fulfill. But Paulsen does not think we tried hard enough, and to make his point he submits

to his readers a short list of what he considers offensive *terms* he mined from the text. Writes Paulsen,

I must confess I was mystified to discover that in *The New Mormon Challenge*, my beliefs and my church are referred to by terms such as: "parasite," "pagan," "cult," "pitiable," "worse than scientific poppycock," "a fairy tale." Somehow, these epithets fail to strike me as courteous, respectful, or charitable. Given their stated aim, I ask the editors to help me understand why these disparaging descriptions of my faith are in their book.¹⁵

Not only is this charge grossly misleading and uncharitable in its own right (more on this below) Paulsen fails to inform his readers that the founder of his faith, Joseph Smith, Jr., in a text that the LDS church claims is inspired Scripture,¹⁶ used colorful language to describe the faith and churches to which the contributors of *TNMC* belong:

When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*

My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them [i.e., the Christian churches], 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.*"¹⁷

Smith is not alone in LDS history in his use of provocative language in describing the theologies, creeds, and churches of the editors and contributors of *TNMC*. For instance, President and Prophet Brigham Young, the namesake of the university at which Paulsen has his academic appointment, asserts, "The Christian world, I discovered, was like the captain and crew of a vessel on the ocean without a compass, and tossed to and fro whithersoever the wind listed to blow them. When the light came to me, I saw that all the so-called Christian world was grovelling in darkness."¹⁸ Apparently, this is why, according to Young, "the Christian world, so called, are heathens as to their knowledge of the salvation of God."¹⁹ But, explains Elder John Taylor, there's a good reason for this: traditional Christians are just ignorant fools about God. Writes Taylor, "What does the Christian world know about God? Nothing. . . . Why so far as the things of God are concerned, they are the veriest fools; they know neither God nor the things of God."²⁰ Young concurs, "The arts and sciences are somewhat advanced among Christian nations; but as to true knowledge of things as they are in eternity, there never were nations more ignorant."²¹ "Christians—those poor, miserable priests brother Brigham was speaking about," President Herbert C. Kimball preaches, "some of them are the biggest whoremasters there are on the earth, and at the same time preaching righteousness to the children of men. The poor devils, they could not get up here and preach an oral discourse, to save themselves from hell; they are preaching

their fathers' sermons—preaching sermons that were written a hundred years before they were born.”²² It is, however, difficult to outdo Apostle Orson Pratt, who offers this prickly judgment of the Christian churches:

[A]ll other churches are entirely destitute of all authority from God; and any person who receives Baptism or the Lord's supper from their hands will highly offend God, for he looks upon them as the most corrupt of all people. Both Catholics and Protestants are nothing less than the “whore of Babylon” whom the Lord denounces by the mouth of John the Revelator as having corrupted all the earth by their fornications and wickedness. And any person who shall be so wicked as to receive a holy ordinance of the gospel from the ministers of any of these apostate churches will be sent down to hell with them, unless they repent of the unholy and impious act.²³

Imagine if the *TNMC* editors and contributors had replaced the traditional Christian churches and creeds that are the target of condemnation and derision by the Mormon leaders quoted above with the name of the LDS church. I'm certain that Paulsen would say that we were being discourteous, disrespectful, and uncharitable, which only means that he condemns discourteousness, disrespect, and lack of charity as a matter of ecclesiastical discretion rather than theological principle.

I understand, and fully concede, that it is unfair for me to hold nineteenth-century preachers of a minority religious faith to the standards embraced by twenty-first-century politically-correct types such as ourselves. For this reason, it would be wrong for any Christian, including me, to judge the case for Mormonism on whether the religion's leaders spoke in hushed tones acceptable to the present generation,

whose members often hesitate to even cast a theological judgment without a ton of nuance unless it involves smoking, campaign finance reform, or the anti-war effort. My hope was that Professor Paulsen would have approached *TNMC* with the sort of deference that I am suggesting one ought to approach his ecclesiastical predecessors. Questions of theological truth and interreligious dialogue are much too important to be ignored until one's expectations of social graces are completely and absolutely satisfied by one's challengers. I am sorry that Professor Paulsen does not seem to agree.

Returning to Paulsen's specific charge of linguistic loutishness in *TNMC*, I believe that Paulsen's mined quotes, under the light of full disclosure, fail to make his case. First, assuming the authors used these words in a pejorative sense (and there is good reason to suppose they did not; see below), the evidence that Paulsen proffers amounts to only about six to ten words (because some are used more than once) out of over 200,000 words in the book. This means that approximately 99.996% of the book is linguistically inoffensive to Paulsen. Moreover, because these six terms appear only in three chapters, Paulsen seems to be conceding that the remaining eleven chapters including the forward, introduction, and conclusion are devoid of offensive language. Given that meager distribution of scarce verbal malfeasance, it's not clear why the minor indiscretions of three authors should tarnish the book's other contributors who were circumspect in crossing their congenial t's and dotting their polite i's. After all, “one bad apple,” the Osmond Brothers perceptively sang, “don't spoil the whole bunch, girl.”

Second, the first three terms he quotes—

“parasite,”²⁴ “pagan,”²⁵ and “cult”²⁶—are wrenched out of their context (and in the case of “parasite,” the term did not even appear in the *published* version of the book)²⁷ as is evident when one reads them in their fuller contexts that I reproduce in the footnotes that correspond to each word. For instance, the word “cult,” which appears in only three places, all in the same chapter, is not used in a pejorative sense by the *TNMC* author: (1) the word is used by a writer whose words are *quoted by* the *TNMC* contributor;²⁸ (2) it is used by the *TNMC* contributor with quotation marks around it, in order to indicate to the reader that the word, “cult,” is likely inappropriate when applied to Mormonism given the strong negative connotation that the word carries;²⁹ and (3) “cult” is used in an extensive endnote to explain the different meanings of the word and why the author will *not* use it in his assessment of Mormonism in *TNMC*.³⁰

In the cases of “parasite” and “pagan,” the authors are using these terms descriptively and not normatively, and each term is part of a complicated and extended argument that Paulsen is apparently not interested in engaging. In the case of “parasite,” the author, Mosser, excised the term from the published version of his chapter. Nevertheless, in the pre-publication manuscript, Mosser uses the word in an inoffensive way. He is making the argument that most LDS converts come from nominal Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, which makes sense given the way in which Mormon missionaries present their message. They offer a *Restored Gospel*, a term that is easy to understand if one already has an idea of what “gospel” means. LDS missionaries offer instruction to their prospective converts about such topics as prophets,

apostles, churches, beliefs, angels, God, Jesus, and Scripture—none of which make any sense unless the listeners and their ecclesiastical predecessors are the result of traditional Christian evangelism, catechism, and Bible study. The Bible used by LDS missionaries in their quest for converts, the King James Version, is a translation produced by non-LDS Christian scholars. Consequently, LDS success, according to Mosser, is *parasitical* on Catholic and Protestant missionary work, education, and scholarship. Mosser does not merely stipulate this view, but offers an argument with reasons and a conclusion. If the argument works, “parasite” is an appropriate term. If the argument does not work, “parasite” is not an appropriate term. However, keep in mind that the word “parasite” was never published in the book, but only appeared in the pre-publication unedited version (see endnote 27).

As for the term “pagan,” Jim W. Adams, the author of the chapter in which that term appears, like Mosser, offers an argument. Adams takes the position that LDS metaphysics has *more in common* with pagan metaphysics than with Hebrew metaphysics, though he never describes the LDS views as pagan *qua* pagan, either in the published or unpublished version of his article. Adams is using the word “pagan” as a scholarly term of art referring to beliefs outside the Jewish-Christian tradition. Because it was clear to us in his public comments at the 2001 AAR meeting mentioned above that Paulsen had misunderstood Adams’ reasoning, the editors inserted a comment in the final published version of the chapter that clarifies Adams’ point: “There are important differences between Mormon and pagan views, to be sure, and they should not be

brushed aside. (It would, therefore, be a serious misunderstanding to say that Mormonism is a form of neopaganism.)”³¹ Unfortunately, in his published version of his comments, Paulsen does not acknowledge this clarification.

What is particularly ironic about Paulsen’s grumble over the use of the term “pagan” is that Paulsen himself concludes in several works that Christian thinkers incorporated *pagan* ideas in their theology.³² In fact, Paulsen endorsed a book, *How Wide the Divide?*, as “must reading for Evangelicals, Mormons, and all who seek a worthy model for understanding and loving their religious other,”³³ even though one of its authors, LDS scholar Stephen E. Robinson, claims that the traditional Christian concept of God is pagan in its origin and thus unbiblical.³⁴ Apparently, the contributors of *TNMC* do not have a monopoly in ascribing pagan roots and ideas to other theological traditions.³⁵

The second three terms Paulsen quotes —“pitiable,” “worse than scientific poppycock,” and “a fairy tale”—are all taken from a portion authored by William Lane Craig in a chapter he co-wrote with Paul Copan. If the reader does not know already, Craig is a philosopher of some stature. He is probably, next to Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne, the most well-known and well-published orthodox Christian philosopher of religion in Anglo-American philosophy. The LDS Church does not have a comparable figure in the field of philosophy who can even approach Professor Craig’s peer-reviewed publication record, monograph production, as well as his accomplishments and influence. This is not to say that Craig’s work should not be an object of criticism. It should and it has been. Rather,

what I am saying is that Paulsen does not set the stage for such legitimate criticism in his general response of *TNMC* when he offers what can only be described as a petty complaint: He singles out *three* terms from a carefully-crafted, philosophically-impressive, intellectually rigorous, and well-written essay by one of the Western world’s most accomplished philosophers in order to scold the 200,000-word text in which the essay appears for being ill-mannered.

Like Mosser and Adams, Craig is constructing an extended *argument* that contains premises and a conclusion.³⁶ A careful reading of this wonderful piece reveals that when Craig is offering his colorful assessment of LDS theology, he is doing so conditionally, not categorically. He is saying that *if* the Mormons maintain certain beliefs about God and the universe, given the nature of contemporary cosmology and several reasonable philosophical arguments, then the LDS God is “pitiable,” and that Mormons embrace a belief “worse than scientific poppycock,” “a fairly tale of Olympian proportions.” Of course, some Mormons may not dogmatically maintain the beliefs that Craig attributes to them, as Craig himself acknowledges and documents.³⁷ In fact, Craig offers and critiques several theological alternatives that are consistent with the LDS Scriptures and that may help Mormon scholars avoid some of the fatal problems he articulates. Craig believes that one of these alternatives is particularly promising.³⁸ It is clear, therefore, that Craig is not simply rattling off a sequence of pejoratives. Rather, he is offering highly-sophisticated reasons to support his strongly-stated conclusions. Paulsen’s emphasis on the provocative wording of Craig’s conclusions distracts the reader from the real issue: Is Craig

right about Mormon theology and do his reasons support his conclusions? It is Mr. Socrates, and not Miss Manners, whom one should consult at this point.

Admittedly, I would not have used the same language that Craig used, and I assume Paulsen would not have used it either. Fair enough. But Paulsen, for some reason, does not seem to appreciate, or anticipate encountering, the wide diversity of characters who have taken up residence in our respective traditions. A person in my line of work, such as Paulsen or Craig, is likely to come across a writer or speaker who employs a phrase or term that will rub him the wrong way. But that is a foreseeable aspect of engaging in a religious conversation over important concepts and ideas disputed between believers who are theological realists and whose gospels have attracted an ample range of personalities and intellects with their own unique styles and rhetorical flourishes. But what is the alternative? Should we require that style and verve, personality and wit, be restrained for fear that someone may take offense? I cannot imagine the LDS scholar Dan Peterson—a truly gifted writer with a sense of style and humor—ever acquiescing to such a dreary suggestion.³⁹ Paulsen, ironically, seems to realize this. For as recent as 2003 he indulged in a bit of colorful language himself when he and a co-author praised the advocates of openness theology for “sounding the call to purge the traditional understanding of God of the doctrinal corruptions left as a pagan inheritance. In this effort, we are indeed co-belligerents.”⁴⁰

Let me suggest that fruitful and genuine dialogue is more likely to result when one engages the arguments offered by Mosser, Adams, Craig, and others instead of combing through their chapters—both

pre-published and published—in order to detect and extract apparent examples of linguistic impropriety so that they may be used as a pretext to lament, rather than set the stage to seriously assess, the content of *The New Mormon Challenge*.

By now it should be apparent to the reader that Paulsen is straining to find any term or phrase in *TNMC* that may be construed as offensive in order to obfuscate our task and delay a response and rebuttal to our arguments until we have properly submitted to Paulsen’s idiosyncratic understanding of civil discourse on topics theological. This, of course, is unreasonable. I will grant to Paulsen that some traditional Christians in their contacts with Mormons have not often conducted themselves in ways that are consistent with the theological virtues articulated in Scripture. For this, I am embarrassed and sorry, and have said as much in both my chapter in *TNMC*⁴¹ and in an article I published in 2001 in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.⁴² However, searching a serious academic text critical of one’s religion in order to find any shortcomings in its authors’ manners—however minimal or irrelevant—whose apparent discovery only serves to fortify barriers to conversation, is no way to begin a quest for fruitful and genuine dialogue.

Conclusion

The authors and editors of *The New Mormon Challenge* welcome critique and analysis by our Mormon friends. This is why I take Professor Paulsen’s essay very seriously. However, like the anti-Catholic radio preacher that I heard as a young man, Paulsen overreaches in his criticism of *TNMC* by issuing judgments that are not possible unless he is practicing

what he is preaching against. Paulsen's requirement that criticism of his faith has no place in fruitful and genuine dialogue is difficult to accept when the one issuing that judgment embraces a religion whose veracity depends on criticism of the theology believed by those with whom he claims he seeks to dialogue. Moreover, he conditions this dialogue on his theological adversaries promising (1) not to respond to the criticism of their theology on which Paulsen's theology depends, and (2) not to use language that ever could be construed as offensive. But this is the dialogue-equivalent of consenting to a game of poker only if the cards are marked for your advantage. You can't call *that* game poker, or your subsequent wins "victories," after vanquishing the perils that make real poker poker. What's true of card games is also true of theologies. One of the philosophical perils of embracing a missionary faith is that one cannot seek the refuge of theological pluralism while suggesting, as all missionary faiths must suggest, that believers in other religious traditions are mistaken and should accept the message offered by one's missionary faith.⁴³

ENDNOTES

¹My mother, Elizabeth Beckwith, tells me that she remembers an earlier, less auspicious, moment of philosophical insight (she would say "being a smart alec") on my part. At the age of 9, I offered to my mother a typical 9-year-old-type reason as to why I should be allowed to participate with the older children in what we in southern Nevada called "dirt clod fights." I held forth that "all the other kids are playing," to which she responded, "But what if all the kids were jumping off the roof?" I

offered this reply, a type of *reductio ad absurdum* (though I surely did not know it at the time), "But what if *you* told me to jump off the roof like you're telling me I can't play with the other kids in the dirt clod fights." Corporeal punishment followed.

²Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

³See Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal* NS 19, no. 2 (1998): 179-205.

⁴David L. Paulsen, "A General Response to *The New Mormon Challenge*," *FARMS Review of Books* 14, no. 1 (2002): 99-112.

⁵See, for example, David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 2 (1990): 105-107; idem, "Must God Be Incorporeal?," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (January 1989); idem, forward to *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van Der Donckt Discussion* by B. H. Roberts (1903; repr., Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); and idem, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995-96): 7-94.

⁶See David Lamont Paulsen, *Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism* (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975).

⁷Paulsen, "A General Response," 100, citing and quoting *The New Mormon Challenge*, 11-13, 21, 68-69, 86. Paulsen's total list consists of six aims. In his list, my 1, 2, and 3 are 1, 5, and 6.

⁸Ibid., 101.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, "Introduction: A Much-Needed and Challenging Book," in *The New Mormon Challenge*, 26.

¹¹Paulsen, "A General Review," 107-08.

¹²Prior to the publication of *TNMC*, the book's two other editors, Mosser and Owen, are on record in a *Mormon* periodical asserting that they have learned much from LDS thinkers including Paulsen: "Reading men like Orson Pratt, B. H. Roberts, Hugh Nibley, Truman Madsen, David Paulsen, Blake Ostler, and Stephen Robinson (among others) has taught us much" (Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, review of *How Wide the Divide? An Evangelical and a Mormon in Conversation*, *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 2 [1999]: 80 [emphasis added]). Paulsen replied to this essay and thus knows of this comment, for he and his co-author (R. Dennis Potter) reciprocate by offering similar comments: "Our own formulations of our beliefs have been sharpened and altered by engaging in this discussion. LDS theology is young and unencumbered. Evangelicals have been pondering their theological doctrines for centuries. We can surely learn from them, just as we think they can learn from modern revelation." (David L. Paulsen and R. Dennis Potter, "How Deep is the Chasm? A Reply to Owen and Mosser's Review," *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 2 [1999]: 263)

¹³See Blake Ostler, "The Mormon Con-

cept of God," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Summer 1984): 65-93; David L. Paulsen, forward to *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*; idem, *Comparative Coherency*; Kent Robson, "Omnis on the Horizon," *Sunstone* 8 (July-August 1983): 21-23; idem, "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," *Sunstone* 5 (May-June 1980): 17-23

¹⁴Francis J. Beckwith, "Moral Law, the Mormon University, and the Nature of the Right We Ought to Choose," in *The New Mormon Challenge*, 219-41.

¹⁵Paulsen, "A General Response," 105-06.

¹⁶The LDS scripture is the *Pearl of Great Price*, which also contains the *Articles of Faith*, a document about which the late Mormon Apostle James E. Talmage penned a massive volume: *A Study of the Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1958). Ironically, Paulsen suggests that the editors of *TNMC* should have recommended to our readers Talmage's book ("A General Response," 105). But if we had done that, perhaps our readers would have been curious about the *Articles of Faith* themselves and as a result of paging through *The Pearl of Great Price* stumbled upon Smith's account of God the Son's vitriolic condemnation of the beliefs embraced by the contributors to *TNMC*. Given Professor Paulsen's call for civility, perhaps he should thank us, rather than criticize us, for not suggesting Talmage's work.

¹⁷Joseph Smith—History 1:9-10, 17b-19, in *The Pearl of Great Price*, [cited 14 September 2004]. Online: <http://scriptures.lds.org/js h/1/1-20#1> (emphasis added).

¹⁸Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses, by Brigham Young, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, His Two Counsellors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, reported by G. D. Watt (26 vols.; Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1854-1886), 13:95 (Hereafter cited as *JD*).

¹⁹Brigham Young, *JD*, 8:171

²⁰John Taylor, *JD*, 13:225.

²¹Brigham Young, *JD*, 8:171.

²²Herbert C. Kimball, *JD*, 5:89.

²³Orson Pratt, "Baptism for the Remission of Sins," *The Seer* 2, no. 4 (April 1854): 255

²⁴In the pre-publication, unedited version, the text reads, "I am skeptical that evangelicalism is growing in the right kind of way to stave off parasite groups like Mormonism." (Carl Mosser, "And the Saints Go Marching On: The New Mormon Challenge for World Missions, Apologetics, and Theology," in *The New Mormon Challenge* [pre-publication manuscript, 2001], 77; as quoted in Paulsen, "A General Response," 7). Paulsen cites, but does not quote, the version that made the published text: "I am skeptical that evangelicalism is growing in the right kind of way to stave off groups like Mormonism." (Carl Mosser, "And the Saints Go Marching On: The New Mormon Challenge for World Missions, Apologetics, and Theology," in *The New Mormon Challenge*, 67)

²⁵"In pagan thought there is a primor-

dial realm that transcends the gods, and they must follow its laws and decrees. In Mormon thought eternal matter and eternal principles are also transcendent over God, and he too is subject to the eternal laws of reality he did not create. In distinction, the Old Testament does not describe anything whatever as being transcendent above or beyond God. Yahweh himself is the transcendent one, and because he is the creator of the universe, he is not subject to, or limited by, anyone or any other phenomena. As shown above, the pagan gods are not the source of all being, nor can they transcend the universe. The gods are constituent with a primordial realm that is precedent to and independent of them. The gods find their origin in this realm and are subservient to its laws. Whereas the historic LDS view of God resembles the pagan idea of deity, the God of the Old Testament is radically different, and the Old Testament writers repudiate any such notions." (Jim W. Adams, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith? God, Creation, and Humanity in the Old Testament and Mormonism," in *The New Mormon Challenge*, 187.

²⁶Evangelicals have often underestimated the challenge Mormonism's success poses to evangelism and world mission, if they have considered it at all. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that as a community, evangelicals tend to be poorly informed about advances in LDS apologetics and theology, unlike the members of most other New Religious Movements or

'cults.'" (Mosser, "And the Saints Go Marching In," 60). The word "cult" in the prior passage is followed immediately by a superscripted number "1", which refers to an endnote that reads, "Controversy rages about how to define the term *cult*. Some advocate purely sociological definitions, while others propose theological definitions. Many times movements classified as cults according to a purely theological definition, as Mormonism, would not be classified as such according to most sociological models. Another problem with the word *cult*, whether defined theologically or sociologically, is that it tends to be closely associated in the minds of many with the occult and with dangerous apocalyptic doomsday predictions, which are not usually the defining characteristics of cults according to either type of definition. Furthermore, in more popular discourse, *cult* is little more than a four-letter word—and not just in the literal sense. Because of this semantic confusion and because of how easily it can be exploited, it seems to me that it would be best not to use the word but to develop alternative vocabularies, especially with respect to the word's use as a precise theological term. In much of the evangelical community, however, *cult* (defined theologically) is the only word used at present to refer to religious movements that claim to be Christian but deviate from Christian orthodoxy. In this chapter I will use the term *New Religious Movement*, though I am not sure that is an entirely satisfac-

tory term either" (Ibid., 410-11, n.1). "Paul Carden observes that 'few Christians in the field of missions seem to recognize the multi-faceted threat of the cults around the globe, consistently underestimating their resources, their determination, and the long-term impact they make on evangelism and church-planting.'" (Ibid., 67; quoting Paul Carden, "The Threat of the Cults on the Mission Fields of the World," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 15, no. 3 [1998]: 147). Although Paulsen lists "p. 71" as the fourth place in *TNMC* he finds the term "cult" applied to Mormonism, the word does not actually appear on that page.

²⁷It should be noted that Paulsen had a copy of the unpublished, *unedited* text that our publisher, Zondervan, provided to him and his LDS colleagues for the November 2001 panel discussion at AAR mentioned above. It seems unethical for Paulsen to cite this unpublished text, which was changed in numerous places prior to publication, and base criticisms of the published book on what was not published. In addition, this is contrary to what Paulsen, his LDS colleagues, and *TNMC* contributors were trying to achieve in our public dialogue. Paulsen offered several criticisms of *TNMC* in his public presentation at AAR. We learned from his comments and subsequently made a few changes in the text to accommodate his concerns, even though these concerns, in my judgment (and I don't know if my fellow editors would agree), were not the result of a careful and charitable reading

of the unpublished text.

²⁸See the third quotation in note 26.

²⁹This grammatical approach is sometimes called “using scare quotes.” See the first two quotations in note 26.

³⁰See the first two quotations in note 26.

³¹Adams, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith,” 189.

³²See, for example, Paulsen, “Early Christian Belief in Corporeal Deity;” idem, “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment;” Carl W. Griffin and David L. Paulsen, “Augustine and the Corporeality of God,” *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 1 (January 2002): 95-116; and David L. Paulsen and Matthew G. Fisher, “A New Evangelical Vision of God: Openness and Mormon Thought,” review of *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* by Clark H. Pinnock, *FARMS Review of Books* 15, no. 2 (2003): 415-42.

³³“For too long, relations between Evangelicals and Mormons have been marred by mistrust, misunderstanding and misrepresentation. . . . This book is a truly remarkable breakthrough. . . . This is must reading for Evangelicals, Mormons, and all who seek a worthy model for understanding and loving their religious other.” (David Paulsen, back cover endorsement of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and An Evangelical In Conversation* by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997]).

³⁴Robinson writes, “The strict wall of separation between the human and the divine . . . in my view is not *really* biblical but, once again, philosophi-

cal. It rests on the same objection to the clear sense of Scripture that led to the equally unbiblical doctrine of the two natures in Christ, which was added to historic Christianity by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. Scripture says that God in Christ became man, that ‘the Word was made flesh’ (Jn. 1:14), that ‘in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren’ (Heb. 2:17). Nevertheless, Greek philosophy, the intellectual fashion of the day, demanded that the divine could not become truly human, and vice versa, since Plato had decreed that the human and the divine were mutually exclusive. . . . The LDS are troubled by the fact that the God of Christian ‘orthodoxy’ is virtually indistinguishable from the God of the Hellenistic philosophers.” (Robinson in *Ibid.*, 82-83, 92). For a response to the “Greek philosophy” charge, see Francis J. Beckwith, “Mormon Theism, the Traditional Christian Concept of God, and Greek Philosophy: A Critical Analysis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001): 671-95

³⁵For example, in the same journal in which his review of *TNMC* appears, Paulsen (with co-author Matthew G. Fisher) reviewed a book by Clark Pinnock. Paulsen and Fisher write, “Pinnock has opened the door for Latter-day Saints and openness thinkers to engage in cooperative work. In a cordial letter to David Paulsen, Pinnock recently wrote: ‘Your work has gotten me interested in knowing more about the “Mormon/evangelical dialogue,” how to measure it and even to

bridge it. Are we (in your opinion) co-belligerents as it were in the struggle against pagan influences in classical theism? Can we benefit from each other?’” (Paulsen and Fisher, “A New Evangelical Vision of God: Openness and Mormon Thought,” *FARMS Review of Books* 15, no. 2 [2002]: 417). One section of the review has the heading, “Overcoming a Pagan Inheritance,” and in that section Paulsen and Fisher write, “In his letter to Paulsen, Pinnock asks: ‘Are we (in your opinion) co-belligerents as it were in the struggle against pagan influences in classical theism?’ The answer resounds: we certainly ought to be! . . . It is refreshing to see writers like Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and other openness thinkers sounding the call to purge the traditional understanding of God of the doctrinal corruptions left as a pagan inheritance. In this effort, we are indeed co-belligerents” (*Ibid.*, 431).

³⁶The following is an extended quote from the section of Craig’s chapter that contains the words that Paulsen finds off-putting (Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, “Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo*,” in *The New Mormon Challenge*, 147):

In fact, even if the universe did not have a singular beginning point, the Mormon concept of God seems hopelessly irreconcilable with contemporary cosmogony. For Mormon theologians construe God as a physical entity wholly immanent in the universe. A time-reversed extrapolation of the expansion of the universe constitutes a process of universe,

gravitational self-collapse governed by the same Hawking-Penrose singularity theorems that determine the behavior of a black hole. Almost any textbook on astrophysics will contain a vivid description of what happens to the unfortunate space traveler who happens to cross the boundary of a black hole. As he is pulled irresistibly in to the maelstrom, tidal forces will tear his body to shreds before he is finally collapsed into an indistinguishable thread. The same fate awaits the Mormon God as we extrapolate backward toward the Big Bang. The idea that there has been an infinite progression of humanoid deities consorting with one another from eternity is worse than scientific poppycock—it is a fairy tale of Olympian proportions.

The thermodynamic evidence for the beginning of the universe has also put Mormon scientists in an awkward position. On the one hand, they recognize the implications of the present thermodynamic disequilibrium for the finitude of the past and will sometimes even employ the argument as part of a natural theology. Henry Eyring, professor of chemistry at the University of Utah, for example, after explaining the inevitable heat death of the universe, asks, “How did the universe get wound up?” and ascribes the initial input of energy to the Creator. But while such a conclusion accords well with the orthodox Christian concept of God as a nonphysical, transcendent being who creates the universe *ex nihilo*, it is irreconcilable with the traditional Mormon understanding of God as a temporal, material being immanent in the universe. Not only must God, on the Mormon conception, have a beginning, but he must also come to an end, either being swallowed up and crushed into oblivion in the Big Crunch or else literally disintegrated

into the cold, dark recesses of outer space—a pitiable deity, indeed!

³⁷Ibid., 150-52.

³⁸See *ibid.*, 147-52

³⁹To provide but one example:

This is not, as one would have expected, an indescribably horrid book. It is merely a very, very bad one, and the credit for its improvement must surely belong to the editorial staff at Harvest House. The dedicated anti-Mormons Jerald and Sandra Tanner have noted “Ed Decker’s ability to make up stories,” “his ability to fabricate evidence to support his own opinions,” and his choice of “the path of sensationalism in his work on Mormonism.” They are not alone. Decker’s activities as a professional opponent of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been highly visible (and audible) for years, and he has bestowed upon the world such signal contributions as “Ex-Mormons for Jesus” and the movie *The God Makers*. Thus experienced students of his astounding career will easily recognize Decker’s hoofprints throughout this volume. But his usual mendacity is relatively subdued.

(Daniel C. Peterson, review of *Decker’s Complete Book of Mormonism*, *FARMS Review of Books* 7, no. 2 [1995]: 38-39).

⁴⁰Paulsen and Fisher, “A New Evangelical Vision of God,” 431 (emphasis added).

⁴¹As I write in *TNMC*,

At the beginning of the groundbreaking work he co-authored with Craig Blomberg, *How Wide the Divide?*, Stephen Robinson relates the following story:

I was a graduate student at Duke University when

our LDS bishop, along with other local ministers, received an invitation to attend a meeting of a citizens’ committee combating the growth of adult bookstores and movie houses in our area. However, when LDS representatives actually showed up at the meeting, they were asked to leave because some of the Evangelical ministers threatened to walk out if Mormons were involved. So we withdrew, but the lesson was not lost on us that some Evangelicals oppose Mormons more vehemently than they oppose pornography.

As an evangelical and a licensed minister I am appalled by such behavior by my fellow Evangelicals. Working with people from diverse religious backgrounds as citizens on issues of common moral concern is not the same as conceding theological ground to them. In fact, as we have seen in this essay, common moral concern may work as a catalyst for deeper moral and theological reflection, reflection that Classical Christians like C. S. Lewis have argued leads to the God of Classical Christianity. My encouragement to the Evangelical community is that they be willing to work with Latter-day Saints, and others with whom we disagree theologically, as “co-belligerents” (to use Francis Schaeffer’s term) in tackling the moral issues confronting our society in the twenty-first century. My encouragement to the Latter-day Saint community is that they allow their correct beliefs about the reality of objective moral values to lead them to embrace a view of God that can adequately ground those values, a view like the God of the classical Christian tradition.

(Beckwith, “Moral Law,” 240-241).

⁴²“Because of the unjust persecution some Mormons have received at the hands of some self-professing Christians, I am sensitive to the fact that this paper may be interpreted to be within that unfortunate tradition. That would, however, be an inaccurate interpretation. For I am a Christian philosopher who is concerned with both the acquisition of truth as well as sharing the power of Christ’s love. Some of what goes by the name of anti-Mormon literature, though containing some accurate information, may, because of its tone and spirit, fuel intolerance, bigotry, and prejudice. This, of course, does not mean that criticizing another’s religion is in principle wrong. As Eleanor Stump and Norman Kretzmann have pointed out, the postmodernist’s absolute prohibition of such activity, though politically correct and theologically fashionable, is self-referentially incoherent. Because I am sensitive to complaints by Mormons that their views are misunderstood by traditional Christians, especially Evangelicals, I have attempted in this essay to understand and critique the Mormon view fairly and honestly.” (Beckwith, “Mormon Theism,” 672).

⁴³Special thanks to Carl Mosser for reading a pre-publication, unedited version of this essay and offering valuable comments, many of which I incorporated into the final version. Fortunately, Carl will not hold me to any pre-publication *fax paus* that I subsequently corrected. However, I am responsible for

the final product and any and all mistakes I may have made.