

Excerpts from Mormon Christianity by Stephen H. Webb

(Excerpts selected by Cameron Ford)

Branches on the family tree: relatives or impersonators:

“Imagine the following scenario. Your family gathers at the funeral of your dearly beloved grandfather, a world traveler. Your relatives begin telling the familiar stories about his legendary adventures. Soon, however, you notice another group of mourners at the other end of the room. As you eavesdrop on them, you realize that they are talking about your grandfather as if they knew him well, yet you have never met these people or heard some of the stories they are telling. These new stories are not insulting to his memory, though some ring more true than others. Indeed, this group seems to have as high an opinion of your grandfather as you do. What do you do?

Do you invite them over to meet your family? That is a tough call. Some of your relatives will dispute the credibility of these stories, and others might make a scene. Others will feel left out—Why didn’t Grandfather tell us all of his stories?—if they think that the other family’s stories are true. The funny thing is, though, that this other group of mourners knows all of the stories your family likes to tell about the deceased, even though your family does not know their stories. And their stories sound strangely familiar, more like exaggerations or embellishments than slander or deceit. Clearly, the two groups have a lot to talk about! However you decide to handle the situation, there is no need for you to change your love for your grandfather. There is also no need for you to react to this other group’s love for your grandfather as if they are trying to threaten or harm you. Whether or not you decide to expand your family to include this group, you can still welcome them for their sincere efforts to honor and respect your grandfather’s memory. And the more you love your grandfather, the more you will be drawn to discover for yourself whether these new stories are true.

Of course, Jesus Christ is not your grandfather, and the stories Christians tell about him are grounded in scripture, not legends and lore. Still, the Book of Mormon raises a very awkward question for Christians. Can you believe too much about Jesus? Can you go too far in conceiving his glory? Can you be too credulous about his work in sacred history? Let me answer those questions by posing several of my own. Isn’t the whole point of affirming Jesus’ divinity the idea that one can never say enough about him? Will we ever be done fathoming the vastness of his glory? Is the story of his eternal existence reducible to the three years of his earthly ministry, much of it spent along the shore of the Sea of Galilee?

And here, perhaps, are the two most important question of all. Shouldn’t Smith’s stories be judged by whether they draw people to the four Gospels in order to learn more about Christ? And if they do that, doesn’t that weigh in favor of their plausibility, if not their truth?

I am not denying that the Mormon Jesus is different from the Jesus of traditional Christianity. Most of those differences, however, are theologically insignificant.

“The theology of the Latter-day Saints is soaked in Christology, and the experience of a non-Mormon Christian coming to recognize how much Mormons love their Savior in spite of some differences in how that Savior is described can be powerful. I confess that this happened to me in reading this book [*Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate*, by Robert Millet and Gerald McDermott], but when I have told this to other theologians, they have warned me about the potential treachery of engaging Mormons in theological debate. There is an insistent suspicion that Mormons are secretive and that what they tell you publicly differs from what they practice privately. Millet is so intellectually honest and fundamentally transparent that he helps to put an end to such distorted construction of the Mormon identity. Millet is very open in this book (and other works) about the Mormon belief that Jesus Christ has a history that did not begin with the virgin birth. Jesus’ personal growth and development extends far back in time.”

On Latter-day Saint Christianity:

"...what gives Christianity its identity is its commitment to the divinity of Jesus Christ. And on that ground Mormons are more Christian than the many Christians who, under the spell of skeptical historians and demythologizing theologians, do not take seriously the astounding claim that Jesus is the Son of God.

The leading theologians of many mainline Protestant churches have backed away from strong claims about the divinity of Jesus Christ. These theologians typically self-identify as liberal, but I want to point out that liberalism means something very specific in theology, whatever it might (or might not) mean in politics. In theology, liberalism refers to a very particular intellectual movement, and scholars are in agreement about how to define it... In its original form, liberal theology promoted the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the infinite value of the human soul, the moral example of Jesus, and the church as a means to establishing a moral kingdom on earth. That is a long list, and some of these tenets have been revised over the years, but moral example of Jesus is probably still the most important item on the liberal agenda. Liberal theology rejects or minimizes the supernatural as a distraction from the task of making this world a better place. Christians are called to love their neighbors and side with the poor in the struggle for justice, and the church, liberals believe, should be on the vanguard of any movement that is working toward those goals. Liberals look to the life of Jesus for reassurance and guidance in their dedication to serve others. There is no need, then, to think of Jesus as a divine human being. Consequently, much liberal theology assigns the idea that he came down from heaven, was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man to the dustbins of discredited mythology... one of its main undertakings is to ensure that Christianity keeps up with progressive social trends by changing with the times. Liberal theology, for example no longer advocates the idea of the infinite value of the human soul. Humans are set apart by God, but they are a part of creation and are not absolutely unique... The emphasis on the moral teachings, rather than the divine personage, of Jesus, however, has changed only in the sense that its defenders have become more strongly convinced of its truth. Liberal theology uses historical scholarship to argue that the four Gospels were written long after the life of Jesus and

cannot possibly be taken as historically reliable records. All we know about the historical Jesus is how he inspired others to change their lives, and that is what we should learn from Jesus today. Any attempt to treat him as a uniquely divine human being who was the Son of God is nothing more than metaphysical speculation.

Whatever one thinks about Joseph Smith's claim regarding the origins of the Book of Mormon, it is impossible to deny that the book is full of a Jesus who is very divine. Smith's Jesus is as far from liberalism as it is possible to get... The really crucial question, then, is the following: Does the Book of Mormon add to the Gospels in a way that is consistent with the New Testament, or does it damage or deface the Gospel portrait?

Let me be clear: I am not asking non-Mormons to consider the truthfulness of what is in the Book of Mormon, although that would not be a bad idea. All I am asking is whether the traditional Christians can consider the possibility that the Book of Mormon adds to the plural but coherent portrait of Jesus that emerges from the four Gospels in a way that complements or expands on that account without marring it in any significant way.

"Now I must confess that I only read the Book of Mormon for the first time four or five years ago. I already knew the basic outline of its narrative, and I had read a lot about it, but there is no substitute for the real thing... When I actually read this book, however, I was utterly surprised by what I found. The Book of Mormon, I found, is utterly obsessed with Jesus Christ, and I concluded that everything it teaches is meant to awaken, encourage, and deepen faith in him. There are many characters in this book, and many events, but Jesus stands out from beginning to end: "And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophecy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins." (2 Nephi 25:25)"

A Way of Life or a Cult?

"I am not a Mormon, but sometimes I wish I were one. I grew up in a tight-knit religious community that shaped every aspect of my life. My church was a world set apart, not unlike the way Mormonism has chosen for much of its history to stay on the sidelines of the American mainstream. Many aspects of Mormonism take me straight back to the powerful experiences I had in the evangelical church of my youth. Indeed, Mormonism cultivates a sense of belonging, purpose, and focus that is not easy to find in many churches today. Mormons, for example, do not play soccer on Sundays. That is, they honor the Sabbath, which is something my church emphasized when I was growing up. Mormons have a strength of religious character that helps them to put religion ahead of popular culture, and that is no easy task. In fact, Mormons can be so intense about their church that some Protestant fundamentalists call them a cult. This accusation is ironic, because Mormons and fundamentalists have a lot in common. They share a commitment to absolute truths, the sacredness of the family, the need for strong moral communities, and a reverence for the King James Version of the Bible. Like fundamentalists,

Mormons know how to draw a sharp line between who they are and what they do not want their children to become."

"The church of my youth inculcated a sense of permanent guilt in me that was not relieved even by several responses to altar calls and many nights on bent knees. We were taught, in accordance with good old-fashioned Protestant doctrine, that we were mired in original sin, which goes so deep that there is nothing we can do to get out of it. Our depravity was so total that we were guilty of sins that we did not even know we committed. There was little hope for moral reform if our sins were not repeatedly washed away by heartfelt appeals for Christ's mercy. These demands put me on an emotional roller coaster that still steers much of my inner life in unhealthy ways. In fact, numerous psychological studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between feelings of guilt, whatever their source, and clinical diagnoses of depression.

Mormons have no tradition of original sin. The very substance of our existence—our material being—is the same type of stuff that makes up God, so there is no inherent reason why we cannot be on the path toward God's holiness in this earthly life. William James, one of America's greatest philosophers, founder of the school called pragmatism, and the first American to write a textbook about psychology, made a famous distinction that is relevant for this discussion in a book called *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He distinguished between two religious personality types that he called the "sick soul" and the "healthy minded." The person with the sick soul is always close to despair, because he or she feels unable to do anything to rectify his or her situation. A sick soul needs a doctor, and fast. In theological terms, the sick soul is mired in original sin, which acts like quicksand: the harder you try to get out, the deeper you sink. Healthy minded people feel basically good about themselves even when they know that they need help from others as well as from God. A healthy mind knows its limits, but it is also confident that it can reach out for help when it reaches those limits. Sick souls need to be revitalized and reborn again and again, while the healthy minded tend to follow a more gradual path toward spiritual maturity. Needless to say, evangelicalism, at least the kind I grew up in, created a lot of sick souls, while Mormonism is a religion for the healthy minded."

"I found the largeness of thought and practice that I needed in Roman Catholicism, not Mormonism, but upon close examination of Mormonism and friendship with many individual Mormons, I have come to the conclusion that I could have found much of that largeness in Mormonism as well. Yet I am not trying to convert anyone to Mormonism or Roman Catholicism. I gladly admit that I do think Christianity is true and that I think all nonbelievers would be better off (in this life and the next) were they to find their way to a form of Christianity that inspires them and fulfills their most basic spiritual needs. I should also note that I am grateful for my childhood church, which my parents still attend and which taught me the love of Jesus and the reliability of the Bible."

"The Mormon Church is ambitious in that it wants to be the foundation for a way of life, not just a set of beliefs or a moral outlook. Being a Mormon should reach right into your gut—and it does, given that Mormonism regulates what you eat (no alcohol or coffee). That is one reason

why Mormonism is sometimes considered a cult. For those used to churches that give their members complete freedom over what to believe and do, Mormonism can appear controlling, but what is a religion worth if it does not exert some formative pressure on individual behavior? Many conservative churches used to prohibit members from playing cards, drinking, dancing, and joining Masonic lodges. The fact that even many fundamentalist churches do not enforce such restrictions any more is surely one reason why so many outsiders are prone to think that Mormon Church discipline is cultish. The rest of us have forgotten that being a Christian should require a high price in terms of outward signs of personal commitment. Mormons give more lax Christians a bad conscience, I suspect.

The word cult comes from the Latin *cultus*, which means worship. The word has come to refer to modes of religious belonging that are socially disruptive and psychologically disabling. The simplest definition of a cult is that it is a religious group that worships its all-too-human leader rather than God. Mormons believe that revelation and prophecy did not end with the death of the twelve apostles or the closing of the New Testament canon. They believe that Joseph Smith was a Prophet and that his successors, the presidents of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are also Prophets. But they do not worship Smith or any other human being. It is true, however, that the God they worship is very much like us, which means that we humans are, by our very nature, very much like him. Mormons do not worship a human being (other than Jesus Christ), but they do believe that all human beings have the potential, beginning now but culminating in the next life, to share in the properties that make God divine. One could say, then, that Mormons honor and revere (but do not worship) the principle of the divine that resides in every human being.

Another reason Mormons are sometimes thought to possess some of the attributes of a cult is related, I think, to their healthy mindedness. The young men and women on their missions, for example, are so uniformly and nicely dressed, and they wear name tags no less! They look like young recruits at a Fortune 500 corporation, and they are so inevitably polite and respectful that their old-fashioned virtues can make them appear almost robotic. The Mormons I know smile a lot and seem very happy, which some people mistake for shallowness or mindless obedience to their church. What is strange is not how well adjusted most Mormons are but how cynical most Americans can be about them. I have come to realize that the main reason Mormons are suspected of being cultish is that they do not manifest any trace of the religious guilt and self-reproach that are still inculcated in many traditional Christian churches. They seem too happy to be Christian!

If one were to be cynical about it, one could say that Mormons have all the benefits of being a cult—the closeness of community and the certainty of convictions—without any of the psychological disturbances. One might even say that the charge of being a cult arises from some level of envy on the part of non-Mormons. Mormons display the fruits of Christian faith with a freshness and abundance that are often lacking in mainstream Christianity."

On being unkind to Latter-day Saints:

"It pains me to say it, but conservative Christians are some of the loudest and meanest voices when it comes to deriding and mocking Mormonism. Social trends have contributed to this situation. The powers of political correctness exercise a kind of vigilante control over much of public discourse, especially in schools, and as a result, some groups earn an unofficial privilege by being designated "off limits" to criticism, especially of the impolite kind. People who do not belong to these groups resent their favorable status, of course, which builds up pressure to find new scapegoats to take their place. Mormons are no longer subjected to physical persecution, but they are still subjected to thoughtless and frequent verbal abuse. To make matters worse, Mormons do not fit any of the criteria for claiming a protected minority status. Being a subset of the dominant Christian culture, they cannot claim to be powerless, and being primarily white (in America, at least, though not in the many churches they have planted abroad), they are not the victims of racism. Furthermore, they are traditionalists when it comes to gender and sexuality issues, so they uphold unpopular patriarchal values in very public ways. Besides, they have a lot of political power in Utah, so what could be wrong in ganging up on them every so often?

What really makes them a target, however, is the fact that people who find their beliefs repugnant come from both the Christian and the secularist camps. I can think of no other group that brings together Christians and atheists in such a unifying manner—and not just any kind of Christian or secularist but the most fervent and hard core. Fervent Christians see in Mormonism a mirror distorting their own faith, reflecting an image strangely recognizable yet recognizably strange. Hard-core secularists think that Mormonism is the best example of the strangeness inherent in all religious belief. Some agnostics are open to the possibility that there is an ethereal spiritual being working behind the scenes in some vague way, but the idea that God has a body not unlike our own can be a scandal to the materialistic mindset. Deriding Mormonism thus pulls off the neat trick of making the devout and the godless feel as if they are on the same side, and with both Christians and anti-Christians eager to denounce Mormons, such mockery does not often get censured and denounced.