

# ATONING GRACE ON PROGRESSION'S HIGHWAY

Explorations into Latter-day Saint Theological Anthropology

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What you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing.

C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>

A real meeting with a partner of another faith must mean being so open to him that his way of looking at the world becomes a real possibility for me. One has not really heard the message of one of the great religions that have moved millions of people for centuries if one has not been really moved by it, if one has not felt in one's own soul the power of it.

Lesslie Newbigin<sup>2</sup>

Yes, I think we would have to agree that one of Joseph Smith's most significant efforts was to make the Father of the universe more accessible to His family members within that universe, to retrieve the unreachable, unknowable, timeless, and impassible Deity that had been pushed to the grand beyond by traditional Christians.

Robert L. Millet<sup>3</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

*Religious encounter through an insider's experience of the faith.* My introduction to interfaith dialogue was under the most enviable of circumstances. In the fall of 2007, I was invited to collaborate on a book by Rabbi Elliot Dorff comparing Jewish and Christian approaches to social ethics—a year-long endeavor that brought me into contact with the rich Conservative Jewish tradition through one of its leading rabbinic figures.<sup>4</sup> A few months later I received an invitation to join a dialogue group of Latter-day Saint and evangelical scholars. This experience ushered me into an ongoing exploration of the Latter-day Saint faith alongside one of its most prolific theologians and apologists, Robert L. Millet. The juxtaposition of Judaism and Mormonism and my friendships with Rabbi Dorff and Robert Millet have had profound implications for my faith and scholarship. While I remain a committed evangelical Christian, these men have given me exposure to powerful religious faiths that have moved my soul and challenged the way I see the world.

When it comes to comparative religious studies, it is problematic to try to establish commonalities between religions by reducing them to their lowest common denominator—whether that is a belief in a higher being, shared beliefs, or an adherence to a universal moral code.<sup>5</sup> This approach dilutes distinctives and overlooks lived religion in favor of formal doctrine, thereby neglecting the powerful affective dimensions of religion.<sup>6</sup> Another methodological misstep is to study religious traditions as if they were hermetically sealed from each other. While a religion may assert that its scriptures are of divine origin, the theology developed from this revelation is contextual and a response to the lived experiences of a particular religious community as it interacts with other religions. Our religious traditions not only shape *what we see* but what kinds of *questions we ask*.<sup>7</sup> In light of this, comparative theology yields better results when it avoids employing outside criteria to establish common ground between religions. A better approach begins with appreciating the “incommensurable peculiarity” of each religious tradition with its dynamic relationship among the beliefs, practices, and religious experiences and then proceeds to explore how these address the needs of the community and its members.<sup>8</sup>

One does not proceed very far into this type of study of religion, however, before being struck by how daunting a task it is to understand the historical, theological, and sociological complexity of a tradition's self-understanding in relation to other faiths. What appears as a "contradiction" to outsiders is often embraced as a "paradox" by adherents of that religion.<sup>9</sup> Care must be taken to find inroads into indigenous perspectives of another tradition to see how adherents understand their own faith and their relationship to other religious communities.<sup>10</sup>

My encounter with Robert Millet and his scholarly work has taken place in my quest to understand the Latter-day Saints in connection with historic Christianity. Not only is Bob a devout Saint with a testimony of being touched by the grace of God, he is a first-class scholar with an extensive literary corpus devoted to bringing the Latter-day Saint faith into dialogue with other religious traditions. He has shed light on the power and appeal of the lived experience of the Latter-day Saint community, distinguished between central saving beliefs and what he calls nonessential "shelf" doctrines, and helped me understand how this faith has captured the affections and imaginations of sixteen million people and counting.<sup>11</sup>

What follows is an exploration of Millet's reflections on the Latter-day Saint view of humankind in conversation with Jewish and Protestant traditions. It begins by examining how the Mormon cosmic drama cultivates a distinct theological imagination of what it means to be created in God's image and then proceeds to explore the means by which the distance between God and humanity is bridged.<sup>12</sup> Given the vastness of scholarly writings on this subject, I will limit my analysis to one prominent writer within each faith community: Robert Millet, Rabbi Abraham Cohen, and Reformed theologian G. C. Berkouwer. Given the breadth of thought in each religious community, I will not attempt to give a comprehensive account of each tradition's theology. Instead I will allow each of these writers to give an insider's account of the theological anthropology of their tradition and how it relates to the religious experience of the community.<sup>13</sup> For it is when we study the Latter-day Saint tradition in light of other religions—not only in terms of theological differences and similarities but also in terms of the lived experience—that we can appreciate that Mormonism is about more (though not less) than intellectual questions. It is also about

a way of life pursued by a community as it attempts to fulfill humanity's deepest desires.<sup>14</sup>

## THE IMAGE OF GOD ACROSS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

*Biblical mysteries and a dialectic approach to theology.* In the first chapter of Genesis, we are presented with the mystery of human beings created in the image of God (1:27). The context of this verse is God's speaking and creating a separation of light from darkness and water from land to make room for the forming and filling of the earth. In speaking, God acts. The more God acts, the more creation is free to live and move and have its being. He forms boundaries and sets limits for creation's manifold parts and establishes life-giving rhythms of reciprocity and interdependence. While humans are created from the ground and are part of creation, they are set in a unique relation to other creatures for they alone are said to bear God's image and likeness (see Genesis 1:27; cf. Psalm 8:4–8). Within these established boundaries, there is a close relationship between God and humanity and between humanity and creation.

In spite of the popularity of the concept in the history of theology, references to the image of God within scripture are relatively limited—those few instances being Genesis 1:27; 5:1–2; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; and James 3:9. It may also come as a surprise to modern readers that apart from these few references, scriptures rarely take the image of God as the basis of appeal for moral reform.<sup>15</sup> Complicating matters further, scripture never defines the meaning of this powerful concept. Debates have ensued among theologians and philosophers over the years as to whether humanity's image bearing is to be understood in functional, substantive, or relational terms. Whereas philosophers have tended to elucidate the meaning of the image of God by rooting it to a specific property of the human person (such as reason, conscience, immortality, freedom), the Old and New Testament writers treat it as a deep mystery and speak in paradoxes that frame our thinking.<sup>16</sup> The Psalmist, for example, reflects on the mystery in this way: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for (*attend to*) them?” (Psalm 8:4; see also Psalm 144:3; Job 7:17).<sup>17</sup> Scriptures like this offer a vision of humanity, but when we push for tight

technical definitions of “image of God,” these texts are robbed of their power to convey mystery.

Historic Jewish and Christian traditions as well as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints see this concept of image of God as being authoritative, and yet each one has taken a different route in developing theological anthropologies that attempt to explain and expand on these biblical dialectics.<sup>18</sup> To understand a tradition on its own terms it is necessary to identify the paradoxes it posits concerning the mystery of the human person.

## LIVING WITH TENSIONS: FOUNDATIONAL DIALECTICS OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

The scriptures of the Restoration and latter-day prophets affirm that God our Father has a plan for his children, a program established to maximize our growth and ensure our happiness. And yet that fact alone—that there is some divine plan to life—is not as obvious from the Bible as from latter-day scripture.<sup>19</sup>

*The cosmic drama of Latter-day Saints.* One cannot read far in the religious writings of Latter-day Saints before coming across references to progression, growth, or development. I find this progression narrative to be one of the most prominent features of Mormon thought, providing structure and direction to many other Church doctrines. This narrative is most easily understood as a cosmic drama that unfolds like a three-act play: act 1, premortal existence; act 2, mortal existence; and act 3, postmortal existence.<sup>20</sup> It is within this drama that Millet’s theological anthropology can best be appreciated as we see it functioning within the larger theological imagination of the Latter-day Saint faith. The narrative structure provided in this drama holds together important tensions (or dialectics) within Mormon theological anthropology that will be explored more below. These dialectics include the following:

1. God and humanity are “of the same species,” yet there remains an immense gap between finite mortal humans and an omnipotent and omniscient God;

2. Each person is on the road of eternal progression, yet all growth and transformation is brought about solely by the atoning grace of God.

## 1. DIVINE SPECIES . . . SEPARATED BY AN IMMENSE GAP

In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; in the image of his own body, male and female, created he them.  
(Moses 6:8–9)

*Divine species.* To be God's image bearer is to be of the same (divine) species as God. One of the most striking (and controversial<sup>21</sup>) features of Latter-day Saint faith is its theological anthropology. When the Mormon Church teaches that human beings are created in the image of God, it means that God and humans are of the same species. The implication of this doctrine for what it means to be human and in relationship with God are far-reaching, especially when viewed alongside of historic Jewish and Protestant views of the human person.

The phrase "image of God" is interpreted literally by Latter-day Saints: we are begotten spirit children of the Father who lived with and worshipped the Father before this life in the spirit existence of the first estate. To say that humans were created in the image of God means that they were made in the image of the Eternal Father's spiritual and *physical* bodies.<sup>22</sup> In his "King Follett" discourse just months before he suffered martyrdom, Joseph Smith spoke these words to comfort mourners at a funeral gathering: "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . . If you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man."<sup>23</sup> In this address Joseph revealed a doctrine that goes beyond the traditional teachings of both Jews and Christians, which retain a clear distinction between God and humans. What follows in the King Follett discourse is an emphasis on the relational implications of this metaphysical nearness between God and humanity: "For Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and . . . walked, talked and conversed with Him, as one man talks and communes with another."<sup>24</sup>

With these words, Joseph sought to bring God near to the bereaved by emphasizing the relational proximity of God to humanity and of the relatively “short season” in which mortals are separated bodily from the deceased.<sup>25</sup> This existential need is important to note as it wedds theology to lived needs in ways that will resurface in this discussion of the Latter-day Saint faith. Critics of the Church often overlook Latter-day Saints’ emphasis on Christlikeness in the process of deification.<sup>26</sup> For Mormons, deification is a specific way of understanding eternal life and insists that we will not only be *with* God for all eternity but also will be *like* him.<sup>27</sup> Again the personal and existential takes central focus over metaphysical explanations: “The whole design of the gospel,” said President Gordon B. Hinckley, “is to lead us onward and upward to greater achievement, even, eventually, to godhood. . . . [The Eternal Father] wishes for his children that they might approach him in stature and stand beside him resplendent in godly strength and wisdom.”<sup>28</sup> Statements like this make clear that in the religious imagination of Latter-day Saints, the primary value conveyed in the doctrine of deification is relational proximity to God as Father.

*Yet an immense gap.* To be God’s image bearer is also to sense the immense gap that separates humans from God. God is near to us in that he has experienced what we experience, even though he has developed infinitely beyond us. It was Lorenzo Snow who picked up on this line of thought from Joseph and stressed the developmental theme embedded in the words “God himself *was once* as we are now.” Snow’s poetic thought reads:

As Abra’m, Isaac, Jacob, too,  
 First babes, then men—to gods they grew.  
 As man now is, our God once was;  
 As now God is, so man may be—  
 which doth unfold man’s destiny.<sup>29</sup>

This couplet draws on the themes of growth and the unfolding of human destiny discussed earlier in the concept of eternal progression. While the metaphysical specificity of God and humanity does become more explicit in Joseph’s later teachings, the concept of progression was well established in prior scriptures and teachings. Modern Latter-day Saint scholars have made it clear that there is indeed a gap between God and humanity—but this is not to be conceived of as an ontological “being” gap but rather an immense

“developmental” gap.<sup>30</sup> Millet explains: “I may believe that God and man are not of a different species, but the last thing in the world I want to be accused of is shortening the distance between a frail, weak, and imperfect mortal and an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfected God. . . . God is God, and I am a mere mortal. . . . God is *qadosh* . . . ‘holy other,’ meaning that he is separate and apart from unholiness and profanity.”<sup>31</sup>

In what can be considered a common feature in his style, Millet wisely avoids unnecessary and abstract philosophical speculations by consistently distinguishing between what we know and what we don't know about these doctrinal matters of progression and deification. First, it is a clear teaching of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that humans can indeed become like God. But as to which attributes of God are communicable and which are not, there has been no clear revelation. Second, throughout the process of eternal progression, at no time will humans ever rival God or compete with him for glory. Third, at no point will any other beings be the focus of our worship besides the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup> Within the Latter-day Saint cosmic drama, the doctrine of deification is held in tension with the emphasis on the immense developmental gap separating humans from the eternal and immortal God.

## A DIALOGUE WITH JUDAISM ON BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY

The preceding section offered an overview of what Latter-day Saints believe is at the heart of the “more” of Mormonism. For those within the faith, the Mormon doctrine of deification adds a personal dimension to their spiritual life: God is not “aloof, passionless, and set free from his children.”<sup>33</sup> He is not the god of the Stoics, a remote unmoved mover or first cause. Instead he is touched by our infirmities and shares in our emotions.<sup>34</sup> It is not only the trajectory of human development that is at stake in the doctrine of deification but the relational proximity of God and his compassion for humanity—an expressed existential concern of Joseph's original funeral address and a significant feature of subsequent Latter-day Saint experience. “We worship a divine Being with whom we can identify,” writes Millet. “That is to say, his infinity does not preclude either his immediacy or his



intimacy.”<sup>35</sup> By holding together the dialectic of “same species” and the “holy other,” Latter-day Saint theology lifts fallen humans up by bringing God near.<sup>36</sup> The Talmudic vision of the human person also wrestles with the issue of how to understand the proximity and distance of God to humans.

*The image of God: preciousness and finitude.* The central Jewish doctrine of humanity is the image of God. A famous saying gets at the heart of the Jewish imagination concerning the mystery of the human person: “A person should always carry around two pieces of paper in his/her pockets. On one should be written, ‘For me the world was created,’ and on the other, ‘I am but dust and ashes.’”<sup>37</sup>

This saying reveals the immense value that rabbis placed on each individual while nevertheless situating humanity squarely within the boundaries of creaturely status. The Talmud teaches that there is a tremendous privilege in being a human being set apart from other creatures and uniquely stamped with God’s image. But it also guards against blurring the boundaries between a finite human person and the holy Creator God.

*Kingship and kinship.* Metaphysical speculation was not of widespread interest to the rabbis of the Talmud. In its cosmology, the Talmud emphasizes both God’s *kingship over* and yet *kinship with* humanity. Since then, modern rabbinic commentaries have incorporated the categories of “transcendence” and “immanence” to discuss the doctrine of God. The Talmud, most likely to guard against the pantheisms of the day, taught that God is eternal and incorporeal and that his abode is in the seventh heaven, an infinite distance from the earth.<sup>38</sup> Since that time, strict adherence to the Jewish monotheistic faith has entailed respecting the unbridgeable gulf between the Creator God and human creatures.

It might surprise us then to learn that the Talmud not only speaks of a “gulf” between humans and God the king, but also of a “kinship.” Rabbi Abraham Cohen explains, “Pre-eminent above all other creatures [is humanity], the culminating point in the work of Creation.” Humans are differentiated in that all other creatures are formed from the earth, while “man’s soul is *from heaven* and [his] body *from earth*.”<sup>39</sup> As image bearers, humans bear a divine semblance afforded to no other creatures. And yet God has placed humans as image bearers in a relationship of kinship with other creatures. Humans share a kinship with God and a kinship with other creatures.

*Bridging the gap.* For all the emphasis the Talmud places on the gulf between humanity and God, it is the closeness (immanence) of God that is stressed time and again. In the Talmudic view, these two attributes of God are complementary. "How close is God to his creatures?" the Talmud asks. "He is as close as a mouth is to the ear," is the answer.<sup>40</sup> The eternal God is the one who hears the whispered prayer uttered behind the pillar of a synagogue. The immanence of God is seen in the emphasis the Talmud places on his relational proximity and emotional concern for the well-being of humans. God, says the Talmud, shares in our sorrows and longs to abide with his creatures.<sup>41</sup>

It is within this kingship-kinship dialectic that the divine presence was conceived as being present in creation and among humanity through the *Shechinah* glory and the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup> The vision of God in the Talmud is not one-sided, writes Rabbi Cohen: "However reluctant the teachers of Israel were to identify God with His Universe and insisted on His being exalted high above the abode of men, yet they thought of the world as permeated through and through with the omnipresent *Shechinah*."<sup>43</sup> In teaching about the immanent presence of God, his emotional intimacy is portrayed in his longing for communion with his people. The Talmud offers the following story of the eschatological Garden of Eden in a meditation on the verse from Leviticus 26:12, "I [God] will walk among you:"

To what is this like? To a king who went out to walk with this tenant in his orchard; but the tenant hid himself from him. The king called to him, "why do you hide from me? See, I am just the same as you!" Similarly the Holy One, blessed be He, will walk with the righteous in Gan Eden in the Hereafter; and the righteous, on beholding Him, will retreat in terror before him. But He will call to them, "See, I am the same as you!" Since, however, it is possible to imagine that My fear should no longer be upon you, the text declares, "I will be your God, and ye shall be My people."<sup>44</sup>

Commenting on this passage, Rabbi Cohen argues that we detect the "anxiety of the Rabbis" to maintain the "unbridgeable gulf" between God and humanity, even in the life to come. But this distinct anxiety grows out of the commitment to a very real and yet mysterious communion that will be experienced between God and his people. Whatever this future

communion will look like, Cohen writes, for the rabbis this meant that God “will still be God and they will be His ‘people,’ *i.e.*, *human*.”<sup>45</sup>

*Discussion: anthropomorphisms and embodiment.* After reading a passage like this from the Talmud, we might be better prepared to entertain this question from Millet: “Is there perhaps something in God that corresponds with embodiment?”<sup>46</sup> Is it really that strange that Latter-day Saints speak of God having a physical body and of our future physical presence with God? To be sure, Saints construe kinship with God literally (physically), whereas the rabbis interpret scriptures that speak of God’s embodiment as anthropomorphisms. For the rabbis, these texts are seen as metaphors that reveal God’s willingness to accommodate to humans by communicating in terms they can understand. Furthermore, the central ethical doctrine in the Talmud is the imitation of God, and such anthropomorphisms are vivid pictures that show God “Himself obeying the precepts which He desires Israel to observe.”<sup>47</sup> As God clothes the naked, visits the sick, comforts mourners, and buries the dead, says the Talmud, so should we.<sup>48</sup> In Talmudic ethics, we bear God’s image most fully when we imitate him by following the Torah’s commands. This is the significance of biblical anthropomorphisms for the Jewish imagination.

Latter-day Saints, by contrast, see scripture’s “anthropomorphisms” not as God’s *linguistic translation* to accommodate humans but as windows into *cosmological transformation*, revealing the truth that humans and God are of the same species and family. What Latter-day Saints perceive to be at stake in this debate is not merely issues of *ontology* but the reality of *intimacy* that can be experienced with God.

*Matters of ontology and intimacy.* In a revealing passage about Trinitarian metaphysical formulations of the Godhead, Millet challenges his readers by asking, “Must one really accept the ontological oneness of the members of the Godhead in order to be close to them, to be at peace with them, to feel their power and presence in his or her life?”<sup>49</sup> Within Mormon thought, intimacy and relational unity between the members of the Godhead does not require ontological oneness. Instead, their unity is seen in being of one mind, spirit, and purpose. On this matter of ontology, our reading of the Talmud leads us to ask, “Must one really accept the shared ontology between humans and God in order to find the deep intimacy that God desires with humanity?”

Within the Jewish religious imagination, the tension between finite humans, who are “dust and ashes,” and the infinite God, who is “holy other,” makes establishing kinship challenging. The fundamental gulf to be bridged is one of intimacy between two different kinds of beings and pushes the Jewish imagination to conceive of how human kinship with God—the Creator and king of the universe—can be experienced in a meaningful way without dishonoring God or undermining humanity’s humanness.<sup>50</sup>

Within the Latter-day Saint religious imagination, the fundamental tension is how to hold together the belief that humans are of divine seed while still maintaining the immense gulf between a holy God. This tension is held together within the Latter-day Saint doctrine of deification. What is required to bridge this “developmental” gulf and achieve intimacy is a belief in a *shared ontology* between God and humanity. With this resolution comes a new challenge within the religious imagination of Latter-day Saints: how do we then maintain a sense of awe, grandeur, and the holy “otherness” of God?

Latter-day Saint interpretation of biblical anthropomorphic language extends into realms beyond the bounds of Jewish and traditional Christian orthodoxy. For all the disagreements between these traditions and the metaphysical interpretations of the Bible, Protestants can identify existentially with the human longings for God and our loved ones that Joseph and subsequent Church leaders have sought to address. Whereas the Mormon faith places the stress on the “mindful” and “magnify” parts of biblical teaching (Psalm 8:4; Job 7:17), the Protestant tradition has focused on those texts that emphasize the “What is man?” biblical theme and interpreted them in light of human sin.

## ETERNAL PROGRESSION . . . BY GRACE ALONE

Adam fell that men might be, and men are that they may have joy.  
(2 Nephi 2:25)

The Fall had a twofold direction—downward, yet forward. It brought man into the world and set his feet upon progression’s highway.<sup>51</sup>

We believe the Fall was a part of God’s divine plan and thus laid the foundation for the Atonement itself. In other words, if there had been no Fall, there would have been no Atonement.<sup>52</sup>

*Eternal progression.* To be God's image bearer is to be engaged in an unfolding drama of growth and development. One of the most prominent areas the Latter-day Saint cosmic drama is found in the idea of eternal progression. "The concept embodied in the phrase *eternal progression*," writes Millet, "is that men and women have been engaged in spiritual development and moral expansion from eternity past and will do so into eternity future."<sup>53</sup> In the premortal spirit existence, we all lived as spirit sons and daughters with our Eternal Father. In this first estate, we were able to progress and grow as we worshipped the Father and were obedient to him. The Father's plan for our spiritual and moral expansion entailed our leaving the premortal abode and entering mortal existence to take on the "earthly tabernacle" of a baby. In this second estate, we encounter adversity and overcome the physical passions and desires in our mortal existence, add upon prior growth, and "qualify for eternal life in the celestial kingdom of God."<sup>54</sup> Spiritual growth will continue on in the third estate of postmortal existence as we progress *within* (but, in most formulations, not *between*) the celestial, terrestrial, and telestial kingdoms.<sup>55</sup>

It is hard to overemphasize the influence that this narrative trajectory has on all aspects of Mormon thought and lived experience. This progression narrative offers an answer to the purpose of mortal existence, an approach to suffering as part of God's plan for human growth, and hope for the salvation of those who have died without accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup> Viewing the human person within this story of eternal progression provides a teleological structure to which Saints conform their lives.

*By grace alone.* To be God's image bearer also means that growth and progression occur by *grace alone*. This strong emphasis on eternal progression is often misunderstood by outsiders, especially evangelicals, who have been conditioned to sniff out "works righteousness" hidden in every theological statement that alludes to human potential.<sup>57</sup> One of the most significant contributions that Millet has made to ecumenical discussions is to demonstrate from Latter-day Saint scriptures the prominent role that grace plays in all stages of eternal progression. Alongside the emphasis on progression there is a counterbalancing emphasis on the atoning blood of Jesus. All growth into Christlikeness is by grace alone.<sup>58</sup> This emphasis on growth through atoning grace goes back to Joseph Smith's *Lectures on Faith*, where he (or perhaps an associate) writes, "all those who keep his

commands shall grow up *from grace to grace*, and become heirs of the heavenly kingdom, and joint hers with Jesus Christ; possessing the same mind, being transformed into the same image or likeness."<sup>59</sup>

This emphasis on grace within Mormon scriptures themselves is lost on many of those outside of the faith. In language that evangelicals readily recognize, Millet unpacks how this emphasis on grace should be held in tension with the emphasis on progression and deification. He writes: "To clarify, Mormons do not believe they can work themselves into glory. . . . Mormons do not believe they can gain eternal life through human effort. Mormons do not believe that one becomes more and more Christlike through sheer grit and willpower. Central to any and all spiritual progress is the Atonement of Jesus Christ, and it is only by and through his righteousness that we may be pronounced righteous."<sup>60</sup>

Latter-day Saint understandings of grace and works comports better with Arminian than Reformed theology, but in all of this it is possible to see the emphasis on spiritual progress as being wedded to a reliance upon grace. Holding together tensions is part and parcel of any life of faith, and Mormonism is no exception. By insisting on the need for growth in Christlikeness while still emphasizing human insufficiency for such a task, the Saints are taught to look to the atoning work of Christ rather than their own abilities.<sup>61</sup> This raises questions of how a Latter-day Saint conception of human agency comports with divine action and human sin, which will be explored in conversation with Protestant Christianity.

## A DIALOGUE WITH TRADITIONAL CHRISTIANITY ON GROWTH, GRACE, AND SIN

*The greatness and misery dialectic in traditional Christianity.* In his classic work on the image of God, G. C. Berkouwer draws on Blaise Pascal and argues that maintaining *both the greatness and misery* of the human person is essential for upholding the mystery of humanity. Humanity's greatness and misery are inextricably linked to each other, for it is the greatness of the human person that displays the depths of their misery. Created in God's image, humanity stands as a vice-regent over creation under God's rule. It is from this height that we see the tragedy of humanity's fall. Far from relativizing humanity's

sin, emphasizing greatness makes the reality of sin all the greater. The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32 is paradigmatic for understanding the relationship between human goodness and sin. The fact that the rebellion was committed by the Father’s *son* makes his actions all the more painful than it would be if the rebel were a stranger or an enemy. At the same time, the stress on human sin should not be understood to eradicate all human goodness, for scripture teaches that even after the Fall humans remain God’s image bearers (see Genesis 5:1–2; 9:6; James 3:9).<sup>62</sup>

Berkouwer notes the ways in which the Protestant tradition has often struggled to uphold humanity’s greatness in its desire to reinforce the need for redemption. In so doing the stress on fallenness has all but eclipsed the view of humanity’s created goodness (see Genesis 1:31). What is needed, he argues, is to maintain a healthy reciprocal relationship between our vision of human misery as “the misery of a nobleman, the misery of a dethroned king.”<sup>63</sup> The problem of the human situation is not simply finitude—“what are humans that you are mindful of them” (Psalm 8:4) for they are “but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27)—but they are also “sinful from [their] mother’s womb” (Psalm 51:5).<sup>64</sup> It is human misery that has been heavily stressed by Protestant Christians—and not surprisingly—frequently misunderstood by those outside this tradition.

One of the central dialectics in the religious imagination of Protestants is that of Luther’s *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously righteous and a sinner.<sup>65</sup> In this dialectic, the believer is suspended between bondage to sin and his or her justified status as an adopted child of God. Holding on to Luther’s paradox has proven to be challenging for Protestants, as seen in our perennial tendency to overlook humanity’s goodness and focus on sinfulness. If we are to uphold the view of the human person we see in scripture, we must not *isolate* humanity’s greatness from its misery, nor allow the one to *limit* the other.<sup>66</sup> It is only in the eschaton that this lived paradox will be resolved. Any recovery of a Protestant emphasis on the greatness of humanity will need to configure with human sinfulness and finitude.

*Discussion.* It is important to draw out some implications of what it means to be human in light of the Latter-day Saint dialectic of growth and grace. First, the emphasis on human progress resonates strongly with the embedded potentials of creation and humanity seen in the opening

chapters of Genesis. While it is clear from scripture and experience that some development can take place throughout a person's mortal life, this embedded potential will not be fully actualized until the eschatological kingdom of God is established and believers receive resurrected and glorified bodies (see 1 Corinthians 15:42–53). From a Latter-day Saint perspective, what it means to be human in mortal existence is to have a tenacious belief in human potential even in the face of sin, suffering, and adversity.

Given the strong Latter-day Saint emphasis on progression, it is not surprising to find a need to emphasize the atoning grace of Christ as a counterbalance to human potential. The religious imagination of Latter-day Saints *begins with progression* and then proceeds to configure *how sin and grace fits* into this narrative. In short, the cosmic drama makes it easier to hold onto humanity's greatness than its misery. Protestants, on the other hand, tend to *begin with sin* and then are left wrestling with how humanity's greatness can be understood. The resolution to how atoning grace operates on progression's highway for Latter-day Saints is found in the temple. It is in the temple sacraments and ordinances that the atoning work of Jesus is made efficacious and fallen humans have their agency repaired so that spiritual progress can transpire.<sup>67</sup> A new tension arises with this resolution: how does the narrative of progression foster a *rising sense* of dependence on the atoning grace of Jesus?<sup>68</sup>

For Protestants, the challenge to uphold humanity's created goodness in light of sin and finitude finds a partial resolution in the eschatological concepts of the "already" and the "not yet." Already we have been justified in Christ and adopted as God's children, but not yet has our sanctification and conformity to Christlikeness been made complete. All "progress" in sanctification is contingent upon a dependence on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and an increasing awareness of our sin.<sup>69</sup> The dialogue between Latter-day Saints and Protestants stands a better chance of being fruitful for God's kingdom if it takes as its primary goal the fostering of dependence upon the Holy Spirit to effect the atoning work of Jesus in our lives.

## CONCLUSION

From a shared belief that human beings are created in the image of God, the Latter-day Saint, Jewish, and Protestant traditions developed religious



imaginations that hold together the mystery of the human person in distinct ways. When we study these traditions on their own terms, we come to see the different sorts of questions they bring to their theological inquiry into sacred texts. The Latter-day Saint view of the human person pushes against the orthodox Judeo-Christian ontology and raises questions over the type of intimacy that can be found with God in this life and the next. Protestants can appreciate the deep human desires for communion with God that Latter-day Saints pursue and the physical means of fulfillment the faith offers men and women to sup with God and Christ. It would behoove Protestants not only to respond to Latter-day Saint doctrines, but more important, to allow themselves to be “really moved by” and feel in their “own soul” the powerful way the Latter-day Saints fulfill the human need for communion with God.<sup>70</sup>

There are important theological issues that remain to be explored among Jews, Protestants, and Latter-day Saints. Among them, two stand out most prominently. First, what are the implications of bearing God’s image if it is the image of the Triune God and not simply of the Father that we take as our starting point? Second, what difference does it make when the incarnation of Jesus is conceived of as bridging a developmental rather than an ontological gulf? What does it mean from a Latter-day Saint perspective for Jesus to maintain his two natures throughout eternity? For Protestant Christians, these issues point to a key to the Mormon ontology-intimacy dilemma. With the very real spiritual progress in Christlikeness that takes place in this life and in the new creation, humanity’s humanness will not be eradicated in the resurrection even though it will be transformed. Indeed, part of the special affection that Protestants and Catholics have for Jesus is bound up with the belief that the intimacy we will experience with God throughout eternity is made possible by the enduring intercession of our High Priest, Jesus, who with resurrected human body is even now in the presence of God the Father.

There are important issues like these that Protestants and Latter-day Saints need to continue to explore together. It is hoped that all future theological dialogue will follow the embodied example of Robert Millet of being grace-centered, convicted and civil, attentive to the nuances between “central, saving” and “shelf” doctrines, and never pursued outside of the awareness of the human desire for communion with God.

NOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Collier Books, 1974), 125.
2. Lesslie Newbigin, "The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30, no. 3 (June 1977): 253–70, 267–68.
3. Robert L. Millet, "We Shall Be Like Him," an address given at the Religious Education Friday faculty forum at Brigham Young University, September 14, 2007.
4. Rabbi Elliot Dorff, *The Jewish Approach to Repairing the World* (Tikkun Olam): *A Brief Introduction for Christians* (Woodstock, UT: Jewish Lights, 2008).
5. This type of approach to comparative religions which treats different religions as commensurable has been thoughtfully critiqued by several authors, including Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 77–78; Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 3–5; 232–33; George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 48–49.
6. James K. A. Smith's book, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), offers a poignant apology for attending to the affective dimensions of religious traditions. On the topic of lived religion, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993); David Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
7. On the role that tradition plays in shaping the types of questions that we ask, as well as the way in which we pursue the answer, see David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 1–3; C. S. Lewis makes a similar point about the relationship between our particular location with what and how we perceive a given phenomenon or issue in his book *The Magician's Nephew*, 125.
8. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 78.
9. For more on the ways in which paradoxes are perceived as contradictions by those outside of the faith, see Isaac Rottenberg's review of Michael S. Kogan's *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2008), available at [http://www.isaacrottenberg.com/uploads/pdf/www.isaacrottenberg.com/a\\_review.pdf](http://www.isaacrottenberg.com/uploads/pdf/www.isaacrottenberg.com/a_review.pdf).

10. On “insider” perspectives, see Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
11. Richard J. Mouw quoting from his conversation with Robert Millet in *Calvinism and the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 39.
12. For a helpful distillation of Charles Taylor’s work on social imaginaries for inter-religious engagement, see William A. Dyrness, *Senses of the Devotion: Interfaith Aesthetics in Buddhist and Muslim Communities* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 1–30.
13. Nicholas Wolterstorff employs a similar methodology in the third chapter in his book, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 43.
14. One of the distinct advantages of interfaith dialogue conducted with attentiveness to insider accounts of lived religion is that we become aware of the pretheoretical assumptions driving our theological inquiry. In dialogue with those who do not share our perspective but also ask different questions, we begin to see that theology is always contextual and a response to the lived experiences of a particular religious community. This study on the theological anthropology of Latter-day Saints through the works of Robert Millet has revealed differences in the religious imaginations of Latter-day Saints, Jews, and Protestants. These differences are in large part due to how each tradition understands the fundamental questions that drive each tradition’s theological inquiry into what it means to be a human being as God intended, and this in turn is conditioned by their particular history and sociocultural location.
15. David Clines, “Humanity as the Image of God,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 1; cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 67.
16. On the need to approach the mystery of the image of God from a posture of awe, see Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 36, 74, 194–95. Cf. Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the Imago Dei in Context,” *Christian Scholars Review* 24, no. 1 (1994): 1–3.
17. For a helpful discussion of the relationship between the Hebrew words *zakar* and *paquad* in this verse, see John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006, 158–59). Another such paradox can be seen by comparing Psalm 17:8, “Keep me as the apple of your eye,” with Psalm 39:5–6, “Everyone is but a breath . . . [and] goes round like a mere phantom.”

18. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998), 194. See also Rabbi Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 67; and Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 67.
19. Robert L. Millet, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 147. For additional reflections on the Latter-day Saint progression narrative, see also Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 58–59; Charles W. Penrose, “Mormon” *Doctrine, Plain and Simple: or, Leaves from the Tree of Life* (Salt Lake City: Geo. Q. Cannon & Sons, 1897), quoted in *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference*, ed. Robert L. Millet, Camille Fronk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 610–11; Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Desert Book, 2013), 3–7, 18; Stephen Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
20. Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 195.
21. Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism: Pressing the Boundaries of Christianity* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2007), 271.
22. *LDS Beliefs*, 498–501; cf. Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 55–56; Millet, *Getting at the Truth: Responding to Difficult Questions about LDS Beliefs* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 110; The First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Origin of Man,” 78, quoted in *LDS Beliefs*, 594–95.
23. Joseph Smith, “The King Follett Discourse [part 1],” *Ensign*, April 1971, 15.
24. Joseph Smith, “The King Follett Discourse,” 15.
25. Joseph Smith, “The King Follett Discourse [part 2],” *Ensign*, May 1971, 13.
26. Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism*, 271–74.
27. Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism*, 272.
28. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1994, 64, quoted in Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism*, 276.
29. Lorenzo Snow’s couplet was originally written in June of 1892 and was later published in the *Improvement Era*, June 1919, 660.
30. Richard J. Mouw, in Robert L. Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 182.
31. Millet, in Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon–Evangelical Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 85–86.
32. Millet, *Getting at the Truth*, 115.
33. Millet, *Claiming Christ*, 86.

34. Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 29–30.
35. Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism*, 272.
36. See Richard J. Mouw, “The Possibility of Joseph Smith: Some Evangelical Probing,” in *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals After Two Centuries*, ed. Terryl Givens and Reid L. Neilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 195.
37. Quoted in Rabbi Elliot Dorff, *The Way into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)* (Woodstock, UT: Jewish Lights, 2005), 31.
38. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 42; 27; 4–6; 40. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is an example of such thought: “Never before or since . . . has God been conceived in so radically transcendent way. God is not to be identified with anything on earth. . . . This ontological divide is fundamental. God is God; humanity is humanity. There can be no blurring of boundaries.” Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (New Milford: Koren Publishers, 2009), 53.
39. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 67; emphasis added.
40. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 41, 40.
41. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 42–43.
42. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 42–47.
43. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 47.
44. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 386.
45. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 386; emphasis added.
46. Millet, *Getting at the Truth*, 109.
47. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 7–8.
48. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 210; cf. Rabbi David J. Wolpe, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 59–61.
49. Millet, *Claiming Christ*, 81.
50. Wolpe discusses the ways in which the strict ethical monotheism of the rabbis of the Talmud was experienced as “personal monotheism.” The Talmud’s way of holding these tensions together is to conceive of God’s immanence in the personal presence of the *Shechinah* glory and the Holy Spirit. Wolpe, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts*, 57.
51. Orson F. Whitney, quoted in Millet, *Selected Writings*, 170.
52. Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism*, 40.
53. *LDS Beliefs*, 191–92.
54. *LDS Beliefs*, 191–92, compare 498; and Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 59; 194, 60.
55. Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 66–68; *LDS Beliefs*, 609–10.

56. On the purpose of human existence, see Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 59–60, and Millet, *Getting at the Truth*, 113. To read a heartfelt discussion about suffering and growth, see Millet, *When a Child Wanders* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 12–13. On hope for those who have died, see *The Mormon Faith*, 59–60, 63–65; Millet, *Getting at the Truth*, 113; Millet, *Claiming Christ*, 71; and *LDS Beliefs*, 596.
57. In her insightful book *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean devotes an entire chapter, “Mormon Envy: Sociological Tools for Consequential Faith,” to the spiritual lives of Latter-day Saint youth. Yet for all the book’s merits, it misleadingly implies that the cultural tools of Latter-day Saints do not comport well with biblical teachings of grace. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), see especially 59–60.
58. Millet, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millet*, 185. See also his *Grace Works: After All We Can Do* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), and *Getting at the Truth*, 112.
59. *Lectures on Faith*, 5:2 (American Fork: Covenant Communications, 2000), 57–58, emphasis added; cf. Millet, *Getting at the Truth*, 112.
60. Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism*, 277.
61. Millet, *Getting at the Truth*, 107; Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism*, 277; Millet, *Claiming Christ*, 109.
62. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 16–17.
63. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 17.
64. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 196–97.
65. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 71.
66. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 117–8; cf. 129, 144–47.
67. Millet, *Claiming Christ*, 144–46.
68. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 112–13.
69. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 117.
70. Newbigin, “The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue,” 267–68.