

MORMONS AND EVANGELICALS IN DIALOGUE

Finding the Right Questions

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Harvard scholar Diana Eck is frequently quoted in interfaith discussions as saying that “if you know only one religion, you know no religion.”¹ A rabbi friend of mine used the quotation in several public dialogues we did together, and finally I decided to challenge him in a private conversation. “I don’t think you really believe that,” I said. And since I knew something of his background I went directly to his family history. “Take your grandmother,” I said, “living in the ghetto in Eastern Europe. She spent her life as a strictly observant Jew, attending synagogue faithfully, and praying fervently to God several times a day. Do I have it right?” He nodded. “So now take a Jewish sophomore at UCLA—let’s say he’s nineteen years old. He too is faithful in his observance but not nearly steeped in the tradition as your grandmother was. Unlike her, though, he has the opportunity to take a course on Hindu philosophy. He receives an A for his work in the course, writing a very fine paper comparing the Eastern idea of reincarnation with the Hebrew view of the afterlife. So now he knows more than one religion, which your grandmother did not. Do you really think he has begun to know Judaism better than she did?”

Before he could respond, I continued. “And my grandmother—she came to these shores with her parents as a child. They went through rough times in urban New Jersey. When she married, she gave birth to six children, one of whom died as a teenager when his appendix burst. The Dutch Reformed Church they attended was her haven. She read the Bible and prayed every day. But the fact is that she could not utter one true sentence about any religion but her own. As her grandson, I can write books on the subject of religious pluralism, but I simply refuse to . . .”

My rabbi friend cut me off. He was laughing. “OK, OK, Richard, I get the point. You’re right. I promise I will never quote that line from Diana Eck again!”

I’m glad he agreed. I’m convinced I’m basically right about this. But later I did think about it more, and I got back to him with a slightly revised assessment. Diana Eck is wrong to imply that our grandmothers were deficient in their religious “knowing” when compared to the students who take her courses at Harvard. But someplace in her comment there is a truth that is lurking. Our knowledge of our own religion can certainly be enhanced by studying it in comparison to another religious perspective. When I study Islam or rabbinic Judaism, I’m not sure I increase in my knowledge of the God whom I worship. But I do get clearer about the content of my evangelical theology by viewing it in comparison to other systems of thought.

The same applies to ecumenical dialogue. When Protestants engage in explorations with Catholics about the meaning of the sacraments, or the role of Mary in Christ’s redemptive mission or papal authority, representatives of both communities often testify that—while the important theological differences have not gone away—they come away from this kind of in-depth conversation with a much clearer grasp of the teachings of their own tradition.

And the gains are not only in technical theological understanding. An “iron-sharpening-iron” kind of theological dialogue can also be the occasion for spiritual growth. In the give-and-take of serious exchanges with people with whom we disagree on profoundly important subjects, we often discover that the exercise has benefited our souls as well as our minds.



I have just referred to two different kinds of serious dialogue about important matters of faith. One kind is properly called interfaith. There is no question, for example, that when Jews dialogue with Buddhists they do so as representatives of different faith communities. In the most obvious sense of the term, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are different religions.

The other kind of dialogue is typically referred to as ecumenical, a term related to *oikos*, the Greek word for household or family. This terminology is used most often in Christian circles. Ecumenical dialogue takes place between Catholics and Lutherans, or between Methodists and Baptists. But the differences between, say, Orthodox Jews and representatives of the Reform Jewish movement, or between Sunni and Sufi Muslims, can also be thought of as ecumenical. This kind of conversation occurs within a broad religious family which has spawned different family lines.

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of a serious ongoing dialogue between representatives of the Mormon and evangelical communities. This dialogue has taken the form of face-to-face group meetings and shared publishing projects—of which this volume is a case in point. Clarification regarding disagreements and commonalities has occurred. Friendships have been formed. There have even been times of praying and singing together.

An interesting question to ask about this particular dialogue is where it belongs with reference to the two categories I have just briefly outlined. Is it interfaith or ecumenical? There is no question that, around the time that our Mormon-evangelical dialogue got started at the turn of this century, if these questions were to be posed to members of both communities, the shared verdict would have come down on the interfaith side of things. One obvious reason for this is that the term *ecumenical* is not common parlance in either community. It has little place in the language of Mormonism; and for evangelicals the term, while fairly well known, is seen as the thing that more liberal types use in order to bring about organizational unity—not a popular cause among evangelicals.

But the underlying issue in the posing of the question is still an interesting one. Properly understood, are Mormons and evangelicals branches of the same broad Christian *oikos*? In good part, long-standing hostility between the two communities has made it difficult to discuss that question calmly. On the evangelical side, the standard assessment of Mormonism in the second half of the twentieth century was that of the “countercult” movement. Mormons, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the adherents to Christian Science teachings, have so redefined the traditional Christian terms, according to that assessment, that they are not only non-Christian—they are, in effect, *anti*-Christian. On the Latter-day Saints’ side, it was not unusual for Mormons to insist, for very different reasons to be sure, that Mormonism was not a branch of Christianity. It has not been uncommon, for example, for folks from each community to refer to what we have initiated in our dialogue as an interfaith effort.

In each case the “different faiths” assessment has been shaped by a century and a half of hostility. Buddhists and Catholics can describe each other as representing different faiths without meaning thereby to insult each other. But the history of Mormon-evangelical relations was antagonistic from the outset. In his canonized First Vision account, Joseph Smith reported that the Son of God had informed him regarding the traditional Christian communities “that all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight.”² One of the standard terms employed by Mormons in describing the traditional Christian communities was “apostasy”—the abandonment of a faith that was now being restored in the establishment of Mormonism. Nor were representatives of those communities any less condemning of the views expressed by the Prophet and his followers.³

But a history of mutual condemnation does not make the ecumenical question irrelevant. The Protestant Reformers often condemned the Catholics as members of a “false church,” and the Catholics consistently responded in kind. Some of that still continues today, but in the larger picture, Catholics and Protestants these days do not perpetuate those stereotypes of each other.

Having raised the question about how to characterize our dialogue, I must confess that I do not have a clear answer to offer to the question of whether my discussions with my Mormon friends are ecumenical or

interfaith. A few years before I began my initial involvement in the dialogue, I was much influenced by the verdict offered by Jan Shipps in her 1985 study of Mormonism. Shipps, a Methodist scholar who was the first non-Mormon to serve as president of the Mormon History Association, proposed that Mormonism should be seen as a “new religious movement.” The relationship of Mormonism to Christianity, she argued, is much like the relationship of Christianity to Judaism.⁴ In each case there are both continuities and discontinuities.

In offering that picture, Shipps was clearly suggesting that Mormonism is a different “faith” than Christianity. Mormonism shares much in common with Christianity, of course, just as Christianity shares much in common with Judaism. But they are, as Shipps made her case, different religions. This seemed to sit well with the Mormon academics who admired Shipps’s work. Her placement of Mormonism outside of the broad Christian household certainly provoked no outcry from her Mormon colleagues.

Again, I began my active involvement in dialogue with Mormon scholars in general agreement with Shipps’s account. I had found it unacceptable simply to relegate Mormonism to cult status. The cult label basically functions, for evangelicals at least, as an instrument of condemnation. Cults are secretive. They are aggressive proselytizers, employing manipulative methods of persuasion. They use language in deceptive ways.

I found Shipps’s category of “new religious movement” a helpful way to view Mormonism. It allowed me to approach Mormons with respect and a genuine desire to learn from them. It gave me a framework for exploring both continuities and discontinuities, without descending into accusations about being “pseudo-Christian.”

Right around the time that we began our dialogue, however, Jan Shipps published another book, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons*. As her subtitle makes clear, in this volume Shipps was gathering her thoughts together about her four-decade academic sojourn in Mormon studies. The book contains some essays previously published in various journals, plus some essays making their first appearance in this book. In the final section of the book Shipps moves to a directly autobiographical mode. Of special interest for me is her chapter entitled “Is

Mormonism Christian? Reflections on a Complicated Question”—an essay originally published in *BYU Studies* but extensively reworked for the book. Throughout her career of studying Mormonism, she says, there has been “a clear modulation . . . in the way I have approached what Mormonism is and whether it is Christian.”⁵

In reflecting back on her “new religious movement” discussion of 1985, Shipps does not retract her placement of Mormonism within this category. But in explaining it she touches on a nuance that I had missed in my reading of her earlier book. Yes, she had argued there that Mormonism was discontinuous with Christianity in much the same way that Christianity had seen itself with Judaism. But in her reflections on that thesis in her 2000 book, she notes that “just as the early Christians believed that they had found the only proper way to be Jewish, so the early followers of the Mormon prophet believed they had found the only proper way to be Christian.”⁶

The point here that I had not adequately attended to in accepting her “new religious movement” placement of Mormonism was that the analogy that she draws in making that decision is itself a complicating factor. There was a time, for example, when Islam occurred as “a new religious movement,” and it emerged in an environment deeply formed by Judaism and Christianity. But its relationship to those other religious movements was not the same as Christianity’s to Judaism, or Mormonism’s to Christianity. Muslims did not see themselves as having discovered “the only proper way” to be a Jew or a Christian. The continuity–discontinuity pattern in Islam’s relationship to those other two faiths was not of the intimate sort that Mormonism bears to Christianity, or Christianity to Judaism.

Again, that is an important nuance to the use of the “new religious movement” category. Some movements are “newer” than others. Hinduism and Judaism are different “faiths” than Christianity, but as a Christian I see Christianity in a very obvious way as the *fulfillment* of Judaism in the way that I do not see Christianity in its relationship to Hinduism. My differences with my Jewish friends have much to do with my conviction that there is something significant within their own faith tradition that they fail to understand properly. And my Mormon friends make similar claims about my understanding of Christianity.

After forty years of studying Mormonism as a Methodist, Shipps concludes that to ask whether Mormons are Christians is to pose—to use the phrase included in the title of her essay—“a complicated question.” And it has become even more complicated in recent years, she observes, because of what she sees within the Mormon community as “a contemporary rhetorical shift that seems to be turning Mormon into an adjectival modifier used to signify a particular kind of Christian.”⁷ In the early years, Mormons—like others who claimed a “restorationist” identity—explicitly distanced themselves from the traditional Christian denominations in order to emphasize the ways they were restoring something that had long been corrupted. But in our present context, the Saints “no longer need an *other* to set themselves apart either rhetorically or categorically.”⁸ Thus, claiming their place within the broad Christian tradition—to be sure, as a purer form than others who claim Christian identity—has become an acceptable posture.

In coming to her own conclusion about whether Mormons are Christians, Shipps points to the ways in which the question of who is truly Christian has loomed large in many splits that have taken place in Christian history. It has been quite common, she argues, for a group that separated from another group—Constantinople from Rome, Protestants from Catholicism, Methodists from Anglicanism—to raise the question of whether what they had left deserved to keep the label “Christian.” Her own assessment on who has a right to claim the label, she confesses, is presently an agnostic one. The final verdict must await, she says, “the fullness of time, [when] a decision will be made in a higher court.” Until that day arrives, she says, she will live with the knowledge that she is “one who sees ‘through a glass darkly,’” which means that all she can do is to “withhold judgment, counting within the definition of Christian any church, sectarian movement, liberal or conservative coalition, or new religious tradition that gathers persons together in the name of Christ and, in so doing, creates genuine community wherein women and men may—to use Methodist phraseology—take up the cross and follow him.”⁹



I agree with Jan Shipps that we humans should not second-guess God about what will be revealed at the Last Judgment. None of that releases

us, however, from serious attempts to discern the workings of the Spirit in ways that are available to us in our pre-eschaton present situation: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1, New International Version, hereafter NIV). In our past relations with Mormons, though, we evangelicals have not always gone about this testing-the-spirits in a manner that honors another important biblical mandate. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have,” the Apostle Peter instructs believers. Then he immediately adds: “But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15–16, NIV). We have often fallen short on the “gentleness and respect” part of it.

Gentle respect for people with whom we disagree is key to productive efforts at dialogue. One reason why we evangelicals have had difficulties in this kind of engagement has to do with the way our approaches to other perspectives—and this has certainly been the case with our approach to Mormonism—had been dominated by soteriological and apologetic concerns. We have seen them as souls whose eternal destinies are imperiled, and we have also wanted to disprove key elements in their worldview.

To be sure, there is much merit in caring about salvation and doctrinal truth. But having them dominate our approaches to others can also lead to dangers. The most basic one is also spiritual in nature: the real possibility that we will bear false witness against our non-Christian neighbors. In evangelization contexts, we rightly want to get people to see the inadequacy of their present religious commitments. But this can lead us to portray those commitments in the worst possible light so that Christian belief and practice can clearly be seen as the better way. It is easy in such contexts to emphasize the negative aspects of the other perspective or even to distort the positive elements of that perspective so that things are portrayed as worse than they really are.

The challenge is to seriously engage other religious perspectives while being very careful not to say anything in our theology of religions that would deny what is at the core of our own deepest convictions. Certainly one criterion for the adequacy of an evangelical theology of religions is whether or not our formulations comport well with our attempts to bring the gospel to those who have not yet accepted Christ. Nonetheless, it is a

helpful exercise to attempt, temporarily at least—and especially because of our overemphasis in the other direction in the past—to bracket our overt interests in evangelism and apologetics as we think about some broader topics in this area.

This bracketing allows us to offer assessments that are not easy to make when we are concentrating primarily on who is in and who is out. When the main question is whether we have good reasons to believe that, say, a fully committed Buddhist—someone whose understanding of reality is spelled out in consistently Buddhist terms—can go to heaven, then many of us will have to answer in the negative. In this context it is appropriate for evangelicals to say that Buddhism is a false religion in the sense that a person who wants to enter into a saving relationship with the one true God will not achieve that goal by following the Buddhist path.

But this is not the same as saying that there is no truth in Buddhism. If we can bracket the question of whether Buddhists *qua* Buddhists can be saved, then we are free to evaluate this or that particular Buddhist teaching or practice in terms of whether it illuminates reality, and we may well find many good and true elements in the Buddhist worldview. Indeed, we might even find things in the Buddhist understanding of spiritual reality that can enrich—even by calling our attention to spiritual matters that we have not thought about clearly—our own Christian understanding of religious truth.

Needless to say, the best way of truly attempting to understand another religious perspective is to engage in genuine dialogue with persons who adhere to that perspective. And in order to do this, we need to be clear about the basic *point* of the enterprise. Relativism runs rampant in contemporary culture, in both the high and the low versions, and it is important that we not encourage the dilettantish samplings of various worldviews.



For me a key element for successful dialogue is entering into the engagement with a genuine learning posture. In approaching another religious perspective it is important to see how specific beliefs function within the larger web of beliefs and convictions in that perspective. Evangelicals have often failed to do this in our approach to Mormonism. We have approached

Mormonism as one of many cults and then assessed specific teachings by using what I have called elsewhere a “doctrinal checklists” test.¹⁰ We ask what each group believes about the sole authority of the Bible: Jehovah’s Witnesses get a pass on this point, Christian Science and Mormonism a fail. Then we move to the Trinity, the substitutionary Atonement, the Virgin Birth, and so on.

What such an approach fails to take into account is the deep differences among religious perspectives. Bishop Stephen Neill—himself a veteran of decades of interfaith dialogue in India—criticized this comparative-method approach to the study of religions for the way it treats “all religions as commensurables.” We cannot simply lay different religious formulations about the divine side by side, Neill says, while ignoring the fact that in doing so we are, in each case, isolating the specific conception from other ideas with which it is interconnected. To do so is to detach the specific ideas of God “from the living experiences which has given rise to them. In so doing we rob them of their life,” thus ignoring “the living fabric of the religion from which the idea has been somewhat violently dissevered.”¹¹

The proper alternative is to enter into the perspective of the person representing another faith, trying as much as possible to place ourselves “within” the framework of the other belief system, in order to probe the deep questions that are being asked within that framework. To do this is to make genuine communication possible. And this, in turn, means setting aside our much-too-common temptation to win rhetorical victories that cut off any interesting conversations.



Our recent efforts at Mormon-evangelical dialogue have been characterized by this empathetic approach: a mutual desire to learn, a spirit of genuine listening. For me this has meant coming to a much better understanding of specific Mormon teachings that had been troubling me deeply.

One of the most challenging issues in this regard is the “being” of God. It is difficult to think of a Mormon teaching that is more offensive to the theological sensitivities of adherents to traditional Christian theology than the notion that the members of the Godhead are “of one species” with human beings.¹² The mainstream of both the Jewish and Christian

traditions are united in insisting upon a vast ontological gap between the Creator and human creatures. God and human beings are of different orders of “being.” The God of the Bible is seen as the *totaliter aliter*, the Wholly Other who infinitely transcends his creation. From such a perspective, nothing could be further from the truth than the thesis that God and humankind are “of one species.”

On the doctrinal checklist approach to get to the point of recognizing that disagreement is basically to shut down the conversation. What evangelicals, along with others in Judaism and Christianity, take to be an essential—even non-negotiable—doctrine about the nature of God stands in stark opposition to Mormon teaching. What more can be said?

The fact is, there *is* much more to be discussed. We can ask why it is that Mormonism wants God to be so like us that Mormons insist upon a “one species” understanding of God and humans. I have explored this question in writing on a couple of occasions with a focus on the historical context in which Mormonism arose,¹³ observing that Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism and Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Science teachings all showed up in the same period as the emergence of Mormonism. Those three metaphysical perspectives obviously differed from each other in key respects. Indeed, in the case of Mormonism and Christian Science, they were exact opposites, with Joseph Smith arguing that everything is physical, so that even God has a physical body, while Mary Baker Eddy espoused the philosophy that everything is spirit, with the appearance of matter resulting from a sinful delusion.

On a deeper level, however, Smith, Emerson, and Eddy shared a common religious motivation. Each of them wanted to bring the realm of the divine nearer—to reduce the ontological distance between God and human beings. The founders of both transcendentalism and Christian Science, for example, would have no difficulty endorsing the Mormon claim that God and human beings are of “the same species,” even though they would diverge in their respective metaphysical accounts.

What these reduce-the-distance theologies also had in common was that they emerged in an environment shaped significantly by the high Calvinism of New England Puritanism. And I have observed that it can be plausibly argued that New England theology, while it rightly, from an

orthodox Christian perspective, stressed the legitimate *metaphysical* distance between God and his human creatures, at the same time it often fostered an unhealthy *spiritual* distance between the Calvinist deity and his human subjects. Thus it should not surprise us that movements arose to shrink that spiritual distance, even if we evangelicals must deeply regret that they did so by also shrinking the distance of Being, rather than by drawing on corrective teachings—such as the incarnation and the person of the Holy Spirit—that can be found within orthodox Christian theology.

This historical analysis is supported by the case set forth by Janice Knight in her 1994 *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts*. Knight, an English professor at the University of Chicago, distinguishes between two schools of thought within the orthodox Calvinism of American Puritanism. One view, represented by William Ames, depicts God as a distant sovereign before whom human beings must live in reverence in the presence of transcendent mystery. In this conception, a pattern of spirituality developed where the believer's relationship to God was dominated by metaphors like master/servant and king/subject. To be sure, a warmer piety often showed up in this context but always against the background that everything else had to be understood with reference to God as "an exacting lord" and a "demanding covenanter."¹⁴

Knight finds a significant alternative within Puritanism to Ames's conception of sovereign power as the primary attribute of God. She details the ways in which some American Puritans looked to Richard Sibbes, Ames's contemporary in Old England, for their theological inspiration. The Sibbesians offered a Calvinist conception of God in whom mercy and not power was primary. Here was a clear alternative to Ames's view of a deity to whom, as Knight puts it, "the only bridge was the contractual covenant, not the personal Christ."¹⁵

Sibbesian Calvinism never abandoned the deep conviction of divine sovereignty. But it did downplay any notion of an *arbitrary* sovereignty by stressing images of divine intimacy, as in Sibbes's assurance that God "applies himself to us, and hath taken upon himself near relations, that he might be near us in goodness. He is a father, and everywhere to maintain us. He is a husband, and everywhere to help. He is a friend, and everywhere to comfort and counsel. So his love it is a near love. Therefore, he has taken

upon him the nearest relations, that we may never want [that is, miss out on] God and the testimonies of his love.”¹⁶

One can find clear hints in Mormon writings that Mormonism was in its own way looking for something like the Sibbesian alternative to that strain of Calvinist orthodoxy that emphasized the spiritual distance between God and humanity. One example: the Mormon philosopher Sterling McMurrin saw Mormon metaphysics as seeking to eliminate traditional Christian theology’s insistence on the “strange distance that separates God from the world of human struggle, aspiration, and tragedy.”¹⁷

McMurrin’s comment points to an important agenda to be addressed by evangelicals and Mormons in dialogue. What are the questions—the deep spiritual questions—to which the “one species” teaching is an answer? What are Mormons attempting to bring about in their own spiritual quests in their efforts to reduce the metaphysical distance between themselves and the members of the Godhead? And—the corresponding topic to explore—what questions are evangelicals trying to answer in their insistence on God’s “Wholly Other-ness”?



In the early 1960s there was considerable attention given by Anglo-American philosophers to St. Anselm’s well-known “Ontological Argument” for the existence of God, the basic point of which is to show that once we grant the definition of God as “that Being than which no greater can be conceived,” then it is impossible to imagine God as nonexistent.

Much of the debate about this argument focused on technical philosophical topics, especially the question whether existence could be thought of as a “property” that something or someone possesses alongside of other properties, such as shape, size, and the like. And it was not uncommon for some Christian believers who witnessed these discussions to question their value. Why would anyone think that one could establish a “proof” for the existence of the God of the Bible by means of an abstract argument regarding “the Being than which no greater can be conceived”? A natural response from a faith perspective was to quote the well-known line attributed to Blaise Pascal: “Not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!”

One philosopher who joined the philosophical fray was Norman Malcolm, a devout Christian and a longtime professor at Cornell University. In an essay he wrote on the subject, he offered his own case for seeing the ontological argument as having some philosophical merit. After making his technical case, though, he also addressed the question of the spiritual relevance of the argument. This kind of argument, he observed, cannot be evaluated properly “without an understanding of the phenomena of human life that give rise to it.” Then he offered this explanation:

There is the phenomenon of feeling guilt for something that one has done or thought or felt or for a disposition one has. One wants to be free of this guilt. But sometimes the guilt is felt to be so great that one is sure that nothing one can do oneself, nor any forgiveness by another human being, would remove it. One feels a guilt that is beyond all measure, a guilt “a greater than which cannot be conceived.” Paradoxically, it would seem, one nevertheless has an intense desire to have this incomparable guilt removed. One requires a forgiveness that is beyond all measure, a forgiveness “a greater than which cannot be conceived.” Out of such a storm of the soul, I am suggesting, there arises the conception of a forgiving mercy that is limitless, beyond all measure. This is one important feature of the Jewish and Christian conception of God.¹⁸

I find Malcolm’s observations about the importance of an “understanding of the phenomena of human life that give rise to” the conception of a “being than which no greater can be conceived” to be profoundly provocative. Why is it so important for us to be discussing together the nature—the “being”—of God? Malcolm is pointing us in a similar spiritual direction as Sterling McMurrin did when the Mormon philosopher insisted that undergirding the Mormon doctrine of the nature of the divine is to have access to a God who is not far removed from “the world of human struggle, aspiration, and tragedy.”

Evangelicals have not typically attributed these spiritual impulses to Mormons. The title of the viciously anti-Mormon film is telling in this regard: we have portrayed Mormons as “God-makers”—people who, rather than submitting to the power and authority of the God of the Bible

choose instead to create a God in their own human image in order to lift themselves into the realm of the divine. The fundamental question driving Mormon theology and spirituality in such a depiction is “How can I become my own god?”

I do not recognize that depiction in the Mormons with whom I have been in dialogue. Here, for example, is what my friend Robert Millet has written about the kind of Christianity that he embraces in a very personal way: to be a follower of Jesus, he says, is to be a person “who acknowledges their fallen state and their need for redemption; one who recognizes that the only source of redemption is through the person and power of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Savior; one who receives the proffered gift of atonement by covenant with Christ, seeks for, and obtains a remission of sins and a new heart.”¹⁹

In that very evangelical-sounding testimony, Millet uses a form of the verb *proffer* in referring to what is provided in the atoning work of Christ. As one who pays close attention to the specific language employed by my Mormon friends when they describe the Atonement, I have noticed the frequent use of the same verb—not one whose use I come across much elsewhere these days—in writings of other Mormon scholars. Here, for example, is another Latter-day Saint friend, Spencer Fluhman, on the subject of divine grace: Mormons, he writes, “stand with the rest of Christendom, ‘all amazed . . . [and] confused at the grace he so fully proffers us.’”²⁰

My puzzlement about the use of the verb was solved when I discovered that my Mormon friends were alluding to one of the two or three most frequently sung hymns at Mormon sacrament services, one that begins with this verse:

I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,
 Confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me.
 I tremble to know that for me he was crucified,
 That for me, a sinner, he suffered, he bled and died.

The hymn goes on to express wonderment that Jesus would leave heaven’s throne to “rescue a soul so rebellious and proud as mine,” with this chorus after each of the three verses:

Oh, it is wonderful that he should care for me
 Enough to die for me!
 Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful to me!²¹



What do the spiritual dynamics expressed in that hymn mean for our continuing conversations about the “being” of God? Obviously the serious theological disagreement remains. But it does bring the dialogue down to issues that are heartfelt for both evangelicals and Mormons. We each testify that we “stand amazed” at the gift of salvation “proffered” to us by means of the cross of Calvary. When we ask the question “What would it take to save the likes of us?” we both look to that cross in awe and wonder. Where we disagree theologically is in our very different answers to the question of how best to understand the nature of the God who makes that gift possible. Is he the deity who is “of one species” with us, or is he “the Wholly Other,” separated from us in his “being” by an infinite ontological gap?

Norman Malcolm’s suggested pattern of going from our spiritual need for a Savior to our theological formulations about the nature of God is a helpful one in this regard. Our shared amazement at the gift of salvation has to do with a deep sense of our own sinfulness—each of us sees ourselves as “a soul so rebellious and proud as mine,” as the sacrament hymn puts it. A sinfulness “than which no greater can be conceived” requires a love “than which no greater can be conceived.” And such a love can be “proffered” only by a Savior “than which no greater can be conceived.”

Again, those shared spiritual concerns point us to important questions to pursue with each other in our continuing dialogues. And the arguments are not easy ones to resolve. But it is important to focus on the right questions. If we can discover that we share a deep sense of our own unworthiness, and that we acknowledge together that only a “proffered” gift of amazing grace can rescue us from our guilty condition, this can mean a more productive—spiritually and theologically—stage in our discussions together.

Focusing on the right questions certainly also means a change in the tone of our efforts at mutual understanding—no small accomplishment, given the history of our angry exchanges in the past! It is a step worth taking: engaging in a dialogue that takes place as we stand together at the

cross, “amazed at the love Jesus offers” us, and “confused at the grace that so fully he proffers” us there, at Calvary.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Ari L. Goldman, *The Search for God at Harvard* (New York: Random House, 1991), 33.
2. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 214.
3. J. Spencer Fluhman provides abundant examples of early anti-Mormon rhetoric in chapters 1 and 2 of his *A Peculiar People: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
4. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 148–49.
5. Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 329.
6. Shipps, *Sojourner*, 337–38.
7. Shipps, *Sojourner*, 345.
8. Shipps, *Sojourner*, 347.
9. Shipps, *Sojourner*, 356.
10. See Richard J. Mouw, *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 15–17.
11. Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue with Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 3.
12. See, for example, “Discourse by Elder O. F. Whitney,” *Millennial Star*, January 17, 1895, 34.
13. See Richard J. Mouw, “Joseph Smith’s Theological Challenges: From Revelation and Authority to Metaphysics,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), especially 218–19.

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14. Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 78.
15. Knight, *Orthodoxies*, 77.
16. Richard Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes* (Edinburgh: J. Nichol, 1862–64), 4:196; quoted by Knight, *Orthodoxies*, 83.
17. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959), 14.
18. Norman Malcolm's contribution to a symposium on "Contemporary Views of the Ontological Argument," in *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), 158.
19. Robert L. Millet, *The Vision of Mormonism: Pressing the Boundaries of Christianity* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2007), xx.
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