

Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen, eds. *Mormonism  
in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies.*

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Reviewed by Douglas J. Davies

**M**artin E. Marty opens his brief foreword to this extensive volume with the question “Why bother?” Why bother writing a book comparing conventional Christian doctrines with Latter-day Saint beliefs when “those who are curious about religion . . . are likely to be busy readers, who have to budget the time” they can devote to a volume like this? (vii). One potential answer is that Latter-day Saint scholars, having studied Christian theology at “Harvard or other graduate schools” while their colleagues in turn know little about Mormon theology, are in a certain kind of “responsive-defensive mode” (ix); hence, a book comprised of dialogues comes naturally.

This project originated when David Paulsen was appointed to hold the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding at Brigham Young University (1994–98), a position set aside for “increasing mutual understanding . . . between Latter-day Saints and other Christians” (xi). Likewise, the preface clearly sets the aim of the book as being “to foster conversations between Latter-day Saints and others in the Christian world” (xiii). What might appear to traditional Christians as a “responsive-defensive” act by Latter-day Saints could, however, just as easily be viewed as a proselytizing move; holders of the Evans Chair could be seen as merely intellectual missionaries. It is far more important in my opinion, however, to think of people like David Paulsen as individuals whose native faith, lifelong reflection, and sense of charity prompt them to “foster conversations” with others who share similar interests in the nature of life and God and the philosophical theology of religion but who differ on the radical issue of Joseph Smith as a prophet of a restored religion.

So, why bother with this book, especially if one is not LDS? Some academics will do so because they are invited to participate by LDS peers, some apologists will because they wish to convert Mormons, and others will because Mormonism stands in sharp contrast on the social profile

of religious presences, especially in the United States. In terms of both theology and religious studies, another valuable reason for “bothering” with this lengthy book is that it presents an example of Christianity that is thinking about itself. Theologies should try to exemplify self-reflection through the preferred thought-forms of particular times and places as people seek understanding of God, the world, and human existence. As is the case with this book, human curiosity and self-reflection are often fostered through mutual discussion. This is to be applauded, especially given the motives of power and status that often drive human identity. Many, even in these postmodern times, still pursue a sense of truth, as did young Joseph Smith, without whom this volume would not exist. Taking Mormonism as one movement within Christianity, we find on a theological level what LDS missionaries often find on a street level, namely, the need of using existing Christian knowledge as a basis for explaining Mormonism’s own rationale and *raison d’être*. Christianity is an immensely complex tradition whose theological debates enable it to “come to itself” over time, though sometimes one message predominates and shouts down others. But in this book, as the non-LDS contributor Clark H. Pinnock puts it, “Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are finding a voice” (490).

Each of the book’s ten major chapters provides “a dialogue” on a single theologian or tradition within the standard syllabus of Christian theology. An extensive traditional Christian account is followed by a Latter-day Saint response; sometimes there are further rejoinders. Acting almost as monograph essays, many of the opening accounts serve as valuable introductions to their topics. Critically speaking, these accounts would be better served by a more thorough index (such topics as hell and Satan are missing) and by a unified description of contributors.

Donald K. McKim and Roger R. Keller discuss the theology of Karl Barth; Dennis P. McCann and Richard Sherlock discuss the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr; and Joseph L. Price and Truman G. Madsen discuss the theology of Paul Tillich. Thematic chapters deal with process (David Ray Griffin and James McLachlan), liberation (Robert McAfee Brown and Warner Woodforth), feminist (Rosemary Radford Reuther and Camille Williams), womanist (Dwight N. Hopkins with Linda E. Thomas and Valerie M. Hudson with Alma Don Sorensen), and black theologies (Dwight N. Hopkins and Eugene England). Then follows myth theology (Gary Dorrien, Kent E. Robson, James E. Faulconer and D. Gregory Sapp) and theology as hermeneutics (David Tracy, James E. Siebach, James L. Faulconer, and Benjamin Huff). A final chapter by Clark H. Pinnock and David Paulsen deals with openness theology. Given Mormonism’s origins, it is understandable that Protestant thought predominates within the

opening accounts, with exceptions including parts of David Tracy's highly valuable contribution (448–62).

I found Gary Dorrien's exposition of Langdon Gilkey's "Myth-Creative Liberal Theology" among the most interesting in the book for two reasons. First, the chapter demonstrates the book's prime methodological shortcoming by outlining a non-LDS theology with practically no reference to LDS thought, followed by an exclusively LDS response, then a rejoinder by Dorrien, followed by another response, rejoinder, and reply. This dialectical exchange may be inevitable when relatively few Christian thinkers have a natural interest in Mormonism, and Mormons often know little about twentieth-century Christian theologies. Perhaps a virtue of this book will be to prompt natural interest on all sides rather than apologetic or invited interest, which will lead to informed people talking together about an issue rather than simply talking about their own beliefs or theological methods.

Second, and far more importantly, this chapter deals with a question relevant to all theological traditions, namely, are doctrines myths? Are theological formulations simply creative outgrowths of the human condition, including the experience of what they call God, or is there something akin to a revelation from deity to humanity in them? Doubtless, this question relates to how faith is conceived within different traditions as well as to issues of dogma and authority. The question of myth is, perhaps, part of "the difficulty of being religious" as Faulconer's response intimates, though his own assumption that "secularism washes everything in gray" (435) does not show the greatest appreciation of some secularists nor does it acknowledge that sometimes within the theological arena the simple assertion of dogma prevails. Certainly, in relation to doctrine and myth, it would have been valuable to see the LDS notion of a plan of salvation (not cited in the index) explored in relation to how other theological traditions and their churches rationalize their belief and basis for authority.

Indeed, the confessional nature of theological methods is rather underplayed in this book and raises profound issues of how, for example, theology and religion are taught within the United States in public and private universities. For some readers, there may be an air of unreality about this book—an air not unfamiliar in many Christian theologies and systematic philosophies—caused by a perceptible gap between belief and ethical-ritual practice. Keller's clear but brief comments on temple rites (49–51) and Tracy's appeal for a link between theology and spirituality (461) are notable exceptions. Perhaps this might prompt a companion volume, much needed in Mormon studies, in which traditional Christians and Mormons are allowed to engage in dialogue with each other about

their rites. LDS authors need to discover how most effectively to treat the rites that relate to their religious experience and its allied beliefs, and share these—as best they may—with other Christians, who in turn need to do the same. In this regard, Keller’s reminder of the vital interplay of orthopraxy and orthodoxy (55) in daily living is valuable and needs developing, especially in light of LDS temples, which stand as a prime symbolic expression of Joseph Smith’s theological rethinking of Christianity. Certainly, then, this book is worth “bothering about.” However, it may not be suitable for sustained reading, which prompts a final question as to whether the LDS responses to the distinctive thought-worlds portrayed here are too monochromatic in nature. Still, *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies* stands as an excellent resource for referencing and teaching.

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