

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

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Reviewed by Jennifer Lane

This volume of academic discussions provides an important new resource to both LDS and non-LDS scholars as well as an educated, nonscholarly audience. It consists of eleven “dialogues,” which include overviews, responses, rejoinders, and replies. Because the various authors share a background in contemporary Christian thought, some of the essays may be initially disorienting for Latter-day Saints without academic theological or philosophical training. On the other hand, Christians and most non-LDS scholars encountering Latter-day Saint belief systems for the first time may also occasionally feel as though they have entered into uncharted territory. This volume is the first to offer navigation of these theological landscapes to all parties. Donald W. Musser begins by giving an excellent overview of twentieth-century Christian thought; his background as professor of religious studies at Stetson University and co-editor of the *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology* (Abingdon, 2003) makes him an ideal co-editor with David L. Paulsen, Brigham Young University professor of philosophy.

It is precisely in offering an entry into both worlds where this volume succeeds most admirably. The book cannot, of course, offer a definitive statement of “Mormonism.” The voices of the LDS writers give thoughtful but distinctive engagement with the most important strands of mainline or liberal theology. The volume might better express the diversity of these voices if it were entitled *Latter-day Saints in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*. The LDS writers all express their understanding of the fundamental doctrines of the Restoration as well as their personal response to contemporary issues of Christian thought; these responses are, however, clearly individual and, while uniformly faithful, cannot be said to

represent “Mormonism” as some kind of static entity. Many other faithful and thoughtful Latter-day Saints will have their own perspective on a number of the issues. In fact, the volume does contain multiple perspectives on a given topic, thus offering a depth and richness to the discussion.

One striking example of these various viewpoints is found in considering the question of theology itself. Does the belief in ongoing revelation and prophecy require that Latter-day Saints avoid the analysis and speculations (the mantic-sophic contrast) of theology? Can LDS thought about religion be described as a systematic theology, or is it more accurate to say that we focus on obedience and practice (orthopraxy) rather than creating a fixed system of doctrines (orthodoxy)? Or do we inevitably “do” theology every time we think about religion? In response to David Tracy’s comments in “A Catholic View of Philosophy: Revelation and Reason,” Jim Siebach, James Faulconer, and Benjamin Huff all offer varying reflections on these questions.

For any of you Latter-day Saints who have wondered what it might be like to do graduate work in theology or religious studies, this volume offers an excellent introduction to the range of thought that has been central to mainline or liberal non-LDS twentieth-century theology. Here is your chance to find clear summaries on the thought of seminal theologians such as Barth, Niebuhr, and Tillich, as well as find discussions of process, liberation, feminist, black, womanist (theology from the perspective of minority women), and myth theology. The book’s scope also extends to more recent trends including theology as hermeneutics and openness theology. While previous publications, such as those initiated by Stephen E. Robinson and Robert L. Millet, have offered dialogues between Latter-day Saints and the Evangelical wing of Protestantism, until this volume there has been nothing that has tried to engage the intersection between Latter-day Saints and mainline or liberal theology. While some of these issues may not find universal appeal, for many people of broad intellectual curiosity there is much that they will find engaging and rewarding.

The title of this volume appropriately reflects the tendency in many cases for somewhat one-sided dialogue. The non-LDS writers’ initial task is to summarize their field of specialty to a general audience, a task that, given their academic experience and training, they are all eminently qualified to accomplish. They are not writing, however, so much “in dialogue with Mormonism” as offering a jumping-off point for discussion. Their summaries are typically presented without any significant reference to the LDS position. This lack is understandable given the dearth of understanding of the LDS position, which this volume is helping to correct. While making the volume less of a two-way dialogue, this format does permit

the theologians to speak in their own voice and not have their approach shaped by external issues or concerns.

Because of this structure, the LDS participants are placed more in a position of respondent. In these responses, they have a chance to travel on intellectual and personal journeys as they interact with the different fields of thought. Part of the richness of this volume is the extent to which each topic and each intellectual interaction has its own flavor and degree of warmth. This very personal interaction involves back-and-forth responses that help to reveal some of the core differences but also provides moving resonances between those in dialogue.

More explicit information on the history of these exchanges would have helped to explain the unevenness in some of these dialogues. In some instances, the participants had passed away before the publication of *Mormonism in Dialogue*, as is the case for Eugene England and Robert McAfee Brown. In the introduction, Martin E. Marty suggests that the volume is the product of a conference held in the 1990s, but David Paulsen has clarified elsewhere that while the structure of the book is dialogical, there was no actual face-to-face conference with these participants. Instead, as the Richard L. Evans Chair for Christian Understanding at Brigham Young University, he invited the non-LDS scholars to come and give several presentations on the BYU campus; the responses to their presentations were then written later. More background on the initial stages of bringing these participants to BYU and the decade-long process of turning this into a book would have helped both to highlight the groundbreaking role of Paulsen's effort in interfaith understanding and to clarify the development of this dialogue in the intervening years.

Examples of resonance and shared concern among the contributors to the book abound. Some striking examples are found in David Ray Griffin and James McLaughlin's discussion of process theology, in which they share a sense of the primacy of human agency and explore the implications of rejecting *creatio ex nihilo*. In this exchange, Latter-day Saints have the chance to fine-tune their thinking about what is implied in their beliefs about God's power and the role of human agency. Clark H. Pinnock and David L. Paulsen's discussion of openness theology is another example of respectful theological resonance and distinction. Essentially agreeing on their personal understanding of God's foreknowledge, they discuss other points of theological difference, including the issue of whether Latter-day Saints can be considered social trinitarians (the idea that the persons of the Trinity are united in a way other than the ontological unity found in classical trinitarian thought). The social and political implications of theology and its role in the public sphere are likewise amicably explored in Dennis P. McCann and Richard Sherlock's discussion of the theology of

Reinhold Niebuhr. Other examples of resonance are found in expressions of sympathy to general concerns and values, as is seen in Eugene England's response to black theology, Valerie M. Hudson's response to womanist theology, and Warner Woodworth's response to liberation theology.

While these essays represent a focus on our shared ideals, other essays highlight intrinsic tension as they expose fundamentally different premises and conclusions. Not surprisingly, the fundamental LDS beliefs about an embodied God, human beings as literal spirit children of God, and the nature of the Godhead, wind their way through many of these discussions. LDS divergence is most obvious in relation to thinkers like Karl Barth, but as Roger R. Keller observes, "common emphasis on the Savior binds the two thought systems together" (56). In a few cases, the positions presented by these contemporary Christian theologians are so influenced by modernism and scientific naturalism that they seem to redefine traditional categories of Christianity or even theism in general. This is Truman G. Madsen's evaluation of the theology of Paul Tillich, describing it as a naturalism "presented in biblical vocabulary with an existential swerve" (154).

The theological tension between Camille S. Williams and Rosemary Radford Reuther takes a somewhat feisty tone over the conclusions of feminist theologians, who see Christian tradition and their traditional understanding of the family as wrong and oppressive. The feeling of deep personal engagement comes through in all the essays of this volume, but in this case, the conviction of Williams and Reuther heightens the conflict. Their clash is, understandably, sometimes personal because it turns on the value and meaning of the lives women live today and throughout history. However, I think that overall there is always more light than heat, and throughout the volume there is surprisingly often a great deal of congenial warmth.

This volume offers an important chance to grapple with assumptions about reality and worldviews that are different than our own. While conducted on an academic level, the discussions and debates are clearly outlined and offer Latter-day Saints the chance to wrestle with some of the key intellectual trends of the twentieth century. Those of other faiths can also, in this helpful volume, work their way through both important similarities and profound differences with the faith of Latter-day Saints.

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