

Can Joseph Smith Save Us From The Evils of Modernity? A critical assessment of the post-modernist turn in Mormon apologetics.

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Society for the Study of Alternative Religions
Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting
Nov. 18, 2004

Last year while engaged in an e-mail discussion with a Mormon apologist, I encountered an interesting example of what appeared to be a new approach in defending Mormonism. He sent me a copy of a doctoral dissertation by Mormon theologian Daniel Wotherspoon called, *Awakening Joseph Smith: Mormon Resources for a Post-Modern Worldview*.¹ This dissertation was produced at the Claremont Graduate School, and Wotherspoon was awarded a Ph.D. for his work. It purports to demonstrate how the Mormon worldview offers potential answers to the difficulties raised by the unraveling of modernity.

What is interesting about Wotherspoon's work is that he embraces process theology as a paradigm for his analysis. More specifically, he accepts the project of "constructive post-modernism" as laid out by process theologian David Ray Griffin and colleagues in the SUNY series of books by that name.² Since Wotherspoon follows Griffin closely at a number of points, it will be helpful to briefly mention a few of Griffin's assumptions regarding modernity and postmodernity before delving deeper into this interpretation of Mormonism.

David Ray Griffin understands there to be two distinguishing marks of modernism. The first is the formal commitment to freedom. This entails both the rejection of beliefs based on authority rather than reason and experience, as well as the affirmation of free-will as a property of human nature. The second mark of modernity he refers to as the "substantive assumptions of modernism." They are the interpretation of nature in a "purely mechanistic way" and the limitation of human knowledge of the world to sense-perception. The dogmatic philosophical materialism and empiricism of the modern scientific worldview are in view here.³ The central problem with modernity is that it is unable to find room for God. This must be remedied if meaning is to be restored in the wake of modernity's failure. On the other hand, modernity's commitment to freedom is viewed as a positive value that is to be retained.

Before turning to the exposition of Wotherspoon's proposal, it is necessary to point out that both he and Griffin reject the nihilism and relativism of the deconstructionist thinking that typically goes under the banner of postmodernity. Referring to this stream of thought as "ultramodernism" or "mostmodern theology," Griffin argues that there is nothing "post" about it. Rather it is simply the taking of the presuppositions of modernism to their logical conclusions.⁴ On this point, at least, we can agree. As Thomas Oden has demonstrated, deconstructive postmodernity challenges the superstructure of modernity while continuing to accept its foundation of philosophical materialism as an unquestioned assumption.⁵ Unlike Oden, Griffin

rejects any return to historic orthodoxy as a simplistic return to a premodern stance; a move he considers untenable in light of current knowledge. The only way forward is through modernity.

Griffin's constructive postmodernism relies quite heavily on Whiteheadian metaphysics. Wotherspoon sees much to be admired in this, but prefers to reconfigure it in accordance with basic Mormon metaphysical doctrines. In addition, he also believes that inspiring the social action and change that postmodern society will need requires something other than the abstractions of Whitehead's "actual occasions" and "occasions of experience". Thus, it is in the symbolism of the Mormon story of creation and eternal progression that Wotherspoon hopes that humankind can find the values necessary to inspire it to meet the challenges ahead.⁶ The question that remains, then, is whether or not this thesis is justified. Wotherspoon's project is to convince us that it is. It is my intention to demonstrate in this paper the futility of this project, and redirect us to historic orthodoxy as the only hopeful way out of the postmodern morass.

I have organized my discussion of Wotherspoon's work under the headings of his view of God and reality, knowledge, values and purpose. An assessment follows at the end of the paper.

God and Reality

Wotherspoon correctly asserts early in his work that "...there can be very little chance of long-term societal successes proceeding from erroneous foundational understandings. Eventually, any wrong turn at the metaphysical level will reveal itself through some negative outcome at the behavioral level."⁷ It is no surprise, then, to discover that his argument rejects superficial pragmatism. He sees clearly that practice is the result of theory, and he sets out to construct a metaphysic that both avoids the pitfalls that beset modernity, while remaining authentically Mormon in its sensitivities. Remaining authentically Mormon is important for him as he views Mormonism as a new tradition, rather than just another variety of Christianity.⁸

In relation to the nature of God, Wotherspoon begins with a discussion of the problem of evil. He accepts the typical skeptic's formulation of the problem as a basis for denying the existence of an all-powerful and perfectly good deity. He understands there to be an unresolvable contradiction between these two attributes and follows the process theologians in resolving the problem by jettisoning God's omnipotence. God is viewed as the most powerful being in the universe, though he is not alone in having real power, nor does he share power via voluntary self-limitation.⁹

Freedom, or creative power, is a characteristic of the most fundamental units of reality. For Wotherspoon these units are the "intelligences" that Joseph Smith postulated as the precursors to human existence. God's control over the universe is limited by the autonomous freedom of these intelligences. This supposedly resolves the problem of evil by first of all making the existence of evil inevitable, since true freedom will certainly at some point actualize evil choices. Secondly, it absolves God of responsibility for evil, as he is only able to exercise *persuasive* power over other entities in the universe.¹⁰ Therefore, while he does his best against evil, he cannot use

coercive power to stem it. It must be addressed by persuading autonomous intelligences to conform to the pattern of good that God sets forth.

Another reason that modernity made God unbelievable was the disenchantment of the world by materialistic science. This served to remove from the universe any natural place for the sacred. The material building blocks of nature were stripped of their innate “aliveness” when the premodern animistic worldview was replaced by the notions that “(1) all matter was inert and devoid of experience and aim and, (2) incapable of acting at a distance, that all motion was the result of causation by contact...” The desacralization of nature resulted in a dualism of supernatural and natural that gave rise to an unsolvable mind-body problem, which modernity resolved by simply throwing out the supernatural.¹¹

Worther spoon is not satisfied that the inert matter of the modernist worldview is capable of producing consciousness. He follows Griffin in explaining the emergence of consciousness by postulating panexperientialism.¹² This means that in some sense all that exists has some qualities of sentience, though not in the sense of having fully developed personality and consciousness. This incipient sentience is the basis of the emergence of consciousness.

Worther spoon’s notion of intelligences as experiencing beings is informed by Griffin’s assertion that all of reality is ultimately creative. Griffin is himself heavily influenced by Whitehead’s notion of ultimate reality as a process of “experiential events” or “actual occasions” rather than discontinuous material substance. These experiential events exist only momentarily and they have an inner reality (experience) that differs *in degree only* from consciousness as we know it. They have a form of non-sensory perception, and an elementary aim or purpose from which they create themselves. Ultimate creativity is described as chaotic, uncaused freedom. God, then, is not the ultimate reality, but rather the ultimate actuality, the principle that provides order for the chaos of ultimate creativity. The chaos of ultimate creativity and freedom is the ultimate reality.¹³

Worther spoon does not define ultimate reality in exactly the same way. He views Mormon intelligences as enduring entities, giving them a more continuous nature than Whitehead’s actual occasions. As aspects of the most fundamental reality, they do take up this notion of uncaused freedom and creativity as their essential characteristic. As experiencing realities, intelligences have the creative potential to experience joy. They can grow in complexity and the experience of joy until they quite literally evolve into gods.¹⁴ A continuity of being is thus proposed that extends from the formless chaos of absolute freedom, to the highly structured form that is consonant with the perfection of deity. This is, of course, just another manifestation of the idea of the Great Chain of Being that has posed a challenge to Christian theism for centuries.¹⁵

The continuity of being as described by Wotherspoon indicates a tendency on his part to collapse the individually existing intelligences into an ontological monism. This represents what appears to be a significant departure from the traditional conception of Mormon metaphysics, characterized as “a thoroughgoing pluralism” by Mormon philosopher Sterling McMurrin.

McMurrin notes that in Mormon ontology, “There is no all-inclusive, single reality that is the being of all the others, in which they are in some way inherent, of which they are facets, expressions, or aspects.”¹⁶ In opposition to this, Wotherspoon adopts a monism which he admits is influenced by the “New Age physics” of Fritjof Capra and David Bohm¹⁷. He asserts that “the spacio-temporal field of the new physics is that which is, ultimately.”¹⁸ Hence, “intelligences can helpfully be considered as rough equivalents to various interacting regions within the undivided wholeness, (as) ‘patterns’ of energy.”¹⁹ Much like a vortex of water swirling in a stream, intelligences are eddies in the flow of cosmic energy. They are patterns of energy within a localized wholeness.

The combination of panexperientialism and the continuity of being supposedly resolves the problem of mind-body dualism that eventually led modernity to abandon the reality of spirit and embrace materialism. If all things are experiencing and capable of perception, then matter inherently is endowed with consciousness like properties.²⁰ The evolution of mind from such matter is a natural expression of these inherent properties, not an epiphenomenon in need of a supernatural explanation.

All complex objects are composed of organized intelligences. Of course, it is clear from simple observation that there is a distinction between entities such as animals and people, and entities such as rocks. The distinction is not to be explained by ontological dualism, but rather an “organizational duality.” All intelligences are self-determining, whether they compose sentient or non-sentient beings. However, objects such as rocks are “aggregational societies” of intelligences, while animals are “compound individuals” in which “‘an all-inclusive subject’ is said to have emerged that can coordinate the input and activity of each individual entity in such a way as to make self direction apparent.”²¹ Even in the case of non-sentient beings each atom is said to experience a measure of joy and satisfaction in relation to other entities.²² “...all existents, from the most basic to the most complex, do not differ ontologically (at least in terms of their internal constitutions) but only in terms of present abilities and capacities.”²³

Given this continuity of being and basic animistic perspective, Wotherspoon argues that ultimately matter and spirit are different in degree but not in kind. Spirit is, as Mormonism has always held, a more refined form of matter.²⁴ Thus, the notion that god is an exalted man with a physical body is a natural extension of the notion of the material nature of all things.²⁵ Since Einstein, matter itself is seen to be an expression of the energy that is the ultimate reality.

Clearly, in spite of his monism, Wotherspoon advocates Mormon polytheism rather than pantheism, or the panentheism of typical process theology. He makes this explicit in noting that the creation was performed by a team of gods.²⁶ His gods are essentially finite aspects of the uncreated and eternal universe of the spacio-temporal energy field.

Wotherspoon is quite content with this state of affairs as he holds that the orthodox view of God is behind many of the negative features of modernity.

the traditional theistic worldview, could have helped shape some of the most negative features of our current society. For instance, the idea that God can bring worlds in and out of existence *ex nihilo*, "from nothing," rather than through "working with" other existents, and the notion that God can act by divine fiat and the exercise of *coercive* power, might be understood as contributors to the nuclearism and militarism that threaten us all.²⁷

Rather than being a sovereign authority, God is himself simply an example of intelligence in its most advanced form. Godhood in Mormonism is analogous to buddahood in Buddhism; it is a state of being or empowerment distinct from the person who has achieved it.²⁸ In this state, God is in a relationship of dependence upon other intelligences for his own sense of purpose and fulfillment. Citing B. H. Roberts, Wotherspoon concurs that God's own perfection depends on other intelligences, since he cannot be complete unless he is helping them to advance.²⁹

The interdependence between God and all other intelligences is an aspect of the internal relatedness of all things. According to Wotherspoon, modernity errs in holding that causality and influence is a question of external relatedness or direct physical contact. This view is limited in that it does not allow for the possibility of one entity to influence another across distances. However, in a postmodern view, informed by the new physics, all things are interrelated because they participate in each other's fundamental make up. Things are internally related, meaning that they constitute one another's being. Hence, the interconnectedness of all things is a part of existence.³⁰

In order to explain and flesh out this notion of interconnectedness, Wotherspoon appeals to the Mormon notion of the Light of Christ. Drawing from section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, he argues that the Light of Christ explains how "embodied Gods" limited by space and time, can still be immanent in the entire universe. The Light of Christ appears to be like an energy that unifies the gods, it is the creative and sustaining power of the immanent God, a unifying power that is internal to all enduring entities.³¹ All intelligences contain "virtue" and "intelligence" as qualities that enable them to be "influential everywhere in the universe-system, by being 'in' all things."³² The only distinction is in the degree of influence, the gods having it in the highest degree.

In order to give this concept plausibility beyond simply the quotation of Mormon scripture, Wotherspoon links it to his discussion of the new physics. Specifically, he follows David Bohm's conceptualization of reality as an undivided wholeness. Reality is viewed as analogous to a holograph. Just as the entire image of a holograph can be reproduced from one of its parts, so the entire universe is said to be implicated in each of its parts.³³ Hence, all entities can influence other entities. Every intelligence has the same capacities as the gods, only in lesser degree. Being is power, the ability to influence or to give and receive influence.³⁴

Knowledge

The question here involves both knowledge in the sense of conceptual knowledge of reality as well as the experiential knowledge of God. Wotherspoon holds that the empiricist, or sensationist, epistemology of modernity leads quite naturally to relativism.³⁵ Having banned knowledge of God from human experience by relegating him to the Kantian realm of the noumenal, modernism discovered that the knowledge of everything else eventually collapsed into it as well. If all knowledge is based in sense perception, ultimately the only thing one can know is his or her own perceptions. The nature of their relation with reality must forever remain a mystery. A sensationist epistemology cannot provide a basis for affirming the existence of the real world outside of the mind nor can it account for the concept of time.³⁶

The solution to this impasse is to reject empiricism as the sole source of knowledge and affirm a non-sensory form of the direct perception of reality. This leads Wotherspoon to agree with the constructive postmodernists in their

affirmation of "nonsensory perception" as the basic experiential mode of all constituents of the universe. This is only logical given the acceptance of panexperientialism, according to which all individuals enjoy a form of perceptual experience, since only a very small percentage of existents have sense organs. Most of the communication in the universe, according to panexperientialism, occurs at a deeper level, from which sensory perception is, by hypothesis, derivative.³⁷

Non-sensory perception is the basic experiential mode of all constituents in the universe. Wotherspoon reasons that this must be the case since, “The Gods could not run the universe if only entities with sense organs were capable of organizing and sharing experiences.”³⁸ The solution to the problem of knowledge is thus derived from Wotherspoon’s monistic ontology. The problem of modernity having banished God from human experience is resolved by creating a continuity of being that extends from the formless chaos of absolute freedom to the highly structured form that is consonant with the perfection of deity, and then imbuing that being with the unifying notion of the “Light of Christ.” Given that the difference between God and other entities is only one of degree and not kind, and that all things interpenetrate each other, it is only natural that sentient beings, such as humans, are capable of the direct non-sensory perception of the divine.

Purpose

To this point in our discussion we have dealt with a fairly abstract exposition of Wotherspoon’s project. However, the use of the phrase “awakening Joseph Smith” in the title of his dissertation points towards the more practical aspects of what this proposal involves. The metaphysical system proposed here is not intended as simply a reinterpretation of LDS theology in terms of Whitehead. It is supposedly grounded in an interpretation of Smith’s preaching, teaching and

revelations. Smith's point was not abstract philosophizing, but rather to give concrete answers to questions concerning salvation and the meaning of life, and to build a church. Thus, Wotherspoon hopes to show that it is Smith's thinking that is decisive for his postmodern project.

While all of Smith's revelations in Mormon scripture, as well as his sermons, are to be taken as resources for constructing an LDS postmodern theology, it is the story of creation and eternal progression that are most significant in Wotherspoon's presentation. Specifically, he focuses on the King Follett Discourse and the portrayal of creation in Mormon scripture. From this we gain further details of the nature of the universe and our place in it.

It was, of course, Smith's famous King Follett discourse that revealed most clearly his notion of a God with a physical body who was once a man like ourselves.³⁹ Smith portrayed God as instituting the laws by means of which other spirits could advance to the state of godhood just as he did.⁴⁰ Involved in this is an explicit denial of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. God does not bring a universe into being out of nothing. Rather, he co-exists with other uncreated entities. He is located in an ocean of chaotic, unorganized being, which he is compelled to organize and induce towards greater stages of complexity, being and power.⁴¹

In this scheme, Wotherspoon asserts that all basic elements of the universe have the creative power to actualize themselves and influence others.⁴² This opens the door for an evolutionary interpretation of reality in which intelligences are seen to be in a constant process of development.⁴³ Accordingly, Mormons embrace the notion of "eternal progression." The Mormon thus sees "the entire telos of the universe as ever increasing development or growth."⁴⁴ Intelligences can grow in complexity and the experience of joy until they quite literally evolve into gods.⁴⁵ However, this upward growth is not guaranteed, since ultimately all intelligences are self-determining. Some may move in the wrong direction. The choice is either to move up the Chain of Being to more complexity, organization and virtue or to move down towards chaos, dissolution and evil.⁴⁶

Mormon polytheism comes into play at this point, as Wotherspoon notes Smith's teaching that the creation, or organization of the world, was planned and carried out by a council of gods. God the Father is the highest god for those of us in this world-system. There are other, lesser gods who are pursuing their own growth to higher levels of being. They do so by accepting their proper roles, the chief of which is to aid other beings who are lower on the scale in their own advancement.⁴⁷

In order to achieve movement in the proper direction, towards more power, complexity and joy, the lower level intelligences need the assistance of these gods. As the basic units of differentiation in the all-encompassing energy field, intelligences are distinct individual units that hold within them the potential and tendency to direct themselves to greater levels of organization and complexity.⁴⁸ But in order to achieve this they require a pattern that will guide them into the proper form. The creative activity of the gods is precisely their provision of the pattern by means

of which intelligences can accomplish this. Hence, Wotherspoon says, “The creation process should be thought of as a dynamic interaction between entities of greater and lesser complexity in which each acknowledges and responds appropriately to the other.”⁴⁹

Creation, then, does not mean that the gods took raw, inanimate matter and bent it to their wills, forging it into the world with all its constituents. They have no coercive power. They simply proposed patterns for the intelligences to embody and then had to wait on each element, as they created the world, to see if they would be obeyed. According to Wotherspoon, “the only real power the Gods have comes through their ability to ‘persuade’ other eternally existent elements to join in their plan.”⁵⁰ While this may seem like a very tentative business, it is argued that the foundational stuff of the universe has a self-organizing power that calls it to greater complexity. The simple elements *desire* this greater complexity, so they respond positively when they are called out by the more advanced.⁵¹

This does not mean that the gods’ creative patterns are necessarily obeyed in all cases. Some collections of intelligences may respond by calling forth new, unanticipated patterns, while others might make choices that cause them to move backwards towards chaos and dissolution.⁵² Each intelligence is said to be a concrete fact of existence co-eternal with God, yet the entities they comprise may evolve or devolve depending on the capacity of the intelligences to hold to the pattern they are given.⁵³ Wotherspoon describes the Mormon conception of reality “as ‘one eternal round’ of world-systems coming into and out of existence, but always with the purpose of helping everything achieve greater growth and enjoyment.”⁵⁴ Whether or not this growth and enjoyment actually occurs is a question of autonomy of the individual intelligences.

Values

Wotherspoon is quite open about his agenda to promote social change by means of his construction of a postmodern Mormon theology. Current social problems are the result of bad theory, he says, and he hopes that Mormonism will be able to contribute to correcting this problem.⁵⁵ He believes that Mormon metaphysics resonate with other efforts to “frame a postmodern worldview capable of underwriting and inspiring a peaceful, sustainable society” as well as suggesting “several new approaches and possibilities for that discussion.”⁵⁶ Defending this thesis is the purpose of the dissertation.

Wotherspoon argues that Mormonism is better positioned to affirm the intrinsic value of all things than either historic Christian orthodoxy or the materialist modernist view of reality. He asserts that

it is much easier to awaken others to take seriously the notion of the intrinsic value of all things with a vision that claims right up front, as does Mormonism, that the entire cosmos is made up of something one can reasonably call "enduring entities," which vary only along a continuum of growth and complexity. Such a view is capable of inspiring many more people, because of the way it lends

momentum to the idea that each moment in an element's life makes a concrete difference in its capacity for experiencing joy or growth.⁵⁷

If intrinsic value is to be given to enduring entities, or entities that are able to experience, or entities that are able to know some kind of joy, then LDS ontology fits the bill, since the intelligences possess all of these attributes.⁵⁸ Hence, he argues that while the dualism of traditional orthodoxy devalues the non-spiritual world, Mormon panexperientialist ontology allows a better ethical stance towards those things “that are not us”.⁵⁹ The problem with modernity was that because of the tendency of science to reduce everything to their smallest discreet parts, it saw things as different in kind, not just in degree. Therefore, nature became a thing to be exploited.⁶⁰ Since all things are in a sense, living, capable of experiencing, and ultimately interconnected, they all have equal value.

It was previously noted that the traditional view of God as all-powerful supposedly creates an ethic that places primary value on power. This purportedly gave rise both to rampant militarism, culminating in the nuclear threat, and the destruction of the environment as a result of the drive to dominate it. In addition, it serves to legitimate oppressive authoritarian regimes, thus supporting inequality and injustice. Specifically, it is the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* that is the supposed source of this. That is, if God creates the world from nothing, rather than in cooperation with other pre-existent entities, then he literally is the source of *all* power. The metaphysical limitations that this places on human freedom are translated into limitations on human freedom in political and social relationships. Oppression is the inevitable result.⁶¹

By stripping God of his creatorial sovereignty, and hence his coercive power, this problem is said to be remedied. When God is conceptualized as exercising persuasive rather than coercive power, it will encourage the imitation of this mode of operation, leading to more peaceful relations. Acknowledging that all humans are capable of achieving godhood supposedly provides motivation for “a profound respect for the rights and abilities for self-determination held by every existent.”⁶² The belief that all of us are on a sacred journey together will make it less likely that we will employ violence against each other.⁶³

Even though the intelligences and the entities they compose sit at different levels on a hierarchy or continuum of being, this is not seen as a problem. The potential for growth makes this type of hierarchy nonthreatening.

The entire point of existence is to learn to embrace and be embraced (made significantly "internal") by as many of the other intelligences in the universe as possible. Gods are "Gods" because they are intelligent enough to embody patterns that are capable of holding all the others within themselves, and because they reach out in such a way that the other existents are willing to embrace them to a significant enough degree that they will cooperate with them. Any person who believes in this view of the nature of deity, and follows her or his *imitatio dei*, urges, will not be inclined to use coercion or exercise "unrighteous dominion"

under this model of hierarchy. The idea that one is "higher " than another would now be seen to mean that one is "more with" the other, not that she or he is "over" or "above" that individual."⁶⁴

Wotherspoon also thinks that the problem of ethical relativism may be resolved by adopting the non-sensationist epistemology that he offers. He sees relativism as an outgrowth of modernity's empiricism.⁶⁵ But since everything in the universe experiences everything else at a non-sensory level then values may be directly perceived. If all things are capable of experience and joy, "ethical relativism is dealt a telling blow."⁶⁶ Hence, we can truly know what is better, or right, or wrong.

When it comes to the specifics of defining right and wrong, it appears that Wotherspoon supports a generally leftist stance on many social issues that confront Western culture. He mentions involvement in anti-nuclear and peace movements, Mormon feminism, and environmental activism as examples of positive developments among Mormons in recent years.⁶⁷ In general, the decline in values in Western culture is attributed to the individualism of modernity. This clashes with the superior values of community and relationships that are supported by the notions of panexperientialism and the interconnectedness of all things.⁶⁸

Assessment

In reading Wotherspoon's construction of a process metaphysic for Mormonism I was struck with how well he illustrates Mormonism's basic affinity with pagan thought that is readily found in ancient non-Christian religions. The notion of a primordial, impersonal, chaotic being from which all else, including the gods themselves, emerged was common fare in the ancient mind. Just as the gods of ancient Egypt, the gods of Mormonism ultimately emerge from the womb of unstructured and chaotic being, creating themselves out of its midst, and then attempting to organize and control it, while calling forth other creatures in the process.⁶⁹ Even the most advanced god in the Mormon hierarchy of deities is likewise derived from, dependent upon and everywhere ontologically part and parcel of the impersonal Absolute that exists before him. His environment is impersonal, chaotic being, which he must ever strive to master.

This is of critical importance, because Wotherspoon claims that his proposal is breaking with the "substantive assumptions of modernity", namely its materialism and empiricism. However, it appears that Wotherspoon fails to break with modernity on a much more basic level, and this failure is the weak point in the edifice he has erected that will ultimately lead to its collapse. While he rejects materialism, he fails to deal adequately with the problems inherent in the presupposition that ultimate being is impersonal, chaotic energy. That is, he continues to build on the foundation of modernity's presupposition that the universe itself is ultimate, and that this ultimate is impersonal. To that extent Wotherspoon is squarely in the tradition of the "mostmodern theology" that he says he rejects.

Wotherspoon hopes that his introduction of animism, via the notion of panexperientialism, will allow him to avoid the pitfalls of philosophical materialism. This move is designed to endow the basic elements that organize the primordial energy, namely the intelligences, with the appearance of having attributes of personal, sentient beings. They “desire” more complexity, they “experience” other entities, they have “creativity”, and they act purposefully to pursue “joy”. However, it is clear that intelligences, in their most primitive state, are mere vortexes or patterns that happen to emerge out of the utterly random flux of the spacio-temporal energy field that is ultimate reality. They do not possess consciousness in any intelligible sense and it could hardly be asserted that they somehow embody minds. Minds do not emerge until a much higher level of complexity is achieved. Exactly how it is that they could desire, have joy, express purposeful creativity or experience in any meaningful way is never explained. Indeed, it seems that what is going on here is the imputing of rational mental and emotional characteristics, only found in creatures that we think of as having minds, to the essentially irrational randomness of the mindless flow of energy. Panexperientialism can be understood as simply the arbitrary anthropomorphizing of the materialist elements of the modernist worldview in an attempt to escape the relativism and nihilism induced by it.

Furthermore, it is difficult to see how Wotherspoon can avoid the eventual collapse of his system into pantheism. He is caught on the horns of the dilemma of the One and Many problem, in which the question of whether it is unity or diversity that is ultimate in the universe comes to the fore. Traditionally, Mormonism has placed priority on diversity. This eventually makes the apparent unity of things inexplicable. However, by reducing all of reality to the chaotic being of the One, the spacio-temporal energy field, the Many, that is the intelligences, become mere epiphenomena in the great sea of undifferentiated Being. They are patterns imposed on it, but they have no ontological status on their own. The final reality is Being as One. That this tends towards pantheism is clearly seen in Wotherspoon’s flirtations with New Age physics. It is apparent in his view of the interconnectedness of all things. It even shows up in his understanding of the Light of Christ as an energy that permeates all enduring entities, a notion that reminds one of the Force from the Star Wars films.

Turning next to Wotherspoon’s non-sensationist epistemology we can again see that the shift he proposes does not help in resolving the difficulties occasioned by the worldview of modernity. First of all, the direct non-sensory communication and perception that is supposed to be inherent in experiencing intelligences suffers from the difficulties mentioned above. How mindless energy can be said to “know” or to “perceive” in any significant way is difficult to understand given that these are activities of minds. Exactly what is meant when it is said that impersonal entities have knowledge and perceptions? In fact, it appears that this non-sensationist epistemology could be a doorway into mysticism and irrationalism.

However, even if we grant that non-sensationist perception could afford a correspondence between perceptions and reality of concrete entities in the universe, it does not explain how it is possible to know abstract concepts, such as those defining ethical principles. The problems of modernity that led to relativism are greater than merely the gulf between sense perception and the

perceived reality that empiricism is unable to bridge. They also involve the problem of locating ultimacy within the impersonal universe, rather than in an infinite omniscient mind that is over and apart from the universe. This is the problem of Plato's *Euthyphro*. What is more ultimate, the gods or the abstract notions of the good? If we respond that the good is more ultimate than the gods, then we are unable to explain how abstract principles of good and justice could exist independently of minds. Yet, if they only exist in minds and all minds are equally elements of the larger impersonal being of the universe, then all ideas of the good are merely relative. Different minds have different ideas and in this system there is no absolute and sovereign mind to arbitrate the disagreements. Wotherspoon comes no closer to solving this difficulty than did the ancient Greeks or any of their successors. Hence, in spite of Wotherspoon's best efforts, he is still mired in ethical relativism. The result is that Mormonism still offers no rational basis for any of the ethical preferences that he mentions as ways of creating a better future.

The issue of the location of ultimacy is critical, for in order to establish an adequate basis for knowledge, there must be a reference point for interpreting the universe that is big enough to account for all of its diversity and possibilities. There must be some unifying principle big enough to handle all of the diversity that exists. In addition, there must be adequate reasons for assuming that the universe conforms to the standards of rationality. That is, there must be an inherent orderliness that can be relied upon by the interpreter of reality. It is not sufficient to say that an inherent correspondence exists between the knower and the object of knowledge if ultimacy is located within the random flux of chaotic being. An ever evolving and changing being is not a trustworthy point of reference. Any revelations from beings caught up in this flux, no matter how highly evolved, would always remain merely the opinion of finite minds confronted with an environment of ultimate irrationality and chaos.

The only reference point for interpreting the universe that is both large enough and stable enough to ground knowledge is the infinite mind of the Triune God of orthodox Christian theism. Only such a God has absolute knowledge of the universe. Given the existence of such a God, the problem of relativism is solved, because all finite minds within the universe are able to appeal to the revelation of this God in the Bible as the final arbiter of truth. In addition since the universe is ordered entirely according to his plan down to the last detail, it is rational in its structure. It did not emerge from irrational chaos, but was created from nothing according to a rational plan. The correspondence of the creation with the created mind of human beings is part of that rational plan, making empirical knowledge possible.

In the Mormon scheme, even the gods are surrounded by ultimate mystery that they are ever trying to penetrate. Whatever they imagine that they know at any point could be proven radically wrong at any time by the emergence of new "patterns" of reality out of the chaotic being that is back of everything. Wotherspoon admits that intelligences are not bound to obey the suggestions of the gods. They may create totally new and unanticipated patterns and realities. What is to prevent these new realities from redefining truth in such a way as to contradict what is currently thought to be assured knowledge? After all, later prophets in the LDS church have overturned

the revelations of earlier prophets. Reality as conceived by Wotherspoon and Mormonism in general would seem to be finally unpredictable.

In conclusion, the basic problem that undermines Wotherspoon's project is his denial of the Creator-creature distinction that is a foundational presupposition of Christian orthodoxy. Unless there exists a God big enough to account for reality, knowledge, purpose and value, then the relativism and nihilism that flows out of the assumptions of modernity are inevitable. Any system that excludes such a God dooms itself to the same futility that is seen in deconstructive postmodernism. Reconstructing Mormonism along the lines of Whitehead's process theology and New Age physics fails to overcome these difficulties because it continues to locate ultimacy within the finite universe. Therefore, we can safely conclude that Mormonism, with its finite gods, will never be able to adequately address the problems of modernity.

1. Daniel Wright Wotherspoon. *Awakening Joseph Smith: Mormon Resources for a Post-modern Worldview*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1996).

2. Griffin was chair of Wotherspoon's dissertation committee.

3. David Ray Griffin. *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology*. SUNY Series in Postmodern Thought. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 52.

4. Griffin., 8, 20-21.

5. Thomas Oden. *Agenda For Theology: After Modernity...What?* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic Books, 1990).

6. Wotherspoon., 169-171.

7. Wotherspoon., 46.

8. Wotherspoon., 17.

9. Wotherspoon., 52-53. A full discussion of the problem of evil is beyond the scope of this paper. For Evangelical solutions to the problem the reader is referred to R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), and Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

10. Wotherspoon., 53.

11. Wotherspoon., 58-59.

12. Wotherspoon., 67-68.

- 13.Griffin, 39-41, 64.
- 14.Wotherspoon, 232.
- 15.Arthur O. Lovejoy. *The Great Chain of Being*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).
- 16.Sterling McMurrin. *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 8.
- 17.Wotherspoon included the following in his bibliography: Fritjof Capra. *The Tao of Physics*., 2nd. ed. (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1977), David Bohm, “Postmodern Science in a Postmodern World” in *The Reenchantment of Science*. ed. David Ray Griffin. SUNY Series in Postmodern Thought. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 57-68, and David Bohm. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983).
- 18.Wotherspoon., 225.
- 19.Wotherspoon., 218.
- 20.Wotherspoon., 61.
- 21.Wotherspoon., 220.
- 22.Wotherspoon., 221.
- 23.Wotherspoon., 184.
- 24.Wotherspoon., 102, 112.
- 25.Wotherspoon., 131.
- 26.Wotherspoon., 98.
- 27.Wotherspoon., 56.
- 28.Wotherspoon., 100.
- 29.Wotherspoon., 97.
- 30.Wotherspoon., 71-72.
- 31.Wotherspoon., 181-183.
- 32.Wotherspoon., 184.
- 33.Wotherspoon., 204-205.

34. Wotherspoon., 186.
35. Wotherspoon., 65.
36. Wotherspoon., 66.
37. Wotherspoon., 67-68.
38. Wotherspoon., 234.
39. Wotherspoon, 131.
40. Wotherspoon, 95.
41. Wotherspoon, 96-97.
42. Wotherspoon, 52.
43. Wotherspoon, 54.
44. Wotherspoon, 131.
45. Wotherspoon, 232.
46. Wotherspoon, 228.
47. Wotherspoon, 96-97.
48. Wotherspoon., 112.
49. Wotherspoon, 118.
50. Wotherspoon, 116.
51. Wotherspoon, 120, 126.
52. Wotherspoon, 127, 229.
53. Wotherspoon, 167, 219.
54. Wotherspoon, 102.
55. Wotherspoon, 78-79.
56. Wotherspoon, 6-7.
57. Wotherspoon, 170.

58. Wotherspoon, 169.

59. Wotherspoon, 165.

60. Wotherspoon, 75.

61. Wotherspoon, 56.

62. Wotherspoon, 174.

63. Wotherspoon, 172.

64. Wotherspoon, 223-224.

65. Wotherspoon., 234.

66. Wotherspoon, 238.

67. Wotherspoon, 38-40.

68. Wotherspoon, 69-71.

69. On Egyptian religion see Robert A. Armour. *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1986). Also my discussion of ancient Egyptian religion at <http://www.myatts.net/articles/atheists14.html>