

Reply to Professor Madsen's Critique

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It was generous of Professor Truman G. Madsen to write his thoughtful critique* of my essay on Mormon metaphysics. He has raised several interesting issues. I agree with what he says about Mormonism's being open-ended, incomplete, and in its development unsystematic. And I agree with him also in his suggestion that its "inmost meaning and vitality" are more available to the "participating prophet" than to the "detached philosopher." He realizes, I am sure, that I have no desire to close any ends or do any completing or systematizing. Certainly I would not want to distort Mormon thought by subjecting it to pigeon-holing, and I'm quite sure that this has not been done. My paper is simply an attempt to describe a few commonplace Mormon ideas by viewing them in terms of equally commonplace issues in metaphysics. As for prophets—it seems obvious to me that the vocation of prophets is religion and morality, not philosophy. The monograph, which was originally a public address, is concerned primarily with philosophy, not theology or religion. I have written a sequel on Mormon theology, soon to be published, which deals with a number of matters that Professor Madsen mentions, such as the doctrines relating to the fall, sin, grace, atonement, and salvation, and this will be followed by a piece on the Mormon religion.

But to return to the critique: I am pleased that Professor Madsen finds value in the type of thing that the monograph attempts. What the Church needs is a continuing analysis and evaluation of the philosophical ideas that constitute the intellectual foundations of Mormonism. Such an enterprise would be of inestimable worth to the Mormon people as well as to the institution. My paper is simply a preliminary identification and description of a few of those ideas. Professor Madsen seems to think that a discussion of Mormon philosophy must involve distilling the philosophical theses from the theology and that

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this necessarily entails superimposition and speculation. But clearly there are many such theses available in the accepted literature that do not have to be distilled from anywhere.

I think that I am less impressed than Professor Madsen by what he regards as the opposing concepts employed by me in describing Mormon thought. Moreover, in some cases I think he sees opposition where there is none. He refers, for instance, to what I have called quantitative pluralism and qualitative monism as if these were in some kind of opposition. But there is no real opposition here, because quantity cannot be compared with quality. Or in his reference to my statement about the platonic yet pragmatic facets of morality he overlooks the fact that I refer to platonic absolutism in connection with Mormon moral philosophy, and to pragmatism and instrumentalism in relation to Mormonism in practice. I do not mean to suggest that this is consistent, but inconsistency between ideas and practice rarely disturbs a living institution. Another example is his comparison of "the necessity or self-derivation of all existent things" with "genuine human freedom and novelty." I did not and would not say that Mormonism teaches that all existent things have necessary being, but rather that, being uncreated, the primary elements that are the basic constituents of the world are necessary. I fail to see where there is anything about such an idea that opposes the notions of freedom and novelty. But granting the syncretic character of Mormonism, and in this I certainly agree with Professor Madsen, I fail to see in this much that is of philosophical importance, although it may tell a great deal about the intellectual history of the Church and testify to its youth, its intellectual needs, and its potential for growth.

Professor Madsen offers several examples of what he calls my riding the wrong philosophical steed, apparently, if I understand him correctly, as a result of my being duped by words. The first is the matter of realism versus nominalism. I did not say that Mormon metaphysics is realistic, or that it is nominalistic, because although the ontological status of universals is one of the most important and persistent issues in metaphysics, and is one of basic importance to theology and religion, there appears to be no explicit Mormon position on this issue. My point was simply that an analysis of every day Mormon ideas and atti-

tudes reveals both realistic and nominalistic tendencies. Now I would like to make it clear that in my monograph I am not presuming to describe the *Priesthood*, but rather am simply raising the question of what Mormons typically mean when they use the word "priesthood," as when they say, for instance, that someone "holds the Priesthood." If Professor Madsen is correct in his particularistic interpretation, they mean that every individual person holds a separate individual priesthood. There are as many separate priesthoods as there are priests, and the expression, "*the Priesthood*" is just a collective term employed to designate these individual instances or pieces of Priesthood when they are taken in the aggregate. No doubt Professor Madsen would not like this idea, but I think he is stuck with it. He even compares the meaning of "priesthood" with the Mormon meaning of the word "spirit," and "spirit" in Mormon terminology refers to something that is highly individualized. There is no *the Spirit* "held" by individual persons. Each has or is his own spirit. I am sure that Professor Madsen would not favor the strictly nominalistic position here, which would recognize "priesthood" as a universal term but would hold it to be simply a word that does not designate anything beyond certain similarities that obtain among priests, as that they are all performers of the sacraments.

If my interpretation is correct, the term "priesthood" is intended to designate some kind of unified entity that has some genuine status in reality, and the expression, "*the Priesthood*" is not a collective term but refers rather to something whose unity is not destroyed by the fact that many persons "hold" it. This is not to say necessarily that "priesthood" designates something that has reality in the sense of platonic universals, over and above and separate from its individual representations, for although, referring to the early Donatist controversy, I mentioned platonic realism, it must be remembered that there are other theories that give ontological status to universals. For the most part since the thirteenth century and certainly at present, the dominant theory of universals entertained in Catholic philosophy, for instance, has been the moderate Aristotelian type that holds that universals are in some sense real but are always resident in particulars. Such an approach to the problem of the

nature of Priesthood would mean that the Priesthood has no reality independently of its being "held" by someone, yet it is a unity and its reality is not exhausted by a description of its individual instances. I think that most Mormon writers and Mormon people generally may mean something like this.

Before Professor Madsen completely settles for his idea that "Priesthood in Mormon literature is much more clearly a particular than a universal," I think he should take a long hard look at the following from the Doctrine and Covenants: "Which priesthood . . . is without beginning of days or end of years." (84:17), or the following statement from Joseph Smith, "The Priesthood is an everlasting principle, and existed with God from eternity, and will to eternity, without beginning of days or end of years." (*History of the Church, Period I*, Vol. III, p. 386.)

Moreover, I did not, as Professor Madsen seems to suppose, identify the Mormon and Catholic theories of priesthood. As he indicates, there are important differences. But there are also similarities, and Mormon writers would do well to take a better look at Catholicism. The Catholic Church has worked long and hard at its intellectual problems and has much to teach those who face the same kinds of problems.

But to get back to universals, my own disposition on the question of universals is to favor nominalism, a prejudice which is related to my preference for empirical rather than rationalistic method, and I have no desire to encourage the development of realism, or for that matter of anything else, in Mormon thought. In the first draft of my monograph, I quoted the well known "amen to the priesthood of that man" passage that lends support to the particularistic interpretation. I am surprised that Professor Madsen didn't use that passage against me, as it would have strengthened his argument. I abandoned it simply because I decided to illustrate the particularistic tendency in Mormonism by the tri-theism of the theology, just for the sake of variety.

Professor Madsen objects to my reference to platonism in describing Mormon value-theory. Now I do not think that there is such a thing as an explicit Mormon value theory. My point is simply that Mormon value philosophy frequently exhibits a

platonic character. This seems to me to be entirely obvious. What is meant here is simply that the norms of value are absolutes established in the structure of reality independently of passing circumstances. But as for platonism as such, there could not be a more interesting or extreme example than the passage by Orson Pratt in *The Seer* (Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 24) where God in the ultimate sense is defined as absolute, impersonal TRUTH — all caps. Describing the lower case Gods, Pratt says, "Persons are only tabernacles or temples, and TRUTH is the God that dwells in them." One would have to be Plato to be much more platonic. I am inclined to suspect, however, that few Mormons would be willing to pray to either Pratt's *Truth* or Plato's *Good*, although Pratt holds that "When we worship the Father, we do not merely worship His person, but we worship the truth which dwells in His person."

Incidentally, as an analogy to the Priesthood problem, Orson Pratt says of his platonic God, "Truth is not a plurality of truths because it dwells in a plurality of persons, but it is one truth, indivisible, though it dwells in millions of persons." (*loc. cit.*) Again, I can't help but feel that something like this is what most Mormons think about the Priesthood, call it a universal or not. However, I should not make too much of Orson Pratt's views here because in 1860 the First Presidency condemned certain passages relating to the discussion to which I have referred. (*Cf. Deseret News*, Vol. 10, Jan. 25, 1860, pp. 162-3.) Interestingly enough, the items that I have quoted were not listed among the condemned, though, given the censorship policy, I think they should have been.

Professor Madsen is concerned about my describing Mormonism as "a kind of naturalistic humanism within a general theistic context." I grant that this combination of words is not common, but I don't see anything here to get disturbed about. The word "humanism" has many uses and it has often been used as compatible with theism. And several Mormon theologians of recent vintage have been anxious to exclude the term "supernatural" and its cognates from the Mormon vocabulary. I think Professor Madsen makes too much of the problem of language. One might easily argue against him that he shouldn't use the word "Trinity" with a capital T, as he does, because

Mormon theology, being tritheistic rather than trinitarian, is opposed to the concept commonly designated by that word.

I do not understand what it is that Professor Madsen is objecting to in his discussion of the divine knowledge problem. Certainly, I see no need for discussing such matters as "calling, covenant, and prophecy" in a treatise on metaphysics. Nor do I find in Mormonism anything particularly unique in the treatment of this problem other than the fact that the very nature of the problem is affected by the temporal conception of God, as I have indicated. That Mormons commonly teach and believe that God has foreknowledge seems to me to be entirely obvious. The term "omniscience" with respect to Mormon theology is Professor Madsen's, not mine. It is fashionable, of course, to hold that foreknowledge and free will are contradictory, but I did not advance this argument because I am not sure that this is the case, considering certain logical subtleties associated with the meaning of free will, and because my purposes in the monograph were descriptive rather than critical. Certainly it is the common belief among Mormons that they are not contradictory.

It seems to me that the most valuable part of Professor Madsen's critique is his statement on the issue of necessity and contingency, where he objects to my failure to recognize what he calls the "contingency of potentiality" in the Mormon conception of man. I think this is an excellent point and I might well have given considerable attention to it. A somewhat extended discussion of this matter will appear in the essay on theology, where it seems to me it belongs. But Professor Madsen is quite wrong in supposing that I ignored this point and am arguing "that Mormonism is required to affirm the second sort of independence as an implication of the first." He seems to have overlooked, on page 29, such expressions as: "Whatever the doctrine holds of man's *dependence* on God. . ." ". . . that *utter* contingency is not the condition of his being. . .," ". . . for he is not *totally* God's creature. . ." and ". . . though he is finite. . ." I would insist, however, that for Mormons the doctrine that man ultimately is uncreated characteristically moderates the sense of dependence, contingency, and creatureliness. How often, for instance, does Professor Madsen meet Mormons

who have guilt feelings that are rooted not in their sins but simply in their consciousness of being beings. The typical Mormon considers himself to be on fairly good terms with himself, the world, and the Almighty. He doesn't worry much about his contingency even though he feels dependent upon God.

Professor Madsen further refers to my failure to mention the Mormon thesis of the "potential *destiny* of man," which "shatters several traditional presuppositions." I am not aware of any Mormon thesis that shatters anything, but I presume that he has in mind the same theory that I have in my closing sentence where I refer to the "radically unorthodox" concept of salvation (p. 29). Here again is a matter that I have preferred to treat, where I believe it belongs, in the essay on theology.

Finally, I must confess that I do not see Mormon literature, as does Professor Madsen, as a potential mine for distinctive theories of knowledge, ethics, language, history, etc. I do, however, believe that Mormonism has far more of what might be called intellectual strength than most of its advocates seem to recognize—or if they recognize, than they seem willing to publicize.