

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF MORMON THEOLOGY

*O. Kendall White, Jr.*

*O. Kendall White, Jr. is currently completing a Ph.D. at Vanderbilt and teaching sociology at Washington and Lee University. The following article, which reveals Mr. White's special interest in the sociology of religion, is based on his forthcoming book, MORMON NEO-ORTHODOXY: A CRISIS THEOLOGY, to be published by the University of Utah Press.*

Mormons are usually startled by the appearance of new theological movements in Catholic or Protestant circles. Without probing into their content, analyzing their presuppositions, or seeking to understand their origins, they often dismiss these movements with the assertion that they are merely further evidence of Catholic and Protestant apostasy. Mormons generally abhor the thought that their own theology could in any way be influenced by these same movements or even by social conditions similar to those out of which these movements have emerged. For most Mormons tend to think of their theology as a relatively constant, unchanging set of doctrines and beliefs, influenced little by social environment.

Yet traditional Mormon theology is quite amenable to environmental analysis, suggesting a profound influence from Protestant fundamentalism and liberalism. At least one cannot deny that the basic doctrines of traditional Mormon thought, both liberal and fundamentalist, were floating around during the formative period of Mormon theology. Nor can one deny that early Mormon leaders, assuming a rather eclectic approach to the acquisition of knowledge, encouraged the saints to "gather" truth from such disparate sources as infidels and Methodists, Universalists and Baptists, Cath-

olics and Shakers. Consider, for instance, Brigham Young's admonition to missionaries: "It is the business of the Elders . . . to gather up all the truths in the world pertaining to life and salvation, to the Gospel we preach, to mechanism of every kind, to the sciences, and to philosophy, wherever it may be found in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, and bring it to Zion."<sup>1</sup>

Despite such advice from early leaders, Mormons typically, by refusing to admit to the fundamentalist and liberal antecedents of their theology, neglect its historical development. This posture enables them to ignore the impact of today's social environment upon contemporary Mormon thought, elements of which are combining to create a critical situation for the Mormon community. One response to this modern crisis is the elaboration of a theology not unlike Protestant neoorthodoxy. While this essay does not examine the social conditions underlying this new theology,<sup>2</sup> it does describe Mormon neoorthodox thought.<sup>3</sup>

### PROTESTANT NEOORTHODOXY

At the hands of its most celebrated and articulate theologians, Protestant neoorthodoxy affirms three basic doctrines — the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, and the necessity of salvation by grace. To anyone even remotely familiar with Reformation theology, these doctrines are not new. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin built their respective theologies around an almighty, sovereign God; a depraved, helpless man; and a human predicament requiring the gracious, saving act of God. While these doctrines have persisted from the Reformation to the present in the form of Protestant fundamentalism, Protestant neoorthodoxy appears as a more sophisticated attempt to reconcile these traditional beliefs with different social conditions and centuries of theological criticism.

In both traditional and neoorthodox theologies, the primary argument for the sovereignty of God is found in the affirmation of the *ex nihilo* creation.<sup>4</sup> Here God, who alone exists, decides to create other entities; and, of

---

<sup>1</sup>*Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1961), p. 248.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the social context out of which this theology is emerging, see the author's *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology*, forthcoming from the University of Utah Press, or "The Social Psychological Basis of Mormon New Orthodoxy" (master's thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Utah, 1967).

<sup>3</sup>The Mormon counterpart of Protestant neoorthodoxy is referred to as Mormon neoorthodoxy throughout the remainder of this essay. In order to avoid certain associations, "new-orthodoxy" appeared in the original thesis (see "Social Psychological Basis of Mormon New-Orthodoxy," pp. 7-8). However, the term has proved unsatisfactory, so I have decided to employ "Mormon neoorthodoxy." The reader should realize, though, that Mormon neoorthodoxy in no sense implies a return to the orthodoxy of early Mormonism. On the contrary, it is employed to suggest similarities to Protestant neoorthodoxy. Yet, at least two differences between the Protestant and Mormon movements should be noted: (1) the Mormon theologians, as far as I can ascertain, do not take seriously modern biblical scholarship (i.e., do not accept many of the fundamental conclusions of such work), while the Protestants do; (2) following from the above, the neoorthodox Mormons are literalists in their orientation toward Scripture while the neoorthodox Protestants are not.

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps the finest brief primary statement of the neoorthodox conception of God is to be found in Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

course, they owe their very existence to Him. Typical Mormon criticism of the *ex nihilo* creation challenges the notion that God created the world out of nothing — an assertion Mormon theologians think absurd.<sup>5</sup> But, these critiques fail to confront the real meaning of the *ex nihilo* creation. The important point is not that God created the world from nothing, but that everything which exists is totally dependent upon God for its being. Without God, it cannot exist.

In sharp contrast, God is not dependent upon anything. He has always existed, and there will never be a time (time is His creation) when He does not exist. He had no beginning, and He will have no end. He was not created, and He cannot be destroyed. However, unlike the Mormon God, who always existed but not in His present form, the God of neoorthodox Christianity has never changed. The creation which He brought into being has no autonomy and imposes no conditions upon Him. Since everything other than God is dependent upon Him for its existence, we speak of it as being characterized by “contingent being,” while God, who is not dependent upon anything, is characterized by “necessary being.”

The importance of the *ex nihilo* creation for Reformation and neoorthodox theology can hardly be overstated. Not only is it easy for theologians to argue for God’s omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience from this premise, but they can also establish the pronounced discontinuity between the Creator and the creature — between God and man — that so characterizes their theologies. Thus, the inordinate preoccupation with the complete “otherness” of God both affirms the sovereignty of God and proclaims the depravity of man.

The emphasis on total otherness would be quite unnecessary if man were basically good. But, of course, the fundamental message of neoorthodoxy is that man is not basically good. In fact, it is that he is by nature evil — that man is depraved. This conception of depravity is expressed in a qualified version of the Reformation doctrine of original sin in which the Fall results in a transformation of human nature, and the product — “fallen,” “sensual,” “carnal” man — is completely estranged from God. From this condition, man can do nothing to effect a reconciliation. He can do no good. He can only sin. Whenever man acts, which is always, he acts against God, and this inevitable act of rebellion is neoorthodoxy’s original sin.<sup>6</sup>

Belief in the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man consistently leads to the neoorthodox doctrine of salvation by grace. A helpless, depraved sinner is in no position to “work out his own salvation.” He must rely upon God — not, as Mormonism has claimed, to point out the way by which he

---

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of this misunderstanding on the part of Mormon theologians, see Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965) and White, *Mormon Neo-orthodoxy*, ch. 4. The implications of the *ex nihilo* creation for Christianity and the denial of it for Mormon theology are also treated in the author’s “Mormonism — A Nineteenth Century Heresy,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 26 (1969), 44–55.

<sup>6</sup>Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939), p. 150.

may live to attain perfection but rather to transform his innermost self, his basic nature. Only God can work these changes. Thus He initiates grace. He acts. He reaches down to man. Through this act of redemption, God saves man. Man is thereby restored to his true nature, for the cross of Christ is more powerful than the sin of Adam.<sup>7</sup>

### MORMON NEOORTHODOXY

Not unlike Protestant neoorthodoxy, the Mormon neoorthodoxy conception of God is characterized by a pronounced discontinuity between God and man. Unlike traditional Mormon thought, it emphasizes the otherness of God. In fact this sets Mormon neoorthodoxy apart from orthodox Mormonism. This is not to say, of course, that traditional Mormonism has no affinity for the greatness and otherness of God, but it is to suggest that historically, at least, Mormonism's concern has been with the similarities rather than the differences between God and man.

This is clearly evident in the Mormon doctrine that God is a person with a tangible body, a doctrine which has led to Mormon claims that man is literally the offspring of God. Through its entire history, orthodox Mormonism has employed its extremely anthropomorphic conception of God to illustrate the likeness and similarities rather than the otherness and differences between God and man. Indeed, to the orthodox Mormon, the apostate character of the traditional Christian conception of God is to be found primarily in traditional Christianity's denial of God's physical and personal similarity to man.

In contrast, Mormon neoorthodoxy seeks to abandon this traditional emphasis. In an address at a Brigham Young University Leadership Week, Hyrum Andrus, a Mormon neoorthodox theologian, lamented Mormon preoccupation with anthropomorphic descriptions of God, at least when they are employed to deemphasize the hiatus between God and man.<sup>8</sup> He argued that Mormons pay too little attention to God's greatness, and he implied that they should more fully recognize his otherness. An interesting preoccupation with the "glory of God" permeates Andrus' writings.

Both traditional and neoorthodox Protestantism emphasize the creation in order to exaggerate the differences between God and man. The central meaning of the *ex nihilo* creation, as previously observed, lies in the fact that the creature is completely dependent upon the Creator. As a creature, man owes his total existence to God, who is the source of all being.

Mormon theologians, on the other hand, emphatically reject the *ex nihilo* creation and employ the creation story to show God's desire to help man, who is also an entity with necessary being, to realize his inherent potential. God does not bring nonexistent things into being but rather helps existing

---

<sup>7</sup>For an excellent discussion of this problem, see Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam*, trans. T. A. Smail (New York: The Crowell-Collier Publishing Co., 1962).

<sup>8</sup>Hyrum Andrus, "The Greatness and Majesty of God," *The Doctrine and Covenants and Man's Relationship to Deity*, Brigham Young University Leadership Week (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Extension Division, 1960) pp. 1 ff.

entities change into forms better suited for their eternal progression. God's creative act gives man's primal form of "intelligence" a spirit body, which makes him capable of actualizing, capable of becoming like God. Thus the creation story, in orthodox Mormonism, is not told to accentuate the differences between God and man, to reveal the profound otherness of God, but rather to demonstrate God's love for man.

Even though Mormon neoorthodox theologians accept the traditional metaphysics upon which the above account rests, their use of the creation story is often intended to emphasize the differences between God and man. While acknowledging the necessity of man's being, they deemphasize it, underscoring the elements of contingency in man's premortal condition. David Yarn, a Brigham Young University philosopher and one of the more articulate representatives of this new theology, writes, "Mortals should take no special pride in the necessity of their original being, for they share this characteristic in common with all other things which exist. Furthermore, they would have remained in that original state were it not for God's goodness in having provided spirit bodies, the light of eternal truth, and opportunities for progression."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the otherness of God is enhanced by the typical Mormon neoorthodox position concerning the progression of God. God is no longer, as in traditional Mormon theology, best described as a God in process, as "becoming" rather than "being." With the possible exception of Andrus,<sup>10</sup> Mormon neoorthodox theologians appear to believe that God no longer progresses in knowledge, power, or goodness. In all of these God is absolute. Whatever "progression" He now experiences is manifest in increases over His dominions through the organization of new worlds. Arriving at an absolute point from which He can no longer progress, God now possesses the attributes of the classical Christian God. Though beginning finite, God is now infinite.

For their conception of God, Mormon neoorthodox theologians rely heavily upon the early *Lectures on Faith*.<sup>11</sup> In these lectures, God is described in the normal vocabulary of traditional Christianity. He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. He is the same yesterday, today, and

---

<sup>9</sup>David Yarn, *The Gospel: God, Man, and Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1965), p. 152.

<sup>10</sup>In a recent book, Andrus attempts a reconciliation of Mormonism's progressing God with Christian absolutism. This is accomplished by suggesting that God knows everything and has all power over his domain but that there are realms above God which apparently involve greater truths and more power. Celestial beings continually move to "higher and higher realms." *Doctrinal Commentary on "The Pearl of Great Price"* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1967), p. 507.

<sup>11</sup>While there is some question of authorship of these essays, with many scholars attributing them to Sidney Rigdon (see, for example, Leonard Arrington, "The Intellectual Tradition of the Latter-day Saints," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 [Spring 1969], 17), for our purposes it is of little importance who wrote them. If Joseph Smith did, as most neoorthodox theologians seem to believe, then he clearly reversed his position on the absolute nature of God in his later work. See "The King Follet Discourse," *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938).

forever. He is unchanging and unchangeable. If God did not possess these attributes, the author of the lectures argued, He would not be worthy of man's worship, for He would not be God.<sup>12</sup>

After quoting freely from the *Lectures on Faith*, Yarn argues that Alma, a Book of Mormon prophet, put it nicely when he said that God "has all power, all wisdom, and all understanding,"<sup>13</sup> and Glenn Pearson contends that God is not subject to law because he is infinite while man is subject to law because he is finite.<sup>14</sup> While discussing man's agency, Lynn McKinlay maintains that God knows all things and has foreknowledge of all events.<sup>15</sup>

To the student of contemporary Mormonism, this absolute and unchanging God is hardly novel. Mormons often speak of God as infinite. At the same time, they suggest He changes. Of course this position should not be construed to mean that Mormonism is flirting with a theology of paradox, an approach entirely foreign to Mormon thought,<sup>16</sup> but rather that Mormons often misunderstand the implications of concepts like infinite, absolute, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. When the implications of these terms are clarified, as sometimes occurs in priesthood meetings and Sunday school classes, Mormons usually modify their positions on the absolute or infinite nature of God.<sup>17</sup> The apparent confusion probably derives from a lack of philosophical or theological training.

In spite of professional training in philosophy, theology, or related disciplines, the neoorthodox theologians either ignore or evade apparent conflicts between Mormon metaphysics and absolutism. Their evasiveness often assumes the form of depreciation of the role of reason in understanding God, including the advocacy of a nonreasonable, "a-logical" sort of revelation. Thus, Pearson and Bankhead write,

There is hardly anything more clearly revealed in the scriptures than God's infinite foreknowledge; for every case of prophecy is witness of it. Yet many men do not believe it because their finite minds cannot grasp how it can be so if men are free to choose. If they cannot understand this, they at least ought to exercise enough faith to believe that if God says he has an infinite foreknowledge, it

---

<sup>12</sup>This argument is developed in the third lecture. See *Lectures on Faith*, comp. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall, n.d.), p. 36.

<sup>13</sup>Yarn, *The Gospel*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>14</sup>Glenn L. Pearson, *Know Your Religion* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961), p. 221.

<sup>15</sup>Lynn McKinlay, "For Behold Ye Are Free," *Know Your Religion Series* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, n.d.), p. 33.

<sup>16</sup>The traditional Mormon conception of revelation stands in sharp contrast to those conceptions in which the major purpose is to reveal the paradoxical nature of deity. In Mormon theology, the purpose of revelation is to clarify, not to "baffle the intellect." Basically, Mormon revelation is rational. For an elaboration of this point, see the section dealing with the implications of Mormon neoorthodoxy.

<sup>17</sup>It is hardly plausible to argue that God is infinite, meaning that no limitations can be imposed upon Him, and at the same time affirm a metaphysics in which several entities in addition to God (i.e., intelligence, matter, time, space, good, evil) exist necessarily. If God has no ultimate control over them, He then exists within an environment which imposes limitations on Him.

must be so. And if he says men are free, they must be free. And if he says both these things, they must not conflict with each other.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast with traditional Mormon theology, then, Mormon neoorthodoxy emphasizes the creation, man's contingency, God's absoluteness, and the inadequacy of human reason to accentuate the differences between God and man and to establish the otherness of God.

However, it is not its conception of God that most radically distinguishes Mormon neoorthodox theology from traditional Mormon thought. Neoorthodox Mormons most radically depart from orthodoxy in their assessment of human nature. While traditional Mormonism emphasizes man's necessity, neoorthodoxy underscores his contingency. That Joseph Smith recognized the radical nature of the traditional Mormon doctrine and the implications it held for the classical Christian conception of man cannot be denied. For, in the speech defining the doctrine of man's necessary being, Joseph warned that his remarks were "calculated to exalt man" and that the "very idea" of ultimate contingency "lessens man in my estimation."<sup>19</sup> Yet, neoorthodoxy suggests that "mortals should take no special pride in the necessity of their original being. They, nevertheless, are contingent."<sup>20</sup>

Mormon neoorthodox theologians appear determined to minimize the implications of man's necessary existence. Implying that intelligence possessed free will in its uncreated state, Yarn nevertheless argues that free will would have been lost in mortality were it not for Christ. With the fall of man, Lucifer "had for all intents and purposes destroyed the agency of man."<sup>21</sup> The position is extended considerably by another neoorthodox theologian who claims that intelligence is merely "undifferentiated mass" from which God creates spirits. With this transformation, a "conscious entity" is born. Not until man reaches this spirit state, which is a direct product of God's creative act, is he an "ego," a "self," a "conscious entity." So opposing orthodox Mormonism — in which the essence of man, the ego or self, is uncreated and coeternal with God — this theologian contends that before man's spirit was organized he was "undifferentiated mass," void of consciousness.<sup>22</sup> For all practical purposes, this notion represents the intrusion of a peculiar version of the concept of the *ex nihilo* creation into Mormon theology.

Even though this preoccupation with contingency constitutes a departure from traditional Mormon thought, it is less significant than the neoorthodox attitude toward man's natural condition. Here the denial of ortho-

<sup>18</sup>A *Doctrinal Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), p. 67.

<sup>19</sup>Smith, *Teachings*, p. 353.

<sup>20</sup>Yarn, *The Gospel*, p. 152.

<sup>21</sup>Yarn, *The Gospel*, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup>Since this information was obtained in a private rather than a public situation, I do not feel free to disclose the individual's name. However, according to a letter in *Dialogue* by John H. Gardner, the teacher's supplement for the 1967 Gospel Doctrine Course, "The Gospel in the Service of Man," expresses essentially the same position. He quotes the manual as saying: "the eternal intelligence was organized into 'intelligences' . . ." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2 (Spring 1967), 5-6. Such a theological position functions to minimize the importance of Mormon denials of the *ex nihilo* creation.

dox Mormon optimism is readily apparent, especially in neoorthodoxy's pessimistic interpretation of the Fall and subsequent predicament of man — a position much closer to traditional Christianity than to traditional Mormonism.

In contrast with the typical Protestant notion that the Fall resulted in a condition of human depravity and the Catholic conception that it led to the withdrawal of supernatural grace, the orthodox Mormon view asserts that the Fall was a necessary condition for man to realize his ultimate potential. His premortal existence as a spirit did not provide him with a physical body, which in Mormon thought is necessary for man to "experience a fulness of joy." A most important consequence of the Fall was the acquisition of physical bodies. Moreover, it was necessary to leave the immediate presence of God, to "enter the school of mortal experience," in order for man to overcome evil and develop the requisite moral character to become like God.

Obviously this interpretation of the Fall, with the consequences primarily positive, implies that the Fall is no fall. It is one of the most fortunate events in human history, a necessary condition for salvation. Without the Fall, man could not realize his ultimate potential. The Mormon reinterpretation is nicely expressed in Sterling Sill's claim that "Adam fell, but he fell in the right direction";<sup>23</sup> and in the oft-quoted Book of Mormon passage asserting that "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy."

Mormon affirmation of the goodness of human nature naturally follows from its positive conception of the Fall. Brigham Young challenged the notion that the natural man is an enemy to God:

It is fully proved in all the revelation that God has ever given to mankind that they naturally love and admire righteousness, justice, and truth more than they do evil. It is, however, universally received by professors of religion as scriptural doctrine that man is naturally opposed to God. This is not so. Paul says in his epistle to the Corinthians, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of God," but I say it is the unnatural "man that receiveth not the things of God."<sup>24</sup>

Mormon neoorthodoxy, in contrast, takes a much more dismal view of the Fall. Though holding that it was necessary for the exaltation of man, their interpretation is negative. Instead of traditional Mormon emphasis on positive scriptural verses describing the human condition, the neoorthodoxy emphasizes such passages as "the natural man is an enemy to God and has been since the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord" (Mosiah 3:19).

Scriptural passages asserting that the natural man is an enemy to God receive the most attention in neoorthodox literature, and the frequent use

---

<sup>23</sup>*Deseret News* (Church Section) (Salt Lake City), July 31, 1965, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup>*Journal of Discourses*, 9: 305.



traditional Christian terminology such as "carnal man," "sensual man," "devilish man," and "original guilt," "evils of the flesh," and "seeds of corruption" abundantly attest to Mormon neoorthodoxy's pessimism. This language is employed to support a negative conception of the Fall and to describe man's inherent propensity to evil, his natural opposition to God. While discussing Karl Marx, Pearson observes that "anyone who rejects Christ is already condemned since that which makes him reject Christ is the inherent wickedness already in him."<sup>25</sup> And Yarn believes man to be possessed of a "rebellious, perverse, recalcitrant, and proud disposition."<sup>26</sup> Though very familiar to orthodox Christians, this language used to describe a pessimistic doctrine of man is generally foreign to traditional Mormons.

While speaking of the corruption of human nature and describing man as "carnal," "sensual," and "devilish," Yarn warns his readers not to confuse this with the "apostate doctrine of depravity." He is not suggesting that man is born evil. The infant is born innocent; but, as he becomes accountable, through free decisions, and he

refuses to make his will submissive to God by accepting him and making covenants with him, he is carnal, sensual, and devilish.

An examination of the matter suggests, however, that the words "carnal," "sensual," and "devilish," must not be limited to their more narrow and specific connotations, but that they are accurately, though more broadly, interpreted by the scriptural phrase "enemy to God." That is, not all men who have not made the covenants with the Christ are given to indulging in practices which are appropriately designated carnal, sensual, and devilish. Yet, all men, regardless of how moral and pure they may be with reference to those practices called carnal, sensual, and devilish, are enemies to God until they yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, accept the atonement of the Lord, and are submissive to his will.<sup>27</sup>

The Mormon neoorthodox conception of the human predicament is not quite the same as the classical Christian conception of original sin. Mormon neoorthodox theologians still work within the context of Mormon metaphysics. They do not deny Mormon doctrines proclaiming the innocence of infants. They perceive the Fall as having at least some positive consequences. Yet, all disclaimers to the contrary, they perhaps approach the traditional Christian conception of man as closely as possible without abandoning central Mormon beliefs. Though generally retaining a conception of actual sin — a position not necessarily irreconcilable with the doctrine of original sin as indicated by Protestant neoorthodoxy — some Mormon neoorthodox theologians define sin in terms barely distinguishable from the Reformation doctrine of original sin. Not unlike John Calvin, Andrus, in a rather explicit instance, argues that the seeds of corruption are hereditarily "transmitted to each embryo at conception." He writes,

---

<sup>25</sup>"Socialism and the United Order or Law of Consecration," unpublished paper with criticisms by Van L. Perkins and a reply by the author (n.d.), p. 2 of the reply.

<sup>26</sup>Yarn, *The Gospel*, pp. 129–30.

<sup>27</sup>Yarn, *The Gospel*, pp. 55–56.

. . . The effects of Adam's transgression and of man's subsequent transgressions are transmitted in the flesh and are thus inherent therein at conception. It is said in a revelation that no less a personage than God explained this fact to Adam. After observing that the atonement took care of the legalities of the "original guilt," God said: "Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good." Observe that it is when children begin to grow up that sin conceives in their hearts; and this because they are initially conceived in sin. Not that the act of conception, properly regulated, is sin, but the conditions of corruption resulting from the Fall are inherent in the embryo at conception. For a time the power of the atonement holds them in abeyance; but, as children grow up and begin to act upon their own initiative, sin conceives in their hearts. . . .

From this statement it is plain that men are not merely born into a world of sin. Instead, the effects of the Fall and the corruption that has subsequently become associated with the flesh are transmitted to each new embryo at conception. As the physical body develops, these elements of corruption manifest themselves by diverting the individual's drives and emotional expressions toward vanity, greed, lust, etc. These elements of corruption are in the flesh.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the above evidences of pessimism, the Mormon neoorthodox fear of reason and education also indicates a basic lack of faith in man. The notion that reason and sensory experience are unreliable is aggressively argued by neoorthodox theologians. They hold that the only way to acquire ultimate knowledge is through revelation.<sup>29</sup>

Traditional interpretations of Mormon Scriptures used to encourage academic study are abandoned for more restrictive and novel exegesis. Andrus, for instance, reinterprets the passage asserting that the "glory of God is intelligence," a scripture employed through Mormon history to encourage the unlimited pursuit of knowledge, to mean that the "brilliant element" encircling God is "intelligence."<sup>30</sup> And Yarn reinterprets the same passage by suggesting that intelligence means character, not knowledge or learning.<sup>31</sup>

The scripture asserting that "it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance" frequently employed to encourage intellectual pursuits and academic excellence is reinterpreted to involve only a testimony of Christ's divinity. Thus Yarn writes,

These words, as others previously discussed, have been used extensively to encourage people to seek excellence in the traditional academic disciplines with the express intent that these were the

---

<sup>28</sup>"Joseph Smith's Idea of the Gospel," *Seminar on the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Adult Education and Extension Services, 1961), p. 66.

<sup>29</sup>Both Hugh Nibley and Chauncey Riddle, who lean toward neoorthodoxy, argue this position. See Nibley's *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1954) and Riddle's "The Conservative View in Mormonism," discussion with Lowell Bennion at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (n.d.).

<sup>30</sup>*Liberalism, Conservatism, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1965), pp. 81-82.

<sup>31</sup>Yarn, *The Gospel*, pp. 201-2.

things of which man could not be ignorant and be saved. And yet the context of this revelation, which is almost enthusiastically ignored, has little if any relation to the traditional academic disciplines, but does speak of one of the most sublime things available to mortals.

The knowledge of which man cannot be ignorant and be saved is knowledge of the truth, that is, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world, and the principles which he has revealed.<sup>32</sup>

Not only do the above depart from the spirit of traditional Mormon faith in education but, along with the emphasis on man's contingency, the denial of the basic goodness of human nature, and the acceptance of a peculiarly Mormon doctrine of original sin, they constitute striking evidence of Mormon neoorthodoxy's rejection of traditional Mormon optimism. Furthermore, they imply a conception of man like that of Protestant neoorthodoxy.

While the Mormon neoorthodox doctrine of salvation may be more similar to traditional Mormonism than either its conceptions of man or God, it does depart significantly on occasions, in tone if not substance, from an orthodox Mormon position. Though basic Mormon beliefs in the after-life remain intact, a more restrictive pathway to salvation is defined and a greater reliance upon God is demanded. Indeed, it is these trends that constitute Mormon neoorthodoxy's departure from orthodoxy on the question of salvation. A shift from traditional Mormonism's fundamentally man-centered doctrine of salvation to a more Protestant God-centered conception is apparent in Mormon neoorthodoxy's doctrine of grace.

I am not suggesting that traditional Mormonism has no conception of grace, but rather that the role of grace differs radically from that of classical Christianity. Not unlike Christian orthodoxy, Mormons hold that mortality is one consequence of the fall of Adam which is overcome through the atonement of Christ. Furthermore, as a result of the Fall, Mormon theology asserts that man experienced "spiritual death." In other words, he is separated from the presence of God. Yet, unlike traditional Christianity, this spiritual death does not alter human nature. In fact, it is conceived as a necessary condition for man's moral and spiritual development. For it is through man's own meritorious efforts, outside of God's presence, along with the atonement of Christ that he may be saved — that he may overcome spiritual death and return to the presence of God. Thus, it is essential to an understanding of Mormonism to recognize that the fall of Adam is an expression of the grace of God in as real a sense of the atonement of Christ. Both are necessary for the salvation of man.

Even so, traditional Mormonism does not emphasize the grace of God and indeed repudiates extreme conceptions of it while opting for a doctrine of individual salvation by merit. In contrast with orthodox divines who quote Paul's "by grace are ye saved," Mormon spokesmen quote James's "Faith without works is dead." There is a striking absence of Pauline theology in Mor-

---

<sup>32</sup>Yarn, *The Gospel*, pp. 203-4.

mon orthodoxy. Still, Mormons often quote Paul, but it is important to note that they do so primarily in reference to the resurrection or in his ethical exhortations. When confronted with his pronouncements on salvation, Mormons generally distort his concept of grace to mean that man will be physically resurrected by the gracious act of God.

Though the traditional Mormon doctrine of salvation is a rather eclectic composition of grace, sacrament, and merit, it is basically set apart from classical Christianity by its emphasis on merit and its insistence upon the perfectability of the individual. Embodied in the notion that man must "work out his own salvation," a central element in Mormon doctrine, are the basic imperatives that the individual submit to various sacraments such as baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, and temple endowment; that he obtain the necessary knowledge, secular and religious; and that he develop the requisite moral character to become like God. To be sure, traditional Mormonism's frequent application of Jesus's life as the example par excellence of the way to salvation naturally follows from its doctrine of salvation, in which the primary responsibility is assigned to man, not God. In contrast with traditional Christianity, man, not God, is the primary actor.

While Mormon neoorthodox theologians agree that the individual must submit to sacrament, acquire knowledge, and develop the requisite moral character if he is to be saved, they dissent from the traditional conceptions of what this implies. The neoorthodox definition of the sort of knowledge essential to salvation and prescription for development of the requisite moral character depart from traditional Mormon thought. Again, if the differences are not strictly substantive, they are at least differences in emphasis.

In contrast with traditional Mormonism's commandment to seek knowledge, secular as well as religious, in order to be saved (exalted), neoorthodoxy demands only religious knowledge. Consequently, Yarn draws a sharp dichotomy between "secular" and "redemptive" truth, arguing that only the latter is necessary for salvation. He writes, "To call some truths secular does not mean they are valueless. It means they have a different value from those called redemptive. We know secular truths do have value for mortals. They may have value for post-mortals, and probably do, but to what extent they are needed we do not know. Redemptive truths have value not only for mortals but are essential for post-mortals if they are to fulfill the true purpose of their being."<sup>33</sup> Rejecting the traditional Mormon notion that the gospel embraces all truth, Pearson writes, "He who teaches that secular education and cultural attainment are part of the gospel, is either mixed up in his vocabulary or else on a foundation of sand. There are very excellent reasons for obtaining secular education and cultural attainment; but their acquisition does not constitute obedience to the gospel."<sup>34</sup>

This neoorthodox position implies an interesting discontinuity between natural and supernatural realms generally foreign to traditional Mormonism.

---

<sup>33</sup>Yarn, *The Gospel*, p. 193.

<sup>34</sup>*Know Your Religion*, p. 52.

As correctly argued by Leonard Arrington (in the first issue of *Dialogue*) the concept of *secular* was really not applicable to early Mormonism. Continuity between the natural and supernatural was such that areas typically regarded as secular were embodied in the Mormon religion. In short, there was no secular. All things were religious. And, knowledge of all things — natural, physical, moral, spiritual — was essential to salvation. Implied in these assumptions is the notion that the Mormon religion embraces all truth.

The neoorthodox departure on the proper character development is no less interesting. Consistent with its conceptions of God and man, orthodox Mormonism strongly emphasizes the performance of good works. Character defects are to be eradicated by behavioral changes. The individual stops being a sinner by not committing specific actual sins. In the language of former Church president Wilford Woodruff, "The man who repents, if he be a swearer, swears no more; or a thief, steals no more; he turns from all his former sins and commits them no more."<sup>35</sup> This is the fundamental message of Mormon orthodoxy, that man should turn from his sins and commit them no more. Through this course of action, along with participation in the necessary sacraments and acquisition of the requisite knowledge, man may hope to realize his ultimate objective, often articulated by ecclesiastical officials and theologians, in the admonition of Jesus to "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Mormon neoorthodoxy, on the other hand, exhibits less concern for the piecemeal development of character through repentance of actual sins and performance of good works. Its doctrine of salvation implies a total regeneration of man. Moral behavior is secondary to "spiritual rebirth." The central task for the sinner is to put off the natural man and become a saint through the atonement of Christ. The "transition from the realm of the natural to the spiritual," writes Andrus, "is required of all men, if they are to obtain the good life here and salvation in the world to come."<sup>36</sup>

Turning away from specific acts of sin, combined with the resolution to commit them no more, does not constitute an act of repentance in Mormon neoorthodoxy. This behavior is merely a moral change, a reform. Man needs a much more basic "regeneration"; he needs, as Yarn says, to be "changed in the inner man."<sup>37</sup> Only through a "spiritual" and not a "moral" change can man be saved. Pearson writes, "One must repent 'towards God.' A reform is not enough if spiritual salvation is the goal. The intent must be to make oneself worthy of God's mercy and forgiveness. Repentance, in this sense, is a theological term, describing an act of compliance in the struggle to be saved, while reformation is an act inspired by an intelligent desire to improve one's lot in mortality."<sup>38</sup>

It now is not difficult to understand why Mormon neoorthodox theologians are so attracted to Pauline theology and so set on identifying Mormon-

<sup>35</sup> *Journal of Discourses*, 23: 127.

<sup>36</sup> *Liberalism*, p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> Yarn, *The Gospel*, p. 74.

<sup>38</sup> *Know Your Religion*, p. 134.

ism with a classical Christian doctrine of grace, though orthodox Mormonism's denial of typical doctrines of grace is reflected in its own aversion to Pauline theology. Objecting to the typical Mormon interpretation of Paul's doctrine of grace, Pearson says, "You know that we very often in the church nowadays think that Paul meant that the grace brought about the resurrection and that everybody would be resurrected by grace, but you notice that Paul said you are saved by grace through faith and you don't have to have faith to have the resurrection and so we know Paul was speaking of another salvation other than the resurrection."<sup>39</sup> This predisposition toward a classical doctrine of grace, the affinity for a pessimistic doctrine of man, and the flirting with a conception of an absolute God not only set this new theology apart from traditional Mormonism but also illustrate its similarities to Protestant neoorthodoxy and, I believe, justify the label of Mormon neoorthodoxy.

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

We now turn to a brief discussion of some possible implications of Mormon neoorthodoxy for the future of Mormon theology and religion. These implications are not necessary consequences of adopting a neoorthodox perspective. In some instances, Protestant neoorthodoxy has effectively avoided them while in others it has fallen victim. What will happen to Mormonism obviously remains to be seen, but I believe there are good reasons for concern over the survival of some fundamental Mormon values.

A dangerous tendency of Mormon neoorthodoxy appears in its conception of revelation. Not only is revelation defined in more narrow terms than in traditional Mormonism, but it also appears to have a somewhat different function. When Mormon neoorthodox theologians argue that two principles cannot be said to conflict merely because both appear in Scripture, they assume a form of revelation not entirely consistent with traditional Mormonism.

For, unlike Protestant neoorthodoxy, traditional Mormonism has little sympathy with a revelation of paradox or for a revelation designed to "baffle the intellect." On the contrary, Mormons have opted for revelation which makes matters more intelligible. Its purpose is to clarify, not to confuse, to solve problems and answer questions, not to indicate that problems are illusory and questions illegitimate. Mormon revelation is explicit. When God revealed Himself to a confused boy, He neither tried to baffle the boy's intellect nor to demonstrate His own paradoxical nature. He was not something so large that He could fill the immensity of space and yet so small that He could dwell within the heart of man. He was a person, with a tangible body, with spatial and temporal dimensions. He was comprehensible, not something beyond the logical grasp or understanding of man. While differences between God and man were apparent, they were not so significant that the young boy could not *intellectually* apprehend God's message.

---

<sup>39</sup>"The Book of Mormon in Its Own Defence," *Know Your Religion Series* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, n.d.), pp. 27-28.

Though Mormon neoorthodoxy denies the rational nature of traditional Mormon revelation, it stops short of the extreme position assumed by Protestant neoorthodoxy. The inordinate preoccupation with God as "totally other" has led some Protestant neoorthodox theologians to distinguish sharply between revelation and religion. Since revelation is conceived as God's gracious act of reaching downward to save depraved man and religion is arrogant man's attempt to become God, the former is praised and the latter damned. Wicked, helpless man cannot legitimately reach for God. Such an act is the epitome of arrogance, pride, and blasphemy. God must initiate all interaction. If any saving is to be done, God must do it. A real danger of Mormon neoorthodoxy's conception of revelation is that it could possibly lead to this sort of distinction between revelation and religion in which man's search for God is vigorously condemned.

Related is the distrust of rationalism and empiricism so characteristic of Mormon neoorthodoxy yet so unlike orthodox Mormonism. In traditional Mormon thought, human reason and sensory experience are enthusiastically supported, not only as ways of helping man acquire knowledge useful to him in his earthly sojourn but also as means of learning information that will enable him to become like God. For, Mormon metaphysics — assuming an orderly reality based upon eternally operative natural, moral, and spiritual laws — demands that individuals learn these laws in order to realize their destinies. Only when all of man's learning faculties are developing to their highest potential is he living in accordance with the basic teachings of his religion.

This fundamental faith in the human intellect has characterized Mormonism from its beginning. It was built into early Mormon experience. Mormons vigorously proclaimed that not only would education provide the solutions to basic problems, but it would also vindicate Mormon claims to truth. It would be most unfortunate, I believe, if the Mormon commitment to education — an attitude intrinsic to its metaphysics — were to disappear and the educational achievements of the Mormon people end.

Thus, a very real consequence of the Mormon neoorthodox contempt for reason and empiricism, combined with its narrow definition of the sort of knowledge necessary for salvation, may be a form of anti-intellectualism that will sap the Mormon religion of its vitality and destroy its commitment to education. For without faith in the human intellect, Mormonism will lose one of its most important checks against superstition and emotional excess. While such an extreme posture may not seem imminent, its realization is by no means impossible. It is the logical extension of anti-intellectualism.

Though contemporary Mormonism exhibits an apparent lack of concern for many of the world's most pressing problems, I fear that Mormon neoorthodoxy may lead even further from such considerations, since, unlike Protestant neoorthodoxy — which emerged with profound moral and social sensitivity, considering itself an expression of greater moral vitality and zeal than Protestant liberalism — Mormon neoorthodoxy exhibits relatively little

interest in ethics and social problems, excluding possibly its concern with governmental expansion, the welfare state, and extension of the franchise. In its literature, little concern with problems of war and peace, racial discrimination, poverty, or population expansion is evident. Yet, few things characterized early Mormonism more than its concern for social justice and interest in creating the perfect society here on earth. It would be a real tragedy, I believe, if Mormon neorthodoxy's preoccupation with the otherness of God, the corruption of man, his reliance upon grace, and the discontinuity between the natural and the spiritual were to induce the Mormon community to ignore the profound insight of orthodox Mormonism that that "religion which cannot save man temporally cannot save him spiritually."

