Philosophical Theology for Mormons: Some Suggestions from an Outsider

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I

In this paper I want to ask what philosophical theology might be able to do for Latter-day Saints. I will begin with a discussion of what philosophy is and how it contrasts with theology. Then I will describe what philosophical theology is and what it typically can do for faith communities, especially Christian ones. Then I will suggest four issues in contemporary Mormon thought where, as it seems to me (an interested outsider), philosophical theology might be of some help. It is hardly my place to suggest how Mormons ought to deal with the issues that I will raise. But I do want to recommend that some of those who engage in the emerging discipline of Mormon philosophical theology ought to try to do so. Finally, I will argue that Mormons can benefit from systematic theology, despite Mormonism’s traditional aversion to it.

II

I myself am both a philosopher who teaches at a secular institution and a Christian. As such, I am occasionally asked about the relationship between philosophy and Christianity. There are lots of opinions out there on this topic. Some religious people view the two as enemies and accordingly avoid
philosophy. Others hope that philosophy can be used to buttress Christianity. Many of today’s philosophers think that commitment to Christianity requires losing one’s philosophical integrity. Some try to use philosophy to discredit religion.

So what exactly is philosophy? There is no better way to begin than with Plato and Aristotle. They both tell us that philosophy begins in wonder.

This sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin.¹

For it was curiosity that first led men to philosophize and that still leads them. Men philosophized in order to escape ignorance.²

What are philosophers curious about? I will say they are curious about what I will call “ultimate questions.”

To me, philosophy is no more or less than the attempt to satisfy our curiosity about ultimate questions. An ultimate question is a question (1) which people are deeply interested in and desperately long to answer and (2) which cannot be answered by the methods of science. The question, “Was Julius Caesar right-handed or left-handed?” is not a philosophical question because nobody is deeply interested in answering it. I’ve never heard of anyone spending three hard hours thinking about it. The question, “Is there life on Mars?” is a question that people are deeply interested in answering, but this question can be answered by science, and no doubt one day will be. So then this question is not a philosophical question either.

Well, then, what are some philosophical questions? Let me list a few:

What will happen to me when I die?
What is knowledge?
What is the meaning of life?
How can I know what is right and what is wrong?
What is beauty?
Does God exist?
Are my acts free or determined?

These are inescapable questions that keep reappearing in the history of human thought, and they do not appear to be answerable by the methods of science. They are, then, ultimate or philosophical questions.

Philosophy (at times not unfairly) has earned the reputation of being
vague, speculative, and irrelevant to real life. But it should not be so. On the contrary, philosophy attempts to help people in a concrete way: it tries to answer questions like these that bother them. So at heart it is a practical enterprise: it concerns real questions asked by real people. If it does not do this, if its concerns become unrelated to real life, then it flounders and is not worth the hard effort it requires. Philosophy is not just for professional philosophers. Anyone who asks a philosophical question is a philosopher.

Philosophical questions cannot be once-and-for-all answered by means of crunching numbers, taking a poll, or doing an experiment in a laboratory. This fact makes philosophy both fascinating and frustrating. Philosophy makes no empirical discoveries and consequently there seems to be almost no progress in philosophy. In other disciplines knowledge can grow like building-blocks: one expert’s discovery, once accepted by others, can lead to new discoveries and new knowledge, and these discoveries to others. But not so in philosophy; since there is no method of verifying or falsifying philosophical results, philosophers can and do continually reexamine the same old questions and the same old answers to those questions. Some people are suspicious of philosophy because of the paucity of accepted conclusions, but in a sense this is not philosophy’s fault: philosophy just is the discipline that gets stuck with the most difficult questions of all.

What is the relationship between philosophy and theology? This is a complex question. On the one hand, there are striking similarities. Many of the questions asked by philosophers are also asked by theologians, e.g., Does God exist? What happens to me when I die? What is the meaning of life? How can I know what is right and what is wrong? Also, philosophers and theologians share certain methodological preferences: both strive for connected, systematic thinking, for example. Also, in a sense, both philosophy and theology are backward-looking disciplines; both philosophers and theologians consider it vital to study and interpret the thoughts of past practitioners.

But there are important differences. The most important is the fact that theology is based upon the assumption that certain claims are revealed truths. So in theology, certain things are accepted, as we might say, on authority—e.g., because Jesus said so or because the Bible says so. Philosophy, however, accepts nothing on authority. (That is not so say that philosophers never do.) A point can be accepted only if reason deems it acceptable, i.e., only if the arguments or evidence in its favor outweigh those against it.

Accordingly, many people have concluded that philosophy and theology are enemies. Many philosophers have apparently believed this, and so have some of the greatest figures in the history of Christian theology, from
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Tertullian to Karl Barth. Even St. Paul seemed to argue passionately that secular philosophy is the enemy of the Christian Gospel:

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. . . . The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 1 and 2, selected verses)

These words of Paul are easy to misinterpret. The passage from Colossians should not be taken as a condemnation on Paul’s part of all philosophy. His speech at Athens, quoted by Luke in Acts 17, shows how he could appreciate and even utilize current philosophy. What Paul was criticizing was the fantastic and mythological speculations that were being perpetrated among to Colossian Christians. He was saying: Do not allow yourselves to be deluded by empty, superstitious thought masquerading as philosophy.

As to the Corinthian passage, I agree that: (1) Christian faith does not rest on philosophical wisdom but on revealed truth; (2) the truth that is revealed to Christians can seem absurd to non-believers, especially to philosophically inclined non-believers; (3) no rational system of human devising, no matter how eloquently it is expressed, has the power to save; and (4) the true wisdom of God is not attained by reasoning but by faith. But I do not believe that reasoning is divorced from faith; although reasoning does not exhaust faith, it is a vital element in faith.

It would even be safe to say that some people should and indeed must be Christian philosophers. For philosophically inclined persons who are also
Christians, doing philosophical theology is a spiritual necessity. Such people cannot believe unless their philosophical scruples allow them to believe. It is a spiritually dangerous enterprise for such people, so to speak, to put their philosophy in one pocket and their faith in another and never allow the two to affect each other. Moreover, their faith need not be merely intellectual—cold, theoretical, or dispassionate. Philosophers can be as deeply and passionately committed as anyone else.

In one sense, the work of philosophy is unimportant to faith. Few religious believers recognize themselves as philosophers and probably even fewer regard their faith as in any sense dependent upon philosophy. It is obvious that religious lives can be and often are lived apart from any interest in philosophy, at least academic philosophy. But in another sense, philosophy is vitally important to faith, and this is no doubt the reason that many Christian believers throughout history, like Clement of Alexander, Augustine, Aquinas, and Pascal, have either approved of philosophy or have seen themselves as philosophers. For surely it would be a catastrophe for Christianity if it were to turn out that Christian faith could not be defended intellectually, if it were to turn out to be irrational to have such faith.

III

So then let us turn to philosophical theology. What exactly is it and what can it do for faith communities? Let me define three terms, the first of which is theology. There are many types of theology—biblical theology, historical theology, pastoral theology, etc. In this paper, when I use the word “theology” I am speaking of what is usually called systematic theology. So I will say that theology is simply the attempt to understand revelation. Theologians take what they believe has been revealed and place it in various topics (doctrine of God, doctrine of redemption, etc.), order it systematically, reflect about it, and explain it. Theology uses human reason to understand God, human beings, redemption, the church, the sacraments, and the future. It tries to be both comprehensive (covering all the doctrines) and systematic (showing how they fit together into a system). Theology explains and presents the content of faith as best it can, both to the church and to the world. Theology is an aid to understanding what one believes and why.

Philosophical theology, in my sense, is just the attempt to think clearly and rigorously in a philosophical way about specific theological topics that are internal to a given faith tradition. Using the tools of philosophy, it has four main concerns, the first of which is logical coherence. Critics occasionally
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charge that a certain doctrine in a given religion is internally inconsistent, and philosophical theology asks whether that charge is true. The second is evidential considerations. In the case of some doctrines—especially those involving historical claims—matters of evidence and probability come to the fore. The third is fit with what is taken to be orthodoxy. Philosophical theologians can argue that a certain theological claim either does or does not cohere with the religious world-view in question. The fourth issue is closely related to the first two: it is apologetics. Philosophical theologians are often called to defend theological claims against criticisms.

IV

What are some issues in Mormon thought that I think Mormon philosophical theologians might be able helpfully to work on? Let me mention three of them.

1. Mormonism on the mind/body problem.

This first point concerns four terms commonly used in Mormon theological discourse. I think LDS thinkers need to do some work on what we might call the Mormon view of the mind-body problem. Maybe it is just a matter of defining terms clearly, but perhaps more serious issues lurk behind problems of vocabulary. One such term is “spirit.” It is clear that Mormons do not think that being a spirit entails being incorporeal. They hold that spirits are embodied human-like persons, although possibly less tangible than human persons because they are composed of “refined matter.” But this is the second puzzling term, refined matter. What exactly is it? Is it meant to be the same thing as the new body or resurrection body (soma pneumaticon) that Paul speaks of in I Corinthians 15, or not? And is having a body consisting of refined matter the same thing as having a “spirit body” (the third term), which Mormons say the Holy Spirit has? Also, how do the two terms, spirit and refined matter, relate to the Mormon view of “intelligence” (the fourth term)? In one sense, I gather that Mormons believe that human intelligences are uncreated and everlasting. Is that true of spirits and refined matter too? Finally, do Mormons hold to what philosophers call substance dualism? This is the theory which says that (1) human beings consist of both material bodies and immaterial souls and (2) the soul is the essence of the person. I suspect that Mormons would affirm the first conjunct of this definition (although they would prefer the word “spirit” to the world “soul”), but I am not sure. I at least need some clarification here, and maybe even Mormons do.
I would humbly recommend that some Mormon scholars tackle the task of defining what these four terms mean—spirit, refined matter, spirit body, and intelligence—and explain how they are related.

2. The need for logical consistency?

As mentioned above, one of the central things that philosophical theology can do for faith communities is to show that their various commitments or doctrines are both individually consistent and consistent with each other. It is important, of course, that our beliefs form a coherent system, because we all live under the epistemological principle that incoherent statements cannot be true and that two statements that are inconsistent with each other cannot both be true. If a given religion holds propositions A and B, but it can be shown that A is internally incoherent, or if it can be shown that A and B are both individually coherent but are inconsistent with each other (that is, if one of them is true the other must be false), that, obviously, would constitute a serious problem for adherents of that religion.

Now this matter of consistency is especially important for mainstream Christianity, where revelation is closed. That is, mainstream Christians hold that normative revelation ceased when the sixty-six books of the Bible were written. We certainly believe that God continues to act in the world and continues to speak to people. I believe that God has spoken to me (not aloud, of course) on several occasions. But those acts of revelation are not—so we hold—normative for the whole of the people of God, as the Bible is. So no Christian has the authority to add to or subtract from the revelation of God given to us in the scriptures.

Of course Christian theology goes on; every generation we discover new things about what God has revealed and new ways to speak that revelation to ourselves and to the world. But since there is no new revelation, the issue of internal consistency among our doctrines is especially acute. We cannot amend revelation, not even to provide consistency. It is true that mainstream Christianity has undergone major mid-course alterations in the twenty centuries in which it has existed. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century is the most notable example. But those adjustments never purported to involve new revelations; they always centered on different interpretations of what had already been revealed.

Naturally, Mormons also face the requirement that their doctrines be both individually coherent and consistent with each other. And it is up to Mormon philosophical theologians, in situations where consistency is challenged, to try to answer that sort of charge. But that is not the main point I want to
raise as a challenge to Mormon thinkers. There seems to me to be two ways in which doctrinal change can occur in Mormonism. The first is what we might call the official way. As we all know, the LDS church does not have a tradition of closed revelation. Revelation is on-going. And there have been at least two occasions in Mormon history when the then current president and prophet has received revelations that in effect said a decisive no to doctrines and practices that were previously held, and even held as important, by Mormons. The second way I will call unofficial: it involves things that were once pronounced by LDS church authorities and believed by most Mormons that are simply no longer taught. There was no announcement, so to speak, but a doctrinal change was in effect brought about.

For example, take the traditional Mormon idea that mainstream Christian notion of the virgin birth of Jesus is false because in fact Jesus was conceived when God the Father had sexual relations with Mary. I may be mistaken, but I have the impression that most Latter-day Saints once held this view and that many now affirm the virgin birth. A second example: despite Joseph Smith’s and Lorenzo Snow’s clearly stated belief that God was once a man (an issue to which we will return below), many Mormon scholars are now saying that we know nothing at all about God’s life before the creation and that since there is nothing in the canonical Mormon scriptures about this point, discussion of it is pure speculation.

So my question is this: just how important is the issue of logical consistency in a religion of continuing revelation? I ask this question because it seems to me that there are several theological areas where Mormonism is presently developing against previous Mormon traditions. Just on the doctrine of God, I have heard contemporary LDS thinkers say that Mormons need to reclaim the picture of God found in the Book of Mormon, which picture seems to people like me to be much closer to mainstream Christian views of God than those found in later LDS canonical writings. And I know that some current Mormon thinkers are uncomfortable with Mormonism’s traditional infinite regress of Gods, with God the Father at one time being finite and inferior to other deities. Now whether these trends will prevail is ultimately up to LDS church authorities, not up to Mormon scholars, and certainly not up to outsiders like me. But I do just wonder whether consistency among one’s doctrines is as serious a desideratum for Mormons as it is for mainstream Christians. In theory, Mormonism can always solve an apparent inconsistency by abandoning or modifying an old doctrine, either officially or unofficially. I think this issue might be a fruitful topic for Mormon scholars to explore.
3. How to decide what is normative and what is not.

I have in mind here a related but different issue in theological methodology. Like any religious tradition, Mormonism must be able to distinguish among doctrines that are normative for all Latter-day Saints, doctrines that are not normative but have been traditionally believed by Latter-day Saints, and doctrines that are not normative and maybe not traditional but are permitted for Latter-day Saints. In specific cases, people can and will disagree about such matters. But there must in principle be some way to draw such lines.

As an example, how much weight should be given to non-canonical sayings of Joseph Smith, like the King Follett sermon and other discourses delivered near the end of his life? As we all know, that sermon is not considered sacred scripture by the LDS church. But why not? I certainly do not know. Is it because of the esoteric doctrines espoused or apparently espoused in it? Or is it because Joseph Smith’s death a few weeks after delivering it prevented him from ever correcting or authorizing any text of the sermon? Or is it because the discourse was not given as a revelation in the way that other LDS revelations were? Still, despite its non-canonical status, there is no denying that the King Follett Discourse is and always has been an important and highly authoritative source of Mormon doctrine.

But whether today’s Mormons do or do not give much theological weight to the King Follett Discourse, they certainly do give substantial weight to other things that Joseph Smith said outside the context of “revealed truth.”

Now I realize that nobody holds that everything Joseph Smith ever said in his life was religiously authoritative. So it seems that some sort of criterion is needed to decide which extracanonical teachings of Joseph Smith are authoritative for Latter-day Saints and which are not.

I also realize that certain LDS scholars have addressed the issue of determining what is church doctrine, and for both external and internal reasons. Externally, I’m sure that most Mormons have been involved in conversations with non-Mormons where they get accused of believing something that they don’t in fact believe. As a scholar whose vocation seems to be speaking mainly to outsiders, Robert Millett sensibly argues, in several of his writings, that Mormon doctrine is whatever can be found in the standard works and/or in official church declarations, proclamations or publications, and that has, as he says, “sticking power” through time.

But Nathan Oman, who seems to be speaking mainly to his fellow Latter-
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day Saints, argues that there is no foolproof method or rule for determining what church doctrine is. At the core, of course, he says that Mormons are clear what they believe. But at the margins there is and can be disagreement and even confusion as to what Mormon doctrine is.8 His criticism, as I understand it, of Millett-type suggestions, is that the words of official spokespersons or publications cannot infallibly declare what is church doctrine since the authors of those statements use a pre-understanding of what counts as church doctrine in making their statements. I will not explore here Oman’s own interesting and nuanced proposal involving telling stories that amount to interpretations of church history, teachings, practices, and texts.

So this issue too seems a point that Mormon philosophical theologians might fruitfully address. How do Mormons decide—or how should church authorities decide—what is normative and what is not?

VI

4. Lorenzo Snow reconsidered.

As I think all Latter-day saints know, mainstream Christians listen to Lorenzo Snow’s famous couplet (echoing, as it does, things that Joseph Smith said) with nothing but shock and horror. It comes in two parts, of course. In my opinion, one of the parts is more troubling than the other. I at least have heard contemporary LDS explanations of the second part, “as God is, man may become,” that strike me as acceptable, although we would still wish that other language could be used. If Mormons are willing to deny that human beings can ontologically become God, and if this part of the couplet means no more than that human beings in the kingdom of God will be redeemed, will have the image of God fully restored in them, and in their glorified bodies will be immortal and perfect in holiness, then I think I can be convinced to let the idea pass. I would probably consider it a slightly rhetorically overblown version of what Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, and other Eastern Church Fathers meant by “theosis” or “divinization.” However, there remains one difference which might not be subject to compromise: in the LDS notion of eternal progression, God and human beings share the same ontology (are members of the same species), so in their exaltation, human beings attain a status (immortality and divinity) that was potentially theirs all along. In the mainstream notion of theosis, on the other hand, God graciously grants human beings a status that is not rightfully theirs.

But the real trouble lies with the first part of the couplet, “As man now is, God once was.” There are both theological and philosophical problems here.
The theological problem, at least for mainstream Christians, is that a God who was once finite and limited like human beings does not seem to us to be worthy of worship. Worshipping him would seem to us like idolatry. Why do we worship this God, and not one or all of the Gods who are superior to this God or who arrived at exhaltation before him? I realize that Joseph Smith said that “the heads of the Gods appointed one God for us,” but that is hardly sufficient to solve the problem: why not worship the Head God? Moreover, we must ask: what is the relationship between the God whom we worship and all the other Gods (presumably an infinite number of them) who were divine before him? Does he worship them?

Philosophically the idea is fraught with difficulties. How can a finite being progress to infinity? Does that idea even make sense? I am not referring to infinite longevity here, since Mormons hold that all beings, Gods and humans, are in a sense everlasting. I am thinking more of divine attributes like omnipotence. Humans, of course, can do many things, but not an infinite number of things. Suppose, just for fun, that extraordinarily powerful human beings have it within their power in their lifetimes to perform a google number of actions. (A google is the number represented by a one followed by one hundred zeros.) But even that very large number is a finite number, and it is impossible to arrive at an infinite number by successive addition. No matter how long you keep increasing numbers in the series, “a google, a google plus one, a google plus two…,” you will never arrive at an infinite number. So if an omnipotent being has it within its power to perform an infinite number of actions, it looks very much like you can never take a finitely powerful being and by increasing its powers arrive at an omnipotent being. So for this reason and others, it looks as if there is an unbridgeable ontological gulf between finite things and infinite things. Moreover, where did the universe—the ordered and quite apparently contingent cosmos that we inhabit—come from in the first place?

As noted above, some contemporary Mormon scholars and ordinary believers solve this problem by denying or ignoring the traditional “infinite regress of Gods” notion. And that certainly seems to me—a Presbyterian—the right way to go. But until the traditional notion is officially or in effect ruled out in the LDS church, there are several issues here that I think Mormon philosophical theologians ought to work on.
In conclusion, let me try to mount an argument to the effect that Mormons need theology, i.e., systematic theology. I make these points tentatively and by way of suggestion only, because as I say, I know that it is none of my business to try to tell Latter-day Saints what they ought to do.

Now as we all know, Mormonism has no official philosophy, theology, or creed. Three reasons are usually given for Mormonism’s aversion to theology. (1) Mormonism has always been oriented more toward the down-to-earth problems of life and practice than to theoretical or academic concerns. Some LDS scholars argue that Mormonism is not to be defined by its beliefs. (2) Mormon scriptures have always been taken as far more important than any theology. (3) Mormonism’s essential insistence on an open canon and on continuing revelation makes systematic theology largely useless; virtually anything that any Mormon theologian says might soon be outdated because of new revelation. Even what has been revealed in the past is partial and subject to revision.

I cannot argue against the first point. It seems to me that Mormonism’s orientation toward life and practice is a defining characteristic. I will only say that I do not see why theology must interfere with that orientation. Indeed, I think it can help it. In mainstream Christianity we have a whole branch of theology—what is called practical theology—that exists just for this purpose.

I warmly embrace the second point in its entirety. Although I believe in a far less expansive scripture than Mormons do, I certainly hold—as do most mainstream Christians—that scripture is far more important than theology and must always outrank any theology.

The third point about continuing revelation does not seem to me to constitute a barrier to theology. I don’t see why the words of Mormon theologians or even official church-sanctioned theological statements cannot be indexed to a certain time. The point could be made or implicitly understood that any such statement is subject to revision by later revelation or authoritative interpretation.

Theology is needed, then, (1) to help Latter-day Saints understand their own religion; (2) to help settle internal disputes as to what church doctrine is and what is not; (3) to enter into informed dialogue with non-Mormons; and (4) to assist Mormon scholars, whenever necessary, to defend Mormonism from criticism. In at least these ways, philosophical theology can be helpful to Latter-day Saints.
NOTES

3 See Robert Millet’s discussion of this issue in Robert L. Millet and Gregory C. V. Johnson, Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation Between a Mormon and an Evangelical (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Company, 2007), 138-139.
4 See, for example, Ibid., 58. In another essay, Millet makes these same points and adds that this is not a “saving doctrine.” Robert L. Millet, “What Do We Really Believe? Identifying Doctrinal Parameters Within Mormonism,” in Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Explorations, ed. James M. McLaughlin and Loyd Ericson (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007).
5 Robert Millett quotes a 1978 statement of Elder Bruce R. McConkie: “Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George O. Canon or whosoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation,” in “What Do We Really Believe?” 275.
6 Notice the intense interest in the question whether Joseph Smith ever stated or believed that human beings have a Heavenly Mother. See the discussion of this issue in David L. Paulsen, “Are Christians Mormon? Reassessing Joseph Smith’s Theology in His Bicentennial,” BYU Studies 45:1 (2006): 96-107.
7 For example, see “What Do We Really Believe?” 266-7, 271.
12 I would like to thank Brian Birch for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.