



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title The New Mormon Theology of Matter

Author Rosalynde Welch

Reference *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 64-79.

ISSN 2156-8022 (print), 2156-8030 (online)

The New Mormon Theology of Matter

Rosalynde Welch

Review of James E. Faulconer, *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture*. Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010; Adam Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016; Joseph M. Spencer, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope*. Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2014.

IN THE THIRD ISSUE OF THE *Mormon Studies Review*, Michelle Chaplin Sanchez suggests that the priority of elemental matter in Mormon cosmology may fundamentally define the nature of its theological language. Whereas other Christian theologies assume an ontological gap between a signifying God and a signified world, thereby structuring sacred language by means of analogy and diversion rather than by straightforward identity, she hypothesizes, Mormon theology may “function in an altogether different rhetorical sense.” That difference, she suggests, may be especially apparent in Mormon soteriology.¹

Sanchez’s perceptive observation is borne out by a new turn in Mormon theology, though perhaps not in the way she predicts. A recent harvest of Mormon theology examines the implications of Mormon

1. Michelle Chaplin Sanchez, “Wrestling with Language: Exploring the Impact of Mormon Metaphysics on Theological Pedagogy,” *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 105–16.

materialism—that is, the claims that all spirit is matter and that the cosmos is thus an ontological continuum—for models of language and law, and does so by way of sustained engagement with contemporary Continental philosophy.² Centered on a core group of three working philosophers—James Faulconer, Adam Miller, and Joseph Spencer—this movement deploys the tools of Continental philosophy in the service of Mormon teachings and texts. Over the past several years, their work for Mormon audiences has included highlights like Faulconer’s *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (2010), a collection of essays reexamining Mormon understandings of canon, revelation, and the meaning of theology itself; Miller’s *Rube Goldberg Machines* (2012), a collection exploring agency and existential grace, his *Letters to a Young Mormon* (2013), and *Future Mormon* (2016), another collection delving into soteriology, truth, and materialism; and Spencer’s *An Other Testament* (2012), a tour de force exegesis of typology in the Book of Mormon, and *For Zion* (2014), an examination of theological time, hope, and consecration.

For Miller and Spencer especially, these books represent only a portion of a larger project that aims at nothing less than the active production and promotion of the discipline of Mormon theology. Other endeavors include their former publishing imprint, Salt Press; the series *Groundwork: Studies in Theory and Scripture*, which they currently edit for the Maxwell Institute; and the Mormon Theology Seminar, which they operate in partnership with the Maxwell Institute’s Willes Center. Through these avenues, Miller and Spencer work to mentor potential contributors, publish new volumes of speculative theology, and develop a community of readers for these works.³ Characterized

2. The notion of “Continental” philosophy obviously betrays a North American perspective and is thus external to the tradition itself. Nevertheless, I use it here because it has become a useful category by which to distinguish this type of inquiry from analytic or classical approaches.

3. Salt Press was managed by Spencer and Miller together with Robert Couch and Jenny Webb. The press was dissolved in 2014, whereupon the Maxwell Institute republished its three previously published titles: two volumes from the Mormon Theology Seminar entitled *An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma 32* and *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: 2 Nephi 26–27*; and Spencer’s *An Other Testament*.

by a collaborative method and a speculative approach, the seminar and the publications range widely in their topics yet retain a characteristic style inflected in part by their interest in critical theory.

This theology naturally shares much in common with—and freely employs the methods of—the exegetical and historical approaches that dominate the wider field of conventional Mormon theology, recently reinvigorated by thinkers like Blake Ostler, Terryl Givens, and Stephen Webb. Furthermore, the new school shares with fellow theologians of Mormonism a focus on the meaning of materialism, a central theme of several of the most important recent works in the category, including Givens’s *Wrestling the Angel* (2014) and Webb’s *Mormon Christianity* (2013). What distinguishes the new school is its turn toward a movement in contemporary Continental philosophy that calls into question the metaphysical basis of traditional Christian theology. To define what is at stake for this new school and what this joint project undertakes, to position it at a crossroads in the larger history of philosophy and religion, and to suggest the unique theological resources that Mormonism brings to this conversation are the aims of this review. To that end, I ask the reader to indulge a very short introduction to one small corner of Continental philosophy.

The relationship between the general and the particular has been the central question of Western philosophy since Plato divided the cosmos into ideal forms and inert matter.⁴ Over time, Western idealism, adopted by Christianity and informing its theological categories, developed a comprehensive account of God, nature, being, morality, and temporality: divine perfection, unchanging and unchangeable, dwells in eternity, while base matter, subject to decay and dissolution, occupies transient time. Moral goodness lies in humanity’s striving to apprehend and imitate the immaterial forms of divine perfection.

4. I rely here on a too-simple characterization of Plato’s metaphysics, which is embedded in a complex rhetorical and pedagogical project, as Sanchez notes. Nevertheless, I use “Plato” as an accessible shorthand for what is sometimes called the “hylomorphic model” of reality, the metaphysical theory that all being is composed of form and matter.

The advent of rational scientific inquiry in early modern Europe generated a competing model of reality in which matter was taken to be definitive in its own right, absent the governing meanings imposed by divine forms. If matter is all that exists, then reality must be reconceived as an ontological continuum, replacing the form-and-matter dualism of Plato. As modernity transformed the intellectual and social landscapes of Europe, influential movements including Darwinism, Marxism, and Freudianism brought materialist assumptions into social practice.

As the violent upheavals of the twentieth century forced a reassessment of the foundations of Western society, it became apparent to some that metaphysics had not kept pace with the technological and scientific advance of materialism. That is, while Marxism offered a revolutionary theory of history, it lacked a revolutionary theory of time; while Darwinism offered a revolutionary theory of life, it lacked a revolutionary theory of being. The absence of a materialist *metaphysics* impeded the ability of science and politics to critically self-reflect and self-correct; the expulsion of the supernatural seemed to leave the natural without a basis for ethical claims. Noting this void, several schools of Continental philosophy began to contest the ontologically binary, morally unitary basis of Platonism and in its place provide an account of the ontologically continuous, morally plural universe unfolding under modern inquiry—a metaphysics suitable for the modern age. It is in this project that the new Mormon theology finds its intellectual context.

To summarize the achievements of Continental philosophy would test the patience of any reader, so let me focus particularly on two threads relevant to our purposes: ethics and temporality. For Plato, the Good originates in the Forms, which impose a unified and consistent moral order on the material cosmos. One strand of Continental philosophy works to fracture the unitary foundation of the Good and establish the Gift (or givenness) in its place as the foundation of ethics. Among these thinkers are Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and Emmanuel Levinas, each of whom takes an original approach but all of whom recognize the moral status of the Other as the basis of the gift-giving ethic. The recognition of irreducible alterity fragments the ethical unity

of the Platonic Good: where there was the transcendent One, now there are the terrestrial many. This move underwrites an ethics grounded in difference, plurality, and process. The upshot is an immanent moral ordering of materiality that need not appeal to transcendent universals, an ethics that accounts for primordial plurality without abandoning moral commitments.

A second strand of Continental metaphysics probes the question of time: is ultimate reality eternal, or does it pass away? For Plato, as we've seen, the perfection of the Forms exists outside time, unchanging and unchangeable. Among the philosophers who grapple, contra Plato, with the transience of the material world is Walter Benjamin, who turns to Judeo-Christian messianic theology for a rich vein of philosophy on temporality, engaging as it does the future redemption of (past) history. From the messianic, Benjamin draws a model of time that is generative and dynamic: always passing away, yes, but always capable of reordering and redemption. Benjamin's model of time underlies the work of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who, by way of a close reading of the Pauline epistles, develops a theory of law, language, and agency that accounts for both the structuring function of law *and* the irreducible difference introduced by human agency, without recourse to a premodern ontology of the ideal or its underlying set logic of part-and-whole. Agamben, in other words, describes a moral topography inherent in material reality.

These ideas are not beyond criticism, naturally, and they have attracted much. Nevertheless, their relevance to philosophers of contemporary religion should be clear: they suggest that a materialist metaphysics *can* respond to the challenge of reductive physical determinism with a model that grounds ethics and agency in the basic fabric of our reality, without requiring ultimate grounding in the transcendent. While this strand of Continental philosophy freely borrows theological concepts, it is framed in nontheistic language and undertakes no defense of traditional religion. Some of its practitioners hold personal religious commitments; others do not. For a person of faith in a secularizing world, however, open to claims both rational and religious and

looking for a warrant that accommodates both, this new metaphysics offers speculative possibilities worth careful attention.

This, at any rate, is the wager behind a burgeoning (though small) movement in academic philosophy known as the Continental philosophy of religion. This largely North American academic subfield recognizes the relevance of the Continental tradition for contemporary religion and draws on these sources to generate new insights about everything from the phenomenology of religious experience to Reformed hermeneutics.⁵ The Continental turn in Mormon theology can be seen in part as an extension of this movement within the larger discipline of philosophy of religion.

For theologians of Mormonism, however, the project is more than mere academic fad. Mormonism, distinctive among Christian traditions, is, precisely, a religious materialism that resonates strikingly with many of the central ideas of the Continental philosophy traced above. Chief among these is Joseph Smith's declaration that "all spirit is matter," an axiom that dissolves Platonic dualism in a stroke and opens the door to a metaphysics of pure matter. The revelation of God's corporeality confirms that the cosmos is ontologically continuous, with human and divine coexisting along the same plane, and that any conception of the good must find its footing within this material plane. Mormon teachings on God's progression and passibility suggest that ultimate reality is temporal, dynamic within time rather than unchanging or absolute. Mormon rejection of creation *ex nihilo* in favor of creation *ex materia*, out of preexisting intelligence and element, together with the corollary that matter is uncreated and coeternal with God, affirm that the primordial origin of being is plural, not singular. Irreducible plurality is the fundamental character of being. The Mormon teaching that the spirit world is coextensive with the physical world suggests the immanence of the divine and orients the theological imagination

5. For a brief assessment of this young field and recommendations for its further growth, see James K. A. Smith, "Continental Philosophy of Religion: Prescriptions for a Healthy Subdiscipline," *Faith and Philosophy* 6/4 (October 2009): 440–48, <http://www.calvin.edu/~jks4/churchandpomodocs/Smitharticle.pdf>.

toward the here and now rather than toward the transcendent. And Joseph Smith's great work of sealing and sacralizing family relationships grounds Mormonism's ultimate value in the mundane material existence of physical bodies.

To what end, then, does the new school of Mormon theology train the lens of Continental philosophy on the singularly compatible teachings of Mormonism? It is my suggestion that the central gesture of the new theology is to reframe agency, a key concept in Mormon thought, and to extend this new version, what we might call "prime agency," from ethics into the adjacent realms of ontology, epistemology, and logic. Mormon teaching typically frames moral agency as the human power to act for oneself, together with individual accountability for those choices. It is thus framed as a properly individual capacity, exercised independently by the subject; indeed, much Mormon discourse deploys choice and accountability to mark, precisely, the inviolable boundaries of the self. The new Mormon theology, however, situates prime agency not in the human personality but in Mormonism's plural ontology of intelligent matter; prime agency, in other words, is hardwired into the basic structure of reality.

In one interpretation of Mormon revelation, the origin of reality lies in the social interaction of uncreated intelligent matter, facilitated by God, through which self-directing elements combine, collaborate, connect, and otherwise engage through and with one another.⁶ Understood as prime agency, an element's power to act is guaranteed by the existential necessity of *interaction*: to act is always to act for and in behalf of others. Because the human soul—body and spirit—is a federation of intelligent elements, any subject's power to act is first and fundamentally an *interaction*. Prime agency is not a feature of the subject but of the *intersubjective*. In this new understanding, the individual

6. Mormon cosmology has no definitive interpretation, and the meaning of Joseph Smith's statements on intelligence, self-existence, and eternity has been the subject of debate and dispute by Mormon thinkers virtually since they were uttered. This summary is not intended to be tendentious, but unavoidably represents a particular point of view on those statements.

person's power to choose is a narrow (and relatively impoverished) manifestation of agency; prime agency itself describes a much broader, more complex social distribution of intelligent agents, including but not limited to human souls, agents who can no more escape their own power to act than they can escape other agents' power to act upon them. Prime agency enables individual choice but cannot be reduced to it. This means that agency is never autonomy and that the *unchosen*—that is, the Other's choice—is as fundamental to moral agency as choice itself.

Prime agency thus introduces openness, contingency, and vulnerability into the moral universe. Mormons embrace the risks of individual agency within the realm of ethics; indeed, the Mormon doctrine of a premortal war in heaven both celebrates and mourns precisely these risks. Prime agency suggests that the open contingency we accept in our ethics also extends to ontology, epistemology, and logic. Latter-day Saints may be slower to embrace the openness of reality, the fluidity of truth, and the immanence of grace, since Mormon discourse has generally borrowed from traditional Christian categories to express these doctrines. But other strands of Mormon studies have begun to produce similar insights into the contingent nature of reality. Writing in the *Mormon Studies Review*, for instance, Josh Probert summarizes the implications of material culture for lived religion. Religious objects, he argues, do far more than merely reflect external ideas: they possess a “nonsentient agency within a web of human-object relationships,” what I have here called prime agency. Objects themselves, then, “are social actors that, along with human actors, cocreate normativity.” Further, he argues, “they actively participate in the social construction of reality. In fact, they destabilize the autonomy of social actors by participating in that process themselves.”⁷ The study of material culture generally, and object-oriented ontology in particular, would seem to confirm what I see as the destabilizing gesture at the heart of the new Mormon theology. Like it or not, epistemology, ontology, and logic are exposed to the same existential risk that defines the Mormon ethics of personal agency.

7. Josh E. Probert, “The Materiality of Lived Mormonism,” *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 22, 26.

To be clear, this account of prime agency and its assignment to preeminence is my own interpretation of the new theology, and any member of the school may certainly disclaim that interpretation of Probert's work if he wishes. Nevertheless, I think such an interpretation does much to highlight what is at stake in each scholar's ideas. Faulconer's work, which comes closest to traditional theology, takes up questions of faith and scripture in light of philosophy's critique of absolute truth or pure reason, showing that both faith and scripture withstand the epistemological challenge. Because "truth *is part of the cosmos, perhaps as it is happening*," he argues in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture*, "we can reject the Enlightenment formulation of truth . . . without rejecting truth itself" (p. 117, emphasis added). Truth is conditioned by time and place, Faulconer shows, and like prime agency, truth is *enabled* by its entanglement with particularity, not invalidated by it. Spencer's work, minutely exegetical and historical, circles questions of time and messianic redemption in restoration scripture and in the historical Mormon project of Zion-building. Time, no less than human agency, is open to redemptive reordering rather than fixed in place by an inevitable providence. And Miller's work, which takes an existential and phenomenological approach, reorients conventional Mormon soteriology away from legalistic obedience and toward a concept of immanent grace arising from the overflowing givenness of the world itself. Grace is to be found in a reordered relationship to divine law, one that escapes the closed linguistic logic of subject and predicate.

Having summarized and situated the Continental turn in Mormon theology, I'd like to conclude with a brief critical assessment of its application. One way to begin such an appraisal is to consider the criticisms likely to be leveled at the school from the political left and right. From the perspective of some observers, philosophy of religion should be modeled on other ethically motivated academic disciplines, as an earnest and consequential kind of intellectual activism that prods its interpretive community toward greater justice and equality.⁸

8. A leading example of this approach to Mormon theology is Taylor G. Petrey. Petrey articulates his objections to the new Mormon theology in his article "Theorizing

Observers of this stripe are likely to be impatient with the new school's general ideological disengagement from overt social justice themes, in particular its silence on the forms of race-, sex-, and sexuality-based oppression in which religion has been complicit. The trio's engagement with Pauline scripture crystallizes the objection. Pauline theology has been central to the work of each—see Faulconer's *Life of Holiness*, Spencer's *For Zion*, and Miller's *Immanent Grace*—yet the epistles of Paul contain notoriously sexist and heterosexist teachings. For the most part, the trio does not explicitly grapple with these problems, preferring instead to focus affirmatively on Paul's teachings about grace, hope, or holiness in their complex, occasionally obscure styles. They do not openly repudiate Pauline patriarchy, nor do they enlist the Epistles in a direct struggle against illegitimate power relations. For readers embedded in directly political strands of Marx-descended Continental critical theory, this amounts to a disappointing political quietism.

These objections are not without basis. As noted above, the new school draws deeply on Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness, a theory that radically prunes back the proper role of the human subjectivity in knowing, evaluating, and mastering the phenomena that populate experience. Marion argues that phenomena show themselves, *give* themselves to our experience, on their own initiative: life is given unconditionally, and it must be received unconditionally. It is the *givenness*, not the substance of the gift, that matters. This point yields two opposing political implications. On the one hand, the ideas of givenness and Gift disrupt the oppressive metaphysics of subject and object at the center of Western history, in which subject dominates and extracts meaning (or other resources) from object. On the other hand, the horizon of givenness provides no ready-made means of disrupting an oppressive sociopolitical order. If we must accept life's self-giving unconditionally, must we then simply accept the injustice and oppression we encounter?

Critical Mormon Biblical Studies: Romans 1:18–32,” forthcoming in the journal *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology*. He practices his activist-oriented theology in his important article “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44/4 (Winter 2011): 106–41.

Not necessarily. Givenness is the unqualified self-giving of the present, which must be received unconditionally; givenness is not identical with the actual state of the sociopolitical order, which can be contested. But on what basis? Spencer's book *For Zion* can be seen as an extended engagement with that problem. If we must avoid imposing our own oppressively subjective view of the good on the world, how are we to envision a better future? Spencer answers those questions in a complex exegesis of Romans 8 in conversation with Agamben. For Agamben, messianic redemption lies in the *suspension* of every worldly ideal, not in the realization of the same. Therefore the work of building Zion may not be reduced to any specific political agenda, because messianic fulfillment does not dwell in an ideal future order. Messianic fulfillment has already arrived and is accessible as a new perspective on the present moment, one that sees beyond bare actuality to the dynamic ontology behind it, to the prime agency shimmering in potentiality. We can only grasp the present, in other words, by understanding it as if it were already redeemed—and precisely therein lies messianic redemption. As Mormons would put it, the spirit world is already all around us.

This messianic perspective transforms our relationship to law. We receive the law because it is given; we love it for its service in structuring the present and offering it to us moment by moment. But we no longer look to law for the establishment of an ideal order or for redemption personal or social, and we are no longer bound to it by a regime of compliance and penalty. As Paul puts it in Romans 7:6, "By dying to what once bound us [e.g., the law], we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code." The messianic cannot decide the questions that roil the political realm, because the messianic and the political occupy distinct, though intersecting, planes. The Christian, then, participates in the social world given to her out of loving care for the Other, but without attachment to particular legal or social ends: "means without ends" is her mantra. She regards social justice movements with benign indifference and little hope for the outcome, yet she willingly engages in the causes that enlist her for the sake of local, present care.

The new Mormon theology thus makes little comment on contemporary debates over social justice that dominate discourse on the left. This may seem to some like a convenient dodge, given the new theology's close institutional ties to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through BYU and the Maxwell Institute. I think this assessment is mistaken, but it is true that the Continental turn largely evades the terms of the political debates as they are presently framed in the United States. Whether this renders the new theology more or less persuasive to its academic and devotional audiences remains to be seen.

The same might be said for critiques leveled at the new theology from the right. Whereas the left is preoccupied with social justice, the right is concerned with questions of truth and relativism, most visibly at stake in the conflict between faith and secularism. Like their counterparts on the left, observers on the right would like to see the new Mormon theology serve the institution in a particular way.⁹ As traditional religious teachings on marriage, family, and sexuality have been forced to cede authority in American society during recent decades, some worry that LDS believers may lose intellectual confidence in the church's doctrines and in religious authority generally. They urge Mormon thinkers to challenge the leftward tilt of the academic humanities and produce intellectual breastwork to shelter Mormon doctrine from what they see as hostile secular winds. They caution against a blasé or unwary enthusiasm for secular academic movements and urge LDS scholars to take up the vanguard in opposing the progressive secular creep of the academy.

Ground zero in this encounter is nothing less than the nature of truth itself. In the idealist metaphysics that structures much traditionalist thought, truth is a fixed moral ordering of the world, authoritative for all times, places, and persons because it is rooted outside any time, place, or person, in eternal law or God's will. This order is susceptible

9. A leading voice for this approach is Ralph C. Hancock. See, for instance, his interchange with Spencer: "Between Materialism and the Metaphysics of Eternity: A Reply to Joseph M. Spencer's Review of *Responsibility of Reason*," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54/2 (2015): 173–81.

to decay in the fallen world, and thus it is the responsibility of the institutional church to preserve and disseminate revealed truth. The logic is foundationalist and oriented toward a divine dispensation in the past—or better, beyond time entirely, toward the still corridors of eternity. Doctrine and Covenants 93 may be read as an exposition of eternal truth in this foundationalist mode:

Ye were also in the beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the Spirit of truth; and truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come; and whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning. (vv. 23–25)

Proponents of this model resist the postmodern contention that all truth is situated and conditioned, arguing that this concession leads to an unacceptable moral relativism and erodes the grounds of an authoritative ethical order.

There is much to appreciate in this position, particularly its alertness to modernity's penchant for an amoral, technological rationalism, often violently imposed. Yet this model of truth, invoking as it does a singular, unchanging divine source, seems to run afoul of a robust Mormon materialism, with its plural ontology and dynamic temporalism. The new Mormon theology attempts to reconcile the conflict by conceding the postmodern critique of truth and then bearing down on Mormon materialism to arrive at a new model.

Adam Miller's book *Future Mormon* takes up the nature of truth as its central concern. For Miller, truth is not a set of representational essences, but a kind of relational action: not a crystallized *product* (of revelation or investigation or invention), as he puts it, but a dynamic *process* of interplay and feedback within the weave of prime agents that composes the Mormon cosmos. He argues that "truths are specialized processes that trace novel paths through the network, revealing inconsistencies and displaying overlooked constellations of meaning" (p. 85). Under this model, "eternal truth," a phrase that does not appear in scripture, is not a crystallized set of perfect ideas that endures forever (even if revealed

incrementally and distorted by human language), but a social process of connection, organization, persuasion, and long-suffering that never ceases. The collaborative method of the Mormon Theology Seminar, run by Miller and Spencer, enacts in miniature this model of truth-as-process: it is the active engagement itself that embodies truth, not the resulting bound volumes that, however valuable, are secondary byproducts of the project. It is in the *process*, the sociality, that normative value is invested, not in the ideological by-products that arise and recede from the ongoing process. "Truth-making is the work of creation," Miller avers. "It is ontological rather than epistemological" (p. 105).

As a process, truth can be activated within any given perspective, even occupying opposed positions simultaneously. Miller writes, "All truths, in order to be truths, must be thinkable from the position of the enemy. . . . A truth that is small enough to be thinkable only from my position and only in opposition to my enemy is no truth at all" (p. 72). He proposes a model of truth-as-process that blithely contravenes (or anyway complicates) the law of noncontradiction, a staple of classical philosophy since Plato whereby two contradictory positions cannot be true at the same time and in the same sense. His model of truth can thus be seen as an extension of the new Mormon philosophy's revision of Platonism, submitting logic as well as ontology, metaphysics, and ethics to a comprehensive overhaul.

For Miller, then, and for the new theology that he practices, the confrontation between religion and secularism is not a threat to truth but, on the contrary, an opportunity for new truths to emerge from the encounter of ideas and factions. The role of the LDS scholar and of Mormon thinking generally is not primarily to defend truth from its enemies, but to facilitate its unfolding by reconfiguring in novel ways the social and intellectual network from which truth arises. Likewise, the value of the institutional church and its leadership lies not primarily in its possession of and access to an exclusive truth, but in its midwifing of emergent, local truths through the forging of a covenant network of agents. "Rather than asking if the church is true," Miller suggests,

ask something like: Is this the body of Christ? Is Christ manifest here? Does his blood flow in these veins? Does his spirit breathe in these lungs? Does forgiveness flourish here? Is faith strengthened? Is hope enlivened? Is charity practiced? Can I see, here, the body of Christ? (p. 114)

This approach is likely to thrill some readers and irritate others, who will see it as avoiding the central question of veridical authority. Miller insists that his approach is not a species of relativism, since the very concept of the relative implies a fixed external referent to which the object relates. There is no such fixed external referent in Miller's cosmos, which is purely immanent.

Whether he is getting at an epistemological relativism or a metaphysical realism, the kind of truth he describes is local, not universal. It is powerfully descriptive, but only weakly prescriptive: *Future Mormon*, ironically, offers little guidance on the direction future Mormonism should take. The book offers a compelling sacralization of social construction—in the broadest possible construal of that term, encompassing nonhuman agents within the social—and a redeeming lens on religious truth claims, which are chockablock with traces of human negotiation, contest, and agency. In this sense, the book is broadly apologetic, offering an appealing explanation for and defense of religion's imperfect earthbound habit. But the model of truth at its center is not well suited to provide a priori normative guidance or to adjudicate conflicts between competing claims. This is a problem because networks produce meaningless noise right alongside novel patterns and solutions. The mechanism Miller proposes to distinguish between the noise and the patterns is a kind of ontological populism: powerful patterns will enlist a large and durable coalition of agents, and the proof of truthfulness will lie in the stability of the alliance. Because prime agency arises not from humans alone but from *all* intelligent matter, including the elemental building blocks of the universe and every entity therein, the production of truth is not merely a popularity contest among human whims: truth will always be constrained by the cooperation or resistance of the elemental agents at work in reality. Nevertheless, in the current

political climate of global populist movements, Miller's ideas are likely to elicit mistrust together with enthusiasm.

The new Mormon theology, then, will fail to satisfy some readers on both the left and the right. It remains to be seen whether the materialist metaphysics and the novel account of agency that it proposes resonate widely among either its lay Mormon readership or its academic subdiscipline in the Continental philosophy of religion. Whatever else may be said of it, the school has already succeeded in exponentially enlarging the scope of Mormon thinking, and for that its architects earn this reader's praise and thanks.

Rosalynde Welch holds a PhD in early modern English literature from the University of California at San Diego. She is an independent scholar writing for academic audiences in the areas of Mormon theology, literature, and culture. She also writes for general audiences at *Times & Seasons*, *Patheos*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Her current project is a study of gender and materialism in Mormon theology.