
BOOKS

THE LIMITS OF
FINITISM

THE TRIAL OF FAITH: DISCUSSIONS CONCERNING MORMONISM AND NEO-MORMONISM

by William Call

Salt Lake City, Utah: Publishers Press, 1986.

Reviewed by Blake T. Ostler

SOME OF THE greatest figures in the history of philosophy such as Plato, Berkeley, and Hume have utilized dialogue to present their ideas. William Call uses dialogue to present his ideas through the fictional John Johnson, a wealthy Mormon who, if one can guess from the bolstering of the dialogue itself, is to be taken seriously because he has thought a lot about Mormonism. Although the book never says so, the position presented through John Johnson is supposedly a new, improved form of Mormonism, called in the title of the book "Neo-Mormonism." Unlike the classic dialogues of philosophy, however, the dialogue of *The Trial of Faith* is contrived, constantly employs false dichotomies to force false dilemmas, jumps to conclusions without support and makes a mess of Mormon finitism generally.

The purpose of *The Trial of Faith* is supposedly to rationally explore the implications of Joseph Smith's incipient finitism. I was prepared to really like the book because I felt that Mormonism's finitist theology provides the best foundation for a coherent and experientially adequate theology. Unfortunately, I was disappointed. The dialogue sets up the foundational axiom that Mormonism is pluralistic while traditional Christianity is monistic. Though the fictional Johnson confuses monism with pantheism and pluralism with essentialism, he correctly deduces that if God did not create the world from nothing, then God is limited. Unfortunately, Call seems to believe

that if God is finite or limited in some respects, God must be limited in *all* respects. This sort of rash conclusion is unjustified and as Charles Hartshorne demonstrated in a rigorously logical discussion of the absolute-finite dichotomy, it fails to hold up.

John Johnson believes that the ultimate question about the nature of God is "whether existence is dependent upon God or whether God is dependent upon existence" (p. 13). I never was sure what this sentence meant, but apparently it asserts that if God is finite, God does not necessarily exist; that is, he could *not* exist. The remainder of the dialogue is premised on this error in reasoning. That assertion misunderstands Mormonism, for Mormons believe that God exists of necessity—on "self-existing principles," if I recall Joseph Smith's phraseology. Call apparently wants to establish that "nature" is necessary, while God is contingent or dependent on what just happens to exist for his existence as God.

Call also rejects the possibility of pansychism (the notion that matter is characterized by aspects of mind), which permeated the thought of Orson Pratt, by assuming that matter is inanimate. He therefore concludes that the body is a machine. Johnson runs squarely into the mind-body problem and a naive determinism in making this move, and then tries unsuccessfully to extricate himself from the dilemma by denying that God has controlling power (pp. 22-23).

In discussing issues of authority, John Johnson asserts that "moral law is either based upon the work of an omnipotent God or else

upon the integrity of the individual" (p. 25). The possibility that God might be perfectly good and not omnipotent and yet the basis of morality apparently doesn't occur to him in this discussion. Such a false dichotomy ignores the concept that legitimate authority in Mormonism arises not from omnipotence, but from love and what leads to individual growth within a human-divine relationship. The fictional Johnson also hastily concludes that if God is not omnipotent, then any mortal is the equal to God or Church leaders in determining what constitutes "personal morality" (p. 36).

Ultimately, what Johnson proposes is Mormonism stripped of the idea of God and hierarchy. The discussions of faith, ordinances, the Fall and the atonement, and agency are all contrived to show that since mortals and gods are ontological equals, mortals simply don't need the gods (p. 103). Johnson believes that Mormonism is committed to the view that salvation is "earned" and orthodox Christians to the belief that salvation comes by grace alone. This historical limiting of options does justice neither to Mormonism nor to orthodox Christianity. I see no reason, however, why God cannot work with and through free creatures to accomplish their joint purposes, i.e., one another's happiness.

In the end, John Johnson is brought to trial for excommunication for his "Neo-Mormon" beliefs, which he promoted in a sacrament meeting talk. The fate of John Johnson is not disclosed in *The Trial of Faith*. I suggest not excommunication, but education is what the fictional John Johnson needs. Perhaps a closer study of logic and logical entailments and a little more time at the drawing board would suffice. I recommend this book as an example of what Mormon finitism does not and ought not entail. The reduction of Christian theism to a limited humanism is not necessary to give genuine meaning to human endeavors and experience, and the rejection of religious authority is not necessary to make sense of Mormon finitism.

YOUR GIFT HELPS IMPROVE
THE LIVES OF THOUSANDS OF
PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY.
PLEASE GIVE THE UNITED
WAY.



THANKS TO YOU
IT WORKS FOR ALL OF US

BLAKE OSTLER is an attorney in Salt Lake City.

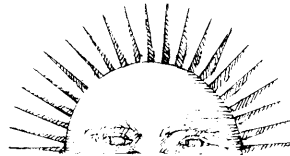
SUNSTONE MAGAZINE

BACK ISSUE ORDER FORM

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1980 5:5 The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven <i>Linda Wilcox</i>
The Sovereignty of God in John Calvin and Brigham Young <i>Davis Bitton</i>
An Interview with Kenneth Woodward</p> <p>5:6 The Fuhrer's New Clothes: Helmuth Hubener and the Mormons of the Third Reich <i>Alan F. Keele and Douglas F. Tobler</i>
History and Theology: The Mormon Connection <i>Edwin Gaustad</i>
The Curse of Cain and Other Stories: Blacks in Mormon Folklore <i>William O. Wilson and Richard Paulsen</i>
The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament <i>Melodie Moench Charles</i></p> <p>1981 6:2 "What are you Doing Up Here?" Graffiti Mormon Style <i>James B. Allen and John Harris</i>
Embracing the Whole Truth <i>Davis Bitton</i>
Book of Mormon Wordprints Reexamined <i>D. James Croft</i>
Professor Seixas, The Hebrew Bible, and the Book of Abraham <i>Michael T. Walton</i></p> <p>6:4 Four Articles on Abortion: <i>Mary C. Segers, Richard Sherlock, Marvin Rytting, Donald G. Hill</i>
The Return of Thomas B. Marsh <i>Richard Van Wagoner and Steve Walker</i>
Trailing Clouds of Glory? Artistic Treatments (and Mistreatments) of the Pre-Existence Theme <i>Alan Frank Keele</i>
The Church in Politics? Two Views <i>J. D. Williams, Ed Firmage</i></p> <p>6:5 A Gift Given, A Gift Taken: Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick Among Mormon Women <i>Linda King Newell</i>
Priesthood and the Male Experience <i>Michael T. Walton</i>
Do You Preach the Orthodox Religion? <i>Michael Hicks</i>
A Jew in Zion <i>Louis C. Zucker</i></p> <p>6:6 The Dilemmas of Pluralism <i>Peter Berger</i>
Zion: The Structure of a Theological Revolution <i>Steven L. Olsen</i>
The Mormon Past: Revealed or Revisited? <i>Jan Shipps</i>
Finitist Theology and the Problem of Evil <i>Peter C. Appleby</i></p> <p>1982 7:1 Process Philosophy and Mormon Thought <i>Floyd H. Ross</i></p> | <p>B. H. Roberts at the World's Parliament of Religions (1893) <i>Davis Bitton</i>
New Perspectives on the Mormon Past: Reflections of a Non-Mormon Historian <i>Lawrence Foster</i>
An Attempt at Reconciliation <i>Robert C. Fletcher</i></p> <p>7:2 The Persistence of Chastity <i>articles by Harold T. Christensen, Marybeth Raynes, Marvin and Ann Rytting</i>
The Use and Abuse of Religion <i>Kenneth L. Woodward</i>
Enlarging the Mormon Vision of Christian Ethics <i>L. Jackson Newell</i>
Three Articles on Faith and History <i>James L. Clayton, Ronald K. Esplin, Sterling M. McMurrin</i></p> <p>7:3 Are Mormons Joining In World Suicide? <i>Arthur Henry King</i>
The Civilizing of Mormondom: The Indispensable Role of the Intellectual <i>Levi S. Peterson</i>
Abortion, Religion and the Constitution <i>Peter Steinfels</i>
The Aesthetics of the Endowment <i>Michael Hicks</i></p> <p>7:4 A Light Unto the World: Issues in Mormon Image Making <i>Peggy Fletcher, Bruce L. Christensen</i>
Between Heaven and Earth: Mormon Theology of the Family in Comparative Perspective <i>Lawrence Foster, Marybeth Raynes</i>
We Are All Enlisted: War As Metaphor <i>Stephen L. Tanner</i>
Sheaves, Bucklers, and the State: Mormon Leaders Respond to the Dilemmas of War <i>Ronald W. Walker</i></p> <p>7:5 The Phenomenon of the Closet Doubter <i>D. Jeff Burton</i>
Mormons and Moonmen <i>Van Hale, James B. Allen</i>
A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon <i>William D. Russell</i>
The Foundations of Freedom in Mormon Thought <i>Kent E. Robson</i></p> <p>7:6 The Jewish Jesus <i>Michael Walton</i>
Can Nations Love Their Enemies? <i>Eugene England</i>
The Russian Chimera <i>Gary L. Browning</i>
The Dangers of Revelation <i>Scott Dunn</i></p> <p>1983 8:1 Mormon Aesthetics <i>Michael Hicks, Levi S. Peterson</i>
Secretary to the Senator: Carl A. Badger and the Smoot Hearings <i>Gary James Bergera</i>
How Long, O Lord? The Delay of Parousia in Mormonism <i>Keith E. Norman</i>
Signs of the Times: The Theological Functions of Early Mormon Apocalyptic <i>Stephen J. Stein</i></p> |
|--|---|

(see other side for more issues and order form)

SUNSTONE



S U B S C R I P T I O N F O R M

SUNSTONE FOUNDATION
331 S. RIO GRANDE, SUITE 30
SALT LAKE CITY, UT. 84101-1136
(801) 355-5926

Please send my issues to:

ZIP+4

PHONE _____

Total enclosed \$ _____.

- \$18.00 - 6 issues
- \$32.00 - 12 issues
- \$60.00 - 24 issues
- Enclosed please find my tax deductible contribution in the amount of \$ _____.

- 8:3 Raining Pitchforks: Brigham Young as Preacher *Ronald W. Walker*
No Higher Ground *David Earl Bohn*
Obedience, Integrity, and the Paradox of Selfhood *Eugene England*
The Meaning of Revival Language in the Book of Mormon *Mark Thomas*
- 8:4 Excommunication articles by *Lester Bush, Douglas Alder, J. Bonner Ritchie*
Women at Winters Quarters *Maureen Ursenbach Beecher*
Personal Reflections on Mormon History *Leonard J. Arrington*
Are We Copying Protestant Theology? *Kent Robson*
- 8:5 Mormonism and a Tragic Sense of Life *U. Carlisle Hunsaker*
Unorthodox Orthodoxy: The Idea of Deification in Christian History *Philip L. Barlow*
The Sacred and the Profuse *Michael Hicks*
First Visions: Personal Observations on Joseph Smith's Religious Experience *Lawrence Foster*
- 8:6 Telling Confessions: Confidentiality in the Practice of Religion *Margaret P. Battin*
The Atonement *J. Clair Batty*
To Beard or Not to Beard *Richard Van Wagener*
Christ's Atoning Sacrifice: The Role of the Crucifixion *Joyce N. Woodbury*
- 1984 9:1 A Modern Look at Tithable Income *Robert F. Bohn*
The Quaker Mystical Model *Moyne Oviatt*
Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ *Joseph T. Hepworth*
The Lihyanites *Hope and Lynn Hilton*
- 9:2 Are Children Almost Too Much To Bear? *James Tunstead Burtchaell*
Social Responsibility and LDS Ethics *Courtney Campbell*
Jehovah As the Father *Boyd Kirkland*
The Language of Niceness *Emma Rebecca Thomas*
- 1985 10:1 The Seriousness of Mormon Humor *Richard H. Cracroft, William A. Wilson*
The Lee Revolution and the Rise of Correlation *Peter Wiley*
Why I am a Believer *Leonard J. Arrington*
Defining the Mormon Doctrine of Deity *Van Hale*
- 10:2 An Interview with Lowell Bennion
That Older Brother Again *Arthur Bassett*
- 10:3 Christian Soldiers or Conscientious Objectors *D. Michael Quinn*
Speaking with Authority *David John Buerger*
Church Youth Manuals *Karla S. Gunnell, Nicole Hoffman*
Familyolatry *Christian Ryder*
- 10:4 Legislating Morality: Reynolds vs. United States *Mark S. Lee*
Good Samaritans and Moral Dilemmas *Courtney S. Campbell*
Toward a Mormon Christology *Keith E. Norman*
Assalt and Preemptive Neutrality *Neal C. Chandler*
- 10:5 10-Year "Best of Sunstone" Issue
The Mormon Temple Experience *Mark P. Leone*
Where are the All Seeing Eyes? *Allen D. Roberts*
The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine *Thomas G. Alexander*
Mormon Women and Depression *Louise Degn*
Knowing, Doing, and Being *Arthur Bassett*
- 10:6 Spirit Writing: Another Look at the Book of Mormon *Scott C. Dunn*
An Engineer's View of Religion *Karl Thatcher Ulrich*
Mormon Poetry Now *D. Marden Clark*
- 10:7 The Missing Rib: The Forgotten Place of Queens and Priestesses in the Establishment of Zion *Margaret M. Toscano*
Breaking the Rule—A Moral Option *Susan Rytting*
Grace Unto the Gentiles *Anthony A. Hutchinson*
- 1986 10:8 The Psychology of the Missionary Training Program *Scott D. Miller, C. Jess Grossbeck*
A Mormon Concept of Armageddon *Cole R. Capener*
A Question of Means or Ends *Donald D. Landon*
One Scientist's Spiritual Autobiography *Robert C. Fletcher*
- 10:9 The Swearing Elders *Thomas A. Blakely, Richard D. Poll*
Mormon Cosmology: Can it Survive the Big Bang? *Keith E. Norman*
- 10:10 The Beautiful and the Darned *Michael Hicks*
Why the Church is as True as the Gospel *Eugene England*
What the Author Had in Mind *Kira Pratt Davis*
The Spectrum of Belief *R. Jan Stout*
- 10:11 Franchising the Faith *Ron Molen*
The Worst Job in the Church *D. James Croft*
The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl *Brant Gardner*
Do you Teach the Orthodox Religion? *Mark C. Dangerfield*
- 10:12 Of Gods, Mortals and Devils *Boyd Kirkland*
Perceptions of Life *Louis A. Moench*
The Mormon Documents' Day in Court *Linda Sillitoe*
Sunswath *Levi S. Peterson*

O R D E R F O R M

(Prices include postage)

List issues requested:

Volumes 5-9 (\$6 per issue) _____

Volume 10 (\$4.50 per issue) _____

TOTAL ENCLOSED \$ _____

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Address: _____

_____ ZIP (+4) _____

Mail to: Sunstone, 331 South Rio Grande Street, Suite 30, Salt Lake City, UT 84101.