BOOKS

THE LIMITS OF FINITISM

THE TRIAL OF FAITH: DISCUSSIONS CONCERNING MORMONISM AND NEO-MORMONISM
by William Call

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 panpsychism (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.

BLAKE OSTLER is an attorney in Salt Lake City.
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