

traditional Mormon thought guarantee Mormon theology's deviation from traditional Christian theology. When considered from the perspective of orthodox Christianity, Mormonism is a heterodoxy, not an orthodoxy. The basic Mormon doctrines of God, man, and salvation are radical departures from traditional Christian thought. This chapter describes these doctrines.

### I. Concept of God

Mormons generally assume their theology differs most radically from classical Christianity in their doctrine that God is a person with a physical body. While this conception may have some implications for the doctrine of God's omnipresence, it is not Mormon theology's most radical departure from the classical Christian concept of God. On the contrary, the general finite character of God represents a much more significant difference between Mormon theology and orthodox Christianity.

In contrast with the sovereign God of Christian orthodoxy and neo-orthodoxy, the Mormon God is finite. This is indicated in the fact that God is not the only reality with necessary existence. That is, He is not the Creator of all that is. This is not to say that Mormon theology has no place for the creation or that God has no role in the creation process. On the contrary, Mormons are probably as preoccupied with creation as the rest of Christianity. But, to them the

glory. Element has an existence from the time he had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed; they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning, and can have no end.<sup>7</sup>

In Mormonism's metaphysical materialism not only do God and the elements exist necessarily but so do the dimensions of space and time. In contrast with this Mormon position, Christian orthodoxy maintains that space and time, along with all other reality except God, exist only because God created them. They would have no being if God had not willed to create them.

On the other hand, to the Mormon, God is involved within space and time. He is not the creator of these dimensions. In fact, the possession of a physical body places rather obvious spatial limitations upon God. The question of whether God could be in more than one place at the same time has received some attention within Mormon literature. In an attempt to preserve God's omnipresence, James E. Talmage, the Church's foremost conservative theologian, followed an argument developed by his predecessors and employed frequently by his successors, to assert that God's influence can be felt in the vast reaches of the universe. However, God is spatially limited, a position which Talmage argued on the basis of primitive

---

<sup>7</sup>Smith, pp. 35-52.

biblical anthropomorphisms such as God's movement from one place to another.<sup>8</sup>

The conception of a changing God, a God in the process of "becoming" rather than "being," which deeply permeates Mormon theology illustrates God's temporality. God is not the author of time, as Christian orthodoxy supposes, but is involved in time. Indeed, time imposes serious restrictions upon God. This is not to say that God did not always exist, that he does not have necessary being; however, it is to say that God did not always exist as he now is. In other words, God was not always God. He has changed. He has progressed. In the most important speech of his life, the "King Follett Discourse," Joseph Smith taught that "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret." He continued:

It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another; and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did; and I will show it from the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of the fact that normative Mormonism has canonized this teaching of Joseph Smith in Lorenzo Snow's

---

<sup>8</sup>James E. Talmage, A Study of the Articles of Faith (33d ed.; Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1955), pp. 42-43.

<sup>9</sup>Smith, pp. 345-46.

verse ("As man now is, God once was: As God now is man may become"), Mormonism is not without some confusion on the changeability of God. The problem may partially stem from Joseph Smith's earlier teaching when he took a position similar to orthodox Christianity. In the third lecture of his 1833 Lectures on Faith, Joseph taught:

But it is equally necessary that men should have the idea that he is a God who changes not, in order to have faith in him . . . ; for without the idea of unchangableness in the character of the Deity, doubt would take the place of faith. But with the idea that he changes not, faith lays hold upon the excellencies in his character with unshaken confidence, believing he is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and that his course is one eternal round.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of settling upon God's unchangeableness or his eternal progression, Mormonism has tried to accept both. Through very poor arguments, Mormons either qualify God's unchangeability or modify his eternal progression, generally they do both, and to such an extreme that the distinctive advantages of an unchangeable God or the opposing advantages of a progressive God are lost. The general emphasis, however, seems to be upon God's progression, since even Mormonism's most exacting absolutists are unable to abandon the progressive God.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Smith, Lectures on Faith, comp. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall, n. d.), p. 36.

<sup>11</sup>For example see Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), I and Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1958).

acquisition of knowledge of the operation of the laws, and the development of the requisite moral character through obedience to eternal moral precepts. Thus, Orson F. Whitney, an early Mormon apostle, says that it is God's "superior intelligence that makes Him God," and that the gospel is merely a ladder "of light, of intelligence, of principle" by which men become Gods.<sup>14</sup> And B. H. Roberts in a discussion of moral laws wrote:

Good and evil then, in Latter-day Saint philosophy, are not created things. Both are eternal, just as duration is, and space. They are old as law--old as truth, old as this eternal universe. Intelligences must adjust themselves to these eternal existences; this, the measure of their duty.<sup>15</sup>

The Mormon conception of God as "becoming" rather than "being," God's spatial limitations, and the general environment in which moral laws, natural laws, and matter all have necessary being combine to provide the finitism that characterizes Mormon theology.

From the above description of God, it should be apparent that the Mormon God is a heretical departure from traditional Christianity, and the traditional Christian terminology of omnipotence and omniscience are not justifiably

---

<sup>14</sup>The Deseret Weekly (Salt Lake City), May 25, 1889, p. 689.

<sup>15</sup>Brigham H. Roberts, A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), II, 404.

applied to the Mormon God. This does not mean that Mormon discourse reveals a dearth of such absolutistic terminology. On the contrary, Mormon speakers, like most other preachers, seem incapable of resisting the "omni"s" when describing God. And, at least the conservative theologians cannot write of God without resorting to such language.

On the other hand, the very persons who describe God as all knowing and all powerful still embrace the metaphysics described above. Indeed, most of the problem for Mormonism arises not over a disagreement of the metaphysical basis of Mormon theology, but out of a misunderstanding of the implications of the metaphysics as well as a misunderstanding of the absolutistic terminology. A typical Mormon might be asked if God is all knowing or all powerful and respond in the affirmative. But, if the implications of the terminology were clearly spelled out, and the individual were compelled to settle upon a finite God or reject his metaphysics, he would very likely deny absolutism.

A position more consistent with Mormon metaphysics is argued by Lowell L. Bennion, a contemporary Mormon theologian. In response to a question concerning God's omnipotence, at an interfaith discussion on the nature of man, Bennion described God as "most powerful" rather than all powerful.<sup>16</sup> He continued pointing out that God has

---

<sup>16</sup>Lowell L. Bennion, "The Nature of Man in Mormon Theology," Interfaith Discussion on the Nature of Man, Salt Lake City, December 2, 1965.

## CHAPTER V

### MORMON NEW-ORTHODOXY

In chapter two, a theoretical model was developed to interpret the rise of Protestant neo-orthodox and Mormon new-orthodox theologies. The reader will recall that this theory chapter discussed man's quest for meaning, crisis as a social condition influencing forms of thought, and psychological and theological responses to crises. Following the same organization as chapter three on Protestant neo-orthodoxy, this chapter employs the theoretical model of chapter two in order to understand Mormon new-orthodoxy. It proceeds with a discussion of new-orthodox theology, then continues with a description of the crises from which new-orthodoxy emerged, and finally concludes with an analysis of the psychological and theological responses made to these crises by new-orthodox theologians.

#### I. Theology

Not unlike Protestant neo-orthodoxy, Mormon new-orthodoxy emphasizes the otherness of God. In fact, it is this general emphasis upon God's greatness that distinguishes new-orthodoxy from traditional Mormon theology on the doctrine of God. This is not to say that Mormonism holds that God is not great; however, it is to suggest that Mormonism's traditional emphasis has been on God's humanity

rather than his transcendence. In other words, Mormon theology is much more concerned with the similarities between God and man than the differences between them.

This emphasis upon the closeness and similarity of God and man is clearly evident in the Mormon doctrine that God is a person with a physical body. For it is the notion that God has a physical body that leads to Mormon claims that man is literally, not figuratively, the offspring of God. Through its entire history, Mormonism has employed its extremely anthropomorphic conception of God to illustrate the similarities rather than the differences between God and man. Indeed, to the Mormon, the apostate character of the traditional Christian conception of God is to be found in its denial of God's physical and personal similarity to man.

On the other hand, Mormon new-orthodoxy attempts to move away from the traditional emphasis upon God's immanence. In an address at a Brigham Young University Leadership Week, Hyrum Andrus, the most extreme of the new-orthodox theologians displayed some concern over the Mormon tendency to emphasize anthropomorphic descriptions of God which indicate his similarity to man. Andrus claimed that Mormons do not concentrate enough upon God's greatness. He implied that Mormon people should recognize more fully God's otherness, his uniqueness, rather than always emphasizing