“Faith Seeking Understanding”: Mormon Atheology and the Challenge of Fideism

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Fides quaerens intellectum has been among the most durable and oft quoted mottos in the western intellectual tradition. In the nine centuries since Anselm coined the phrase, it has been utilized in a variety of ways and invoked to support a variety of positions in the relationship between the life of mind and the life of the spirit. Anselm, of course, self-consciously situated his theologizing within the devotional life of Christianity, and is most clearly evidenced in the Proslogion, written as an extended prayer.

Theology, however, has not comfortably remained within the confines of worship. Modernist thinking, for example, gave rise to questions regarding the very foundations of knowledge, which prompted a variety of responses, including skepticism and fideism. Theologians were forced to reconsider their enterprise within their contemporary social and intellectual landscape. Christian movements sprang up that openly questioned theological authority and which began to favor individual piety and practice over adherence to creeds, confessions, or concords and the theology upon which they were based. This is especially evident in American religious culture, which has been resistant to the intellectualizing of Christianity. For historian Brooks Holifield it was the “disdain for the ‘metaphysical’ that gave impetus to the cult of ‘common sense’ in American theology, and after the great controversy

1. This paper is largely a revision of two papers presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, “Rethinking Atheology” (University of Utah, 2008) and “Reformed Epistemology, Mormonism, and the Question of Fideism” (Westminster College, Salt Lake City, 2006).

2. The Proslogion famously contains what eventually came to be known as the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God.
over deism, common sense would begin to define the very meaning of theological rationality.”

Mormon Atheology

As “an American original,” Latter-day Saints exemplify many of these cultural characteristics of including common sense, pragmatism, and a distrust of intellectualism in religious matters. Church President John Taylor (1808–87) opined, “I consider that if ever I lost any time in my life, it was while studying the Christian theology,” referring to it as “the greatest tomfoolery in the world.” Though almost assuredly an exercise in hyperbole, this statement captures the widespread sensibility among Latter-day Saints that Mormon doctrine and practice are at odds with the theological enterprise that has shaped Christian thought across the centuries. As R. Douglas Phillips puts it in the forward to Hugh Nibley’s The World and the Prophets, “it is abundantly clear that the whole philosophical theological enterprise, however well-intentioned, is incompatible with the existence of continuing revelation.”

3. E. Brooks Holifeld, Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 56.


Such a view was not always the case in Mormon thought. Early in the Church’s history, Parley P. Pratt published his *Key to the Science of Theology*, which offers an expansive and integrative account of the relationship between reason, scientific learning, and revealed religion. John Widtsoe published his *Rational Theology* in 1915 for use as a manual of study for the Church’s Priesthood, and it was subsequently reproduced in six editions and translated into seven languages between 1915 and 1952. Widtsoe describes his project as “based on fundamental principles that harmonize with the knowledge and reason of man.”

In recent literature, however, the word “theology” has all but disappeared from the Mormon intellectual vocabulary. One can scarcely think of a work within the orbit of LDS-approved publications with the term in its title or subtitle. Observers of Mormonism have puzzled over this antipathy. Martin Marty, for example, has openly wondered about Latter-day Saints who “note and sometimes even brag that they do not have a theology.” Though he acknowledges the need for a “slightly broader definition” for reference to Mormon doctrinal discourse, Marty concludes that Latter-day Saints nonetheless have a theology and make theological statements. The Reformed Christian philosopher Stephen Davis identifies three reasons 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. (2) Mormon scriptures have always been taken as far more important than any theology. (3) Mormonism’s insistence on continuing revelation makes systematic theology largely useless.

Davis goes on to articulate the ways in which philosophical theology could assist Latter-day Saints to move toward greater clarity on points

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7. John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), iii. Other examples include B. H. Roberts’ *Seventy’s Course in Theology* and *The Way, the Truth, and the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*. Noteworthy as well is the fact that the once canonized “Lectures on Faith” were also referred to as the “lectures on theology.” It must be acknowledged that Pratt and Widtsoe employed the term in peculiar fashions, and I would certainly agree with those, like Louis Midgley, who maintain that the term meant something particular to each of these thinkers; but I would argue that this actually supports my point.


of doctrine, particularly in response to criticisms and in contexts of comparative exchange.

This project has been taken up by David Paulsen, whose writings are perhaps the finest example of Mormon attempts to utilize philosophy and theology to clarify and lend support to Latter-day Saint beliefs. He has demonstrated that substantive and sustained dialogue with Christian theologians can be mutually enriching and cast Mormon thought in a new light in relation to alternative approaches. His efforts to defend the coherence and consistency of Latter-day Saint beliefs in response to critics is Mormon apologetics at its finest, and I am confident his work will be increasingly valuable in coming years as Mormons seek a deeper level of engagement with other faith traditions.

The issues raised by Marty and Davis are especially significant in light of the renewed openness toward the academic study of Mormonism on the part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. On November 2, 2007, the Church offered a commentary statement entitled “Mormon Studies and the Value of Education,” with the purpose to express warm encouragement for emerging Mormon Studies programs such as those at Claremont Graduate University and Utah State University. Of particular interest for this investigation is the following statement: “The Church encourages a deeper and broader examination of its theology, history and culture on an intellectual level, and this is a wonderful opportunity to expand open dialogue and conversation between the Latter-day Saints and various scholarly and religious communities.”10

Two months later, the Church released another commentary entitled “A Mormon Worldview,” which intended to give observers a taste of the “collective spiritual experience” of the Latter-day Saints. The document ends with an intriguing assertion: “Getting at the heart of Mormonism is best undertaken not by narrowly focusing on controversy and getting mired in esoteric theological debates, but through a more imaginative examination of the worldview that inspires its members.”11

In reflecting upon the application of these two documents, the question naturally arises as to what it means to undertake a “deeper and broader examination of Mormon theology.” Can this be done with-

out engaging in “esoteric theological debates”? How is the esoteric to be distinguished from the imaginative? Can one explore deeply and avoid the mire? The outcome of these questions, I believe, will have profound consequences for the academic study of Mormonism in the years to come. With these questions in mind, we can turn our attention toward a more refined understanding of how theology operates both within and outside Mormonism.

Within Latter-day Saint discourse, one frequently observes the term “theology” referenced in contradistinction to some other category of the Mormon doctrinal lexicon (e.g., theology vs. revelation, theology vs. prophetic teaching, or theology vs. theophany). In a “living gospel” regulated by continuing revelation, theology has become a metaphor for a rootless Christianity in desperate search for truth. LDS writer Louis Midgley sums up this position nicely in his aphorism that “theology involves arguments about God and not encounters with God.”

However, in our attempt to penetrate beyond the rhetorical volleys between Mormons and their critics, it is vital to acknowledge the range and diversity within theological discourse. This is an obvious and essential first step toward identifying the intended meaning of the term as a target of criticism. So how do influential contemporary theologians define and utilize the term? A useful place to start, I believe, is with David Ford’s *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, which defines theology “at its broadest as *thinking about* questions raised by and about the religions.”

This definition is, of course, easy for Mormons to accept. Like those of many other faiths, Latter-day Saints think about questions raised by and about their religion with great frequency.


A more robust definition, however, comes from the famed Catholic theologian and cardinal Avery Dulles, who describes theology as “a methodical inquiry into the meaning and grounding of what, in faith, is taken to be the word of God.”\textsuperscript{15} Depending on how one understands the term “methodical,” Dulles’s description is not at all alien to a Latter-day Saint self-understanding. Mormons believe themselves to be divinely instructed to carefully study their faith in the attempt to gain a deeper understanding of what they take to be the revelations of God.

Finally, let us consider Shubert Ogden, certainly one of the most influential American theologians of the last half-century. For Ogden, theology is more demanding and constitutes the “fully reflective understanding of the Christian witness of faith as decisive for human existence.” Of course the operative term here is “fully reflective,” by which he means that theology “ought to exhibit at least some of the formal marks of any ‘science,’ including the methodological pursuit of its questions and the formulation of its answers in a precise conceptuality.”\textsuperscript{16} This is the point at which Latter-day Saints begin to get uncomfortable. The attempt to obtain a fully reflective understanding of LDS doctrine is said to be precluded by the doctrine of continuing revelation expressed in the Article of Faith that reads “we believe that He [God] will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (A of F 9). A Mormon theology thus leaves things incomplete and perhaps untidy. Because there is more to know, there cannot be (at least in our present state) a complete system of doctrine. This is articulated well by James Faulconer:

Since Latter-day Saints insist on continuing revelation, they cannot have a dogmatic theology that is any more than provisional and heuristic, for a theology claiming to be more than that could always be trumped by new revelation. Dogmatic theology, however, tempts us to think we have found something more. As a rational system, it gives the appearance of being complete.\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{16} Shubert M. Ogden, \textit{On Theology} (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 2; emphasis added. Ogden does not speak here of a complete system; rather, he talks about the methodological \textit{pursuit} of doctrinal questions.

As an advocate of the “atheological” character of Mormonism, Faulconer nevertheless proceeds to effectively delineate the kind of theology he thinks most appropriate to Latter-day Saint thought, what he calls *prophetic revelation theology*: “Unless one insists that all theology be systematically rational, and I know of no one who does, it makes sense to call prophetic revelation theology. Indeed, revelation is the Latter-day Saint theology.”¹⁸

Faulconer’s suggestion here is valuable and productive. The expanding body of truths that Mormons consider revelation plays an authoritative role similar in some respects to that of dogmatic theology in other Christian traditions. However, the key difference, as we have seen, is that Latter-day Saints are not reflecting upon, nor attempting to articulate, a body of revelation that is complete. Thus the effort to bring systematic coherence to Mormon doctrines is said to be misguided in part because rational systems imply the presence of at least a kind of completeness.

It is worthwhile, however, to acknowledge an important response to this approach. Stephen Davis maintains that systematic theology is possible despite an expanding set of truths. “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.”¹⁹ For Davis, Latter-day Saints are still “on the hook” of rational justifiability just to the extent they claim their teachings are consistent at any given time.²⁰

Benjamin Huff extends these considerations and argues in favor of what he calls a “modified systematic approach” to theology. He attempts to address the concerns of Mormons over system building without giving up on the quest for rational consistency. In doing so, he distinguishes between *monosystematic* and *polysystematic* approaches to theological discourse; the former is the attempt to fit all knowledge into a single system, while polysystematic approaches...
are necessarily provisional and expect to be superseded by more adequate systems in light of additional revelation. Huff writes, “If one set of concepts is inadequate, then we should work toward a better set. The new set may also be inadequate, yet still be an improvement. To refuse to think through one’s understanding systematically at all, I suggest, is to risk simply consigning oneself to confusion.”

This approach is not altogether different from contemporary Catholic dogma, which acknowledges the provisional and evolutionary character of theology. The Second Vatican Council made this point explicit in the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.” Though the Catholic community “awaits no further public revelation,” they do affirm an ongoing “living tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church.” Moreover they acknowledge that there is a “growth of understanding of the realities and words which have been handed down.” Avery Dulles sharpens the point: “Every theological system is deficient, but some systems are better than others, especially for making the faith intelligible to a given cultural group at a given period in history.”

Louis Midgley, among the most outspoken Mormon critics of theology, acknowledges that Latter-day Saint teaching is “rationally structured, coherent, and ordered.” While explicitly rejecting philosophical, dogmatic, and speculative theologies, he nevertheless maintains that Mormonism “does allow room for reason as a tool for attaining coherence and for working out implications in the revelations.” Midgley’s colleague and protégé, Gerald Bradford, maintains further that “it is required that the theologian present his ideas in a clear and cohesive manner. His reflections must be carried out in a consistent and systematic fashion. His arguments must be valid according to the rules of logic, theology being as dependent on logic as any other scholarly discipline. The

emphasis would be on theological clarification not theological system-
building or speculation.” The crucial consideration for Bradford here
lies in the distinction between systematic thinking and system-
building. The major target for Midgley, Bradford, and other LDS apologetics have
been theological projects that introduce philosophical concepts, catego-
ries, or distinctions that could serve to displace scripture and authorita-
tive teaching. “No doubt one who undertakes to do theology ought to see
his job primarily as one of exposition or description of what is taken to be
the revealed word of God.” These arguments reflect conventional wis-
dom in LDS scholarship. The earlier and more daring works in Mormon
thought have given way to compendia, expositions, and commentaries, a
persistent theme of which has been the conscientious effort to avoid any
hint of theological adventurism.

This naturally leads us to consider the extent to which these works
have succeeded (or indeed can succeed) in this regard. Though these
self-described expositions and commentaries appear to be theoretically
modest, this approach can be misleading. From the absence of theoretical
language it does not follow that substantive theological claims are not be-
ing made. Though the theological impact is more tacit in these cases, the
implications may be every bit as dramatic and potentially problematic as
that of the speculative theologian decried in the literature.

In reviewing Robert Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie’s
_Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon_, Midgley compares their
work to that of the “revisionists” who subject the Book of Mormon to
“the categories of Secular Fundamentalism”:

Though Millet is clearly opposed to speculation about a radical “re-
construction of Mormon doctrine,” unfortunately both he and Mc-
Conkie share basically the same understanding of “doctrine” as do
the Revisionists, for they also think in terms of a complex network
of dogmas answering a host of different questions. They are therefore
prepared to say exactly what Mormon doctrine is on the nature of
God and man, and numerous other theoretical questions. They dif-
fer from the Revisionists by holding that the vast array of statements
and beliefs that Latter-day Saints have entertained on various ques-
tions must be winnowed, and the doctrines of what they call “true
religion” (1:369; 2:102, 107, 115) or even “revealed religion” (1:369;

27. Ibid., 353.
2:115) then ascertained, harmonized, and taught authoritatively. A commentary thus provides the occasion for setting forth an elaborate and detailed creed, at least partially explicated in terms of categories quite foreign to the scriptures, upon which assent is thought to be mandatory for salvation. Labels like “true religion” and “revealed religion,” like “theology,” are categories foreign to the scriptures, but common to our post-Enlightenment, secularized world.28

Midgley’s point here is important and well expressed. Doctrinal commentaries indeed can engage in a form of implicit dogmatic theology. Ironically, however, he goes on to offer an alternative reading of the message of the Book of Mormon that is every bit as theological as he accuses Millet and McConkie’s work of being. He argues that doctrinal commentary ought to be replaced with forms of narrative and practical theology (though he does not refer to them as such), and both of these approaches have solid places in the Christian theological tradition.29 I too argue in favor of a narrative approach to scripture and doctrine; but to maintain that this is an alternative to theology is misleading. The claim that the “living gospel,” “prophetic teaching,” or “continuing revelation” overcomes, supersedes, or replaces theology is a classic case of a false dichotomy; and though these invocations are often intended to serve as “conversation-stoppers” in LDS discourse, they ought to function as the opening act in theological reflection as to what these statements mean and how they fit and cohere with other ideas.30


30. James Faulconer does nuance his description of theology in making his argument for the “atheological character” of Mormonism: “As I use the word ‘theology’ here, it begins with belief and uses of the methods of rational philosophy to give support to that belief: dogmatic, systematic, or rational theology.” Recognizing the variety of methods and approaches to theology, he goes on to claim that “since rational theology is what most Latter-day Saints first think of when they think of theology, since dogmatic (in other words, church-sanctioned) theologies, are rational, and since I think at least some of what I say of rational or systematic theology may also apply to other theologies, I think it reasonable to
Whichever side one takes in the debate over the value of systematic accounts of Mormonism, there is agreement that all reflective inquiry must take account of the claim of ongoing revelation. Nevertheless, there is a vast theological literature on the very nature of revelation, and there are a variety of views within Mormonism regarding the necessary and sufficient conditions for LDS prophetic revelation, each of which could form the basis of a distinct “prophetic revelation” theology. Setting the question as to which of these options is most preferable may depend on the very sources under consideration. For some, this circularity is vicious and thus unacceptable. For others, however, it comes part and parcel with the affirmation of continuing revelation.

The Challenge of Fideism

The last point leads us to consider the dynamics of religious belief in relation to our question of “faith seeking understanding.” The debate over faith, reason, and revelation has been revitalized in recent years focus on rational theology.” James Faulconer, “Why a Mormon Won’t Drink Coffee But Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Element: The Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2006), 21–22. Despite this qualification, the use of atheological language has been both helpful and a challenge for scholars of religion from other faith traditions who do have an understanding of the theological landscape.

and in directions that have implications for the way Latter-day Saints reflect on their beliefs.

At the heart of this debate has been the challenge of fideism, which can be broadly described as the position that religious understanding is ultimately grounded in faith and not on rational argument or scientific knowledge. It is typically contrasted with rationalism, which can be described in its strongest form as the position that religious belief must be provable according to commonly accepted standards of rationality. The most influential form of rationalism is evidentialism, which argues that the justification for religious belief lies in proportioning one’s belief to the evidence for or against a given proposition. Antony Flew, in his landmark essay, “The Presumption of Atheism,” states that if one wishes to establish that God exists, then “we have to have good grounds for believing that this is indeed so. Until and unless some such grounds are produced we have literally no reason at all for believing.” For Flew, these “good grounds” would be evidential in nature. Fideism, by contrast, maintains that religious belief is appropriately grounded in ways of understanding that are religious by nature.

The term fideism has been used to characterize a variety of specific positions, which vary in both form and strength. For this reason, it is important to properly identify and delineate the type of fideism I am interested in applying to certain Mormon epistemic practices. First, there is radical fideism, which is the position that faith is somehow con-


33. Aquinas, following Aristotle, states that all knowledge is based upon either self-evident propositions or propositions that are what he calls “evident to the senses.” Both classes of propositions are known immediately and are the foundation for all mediate knowledge. Mediate knowledge or *scientia* consists of either self-evident propositions or a body of propositions that are logically deduced from self-evident propositions. Locke states that the mark of a rational person lies in “not entertaining of any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs upon which it is built will warrant.” Finally, Hume holds that a “wise man proportions his belief to the evidence.”

trary to reason. One form of this approach is that reason is not merely irrelevant to justifying religious belief, but that its use is a positive barrier to gaining religious understanding.\textsuperscript{35} Thinkers such as Tertullian, Kierkegaard, and Bayle, for example, have maintained that “Christian proclamations, most notably those of the Incarnation and the Trinity, do not merely look paradoxical but must genuinely be so, and that the believer must knowingly brush aside the claims that reason makes when faith confronts it.”\textsuperscript{36} This position may be contrasted with moderate fideism, which merely rejects the requirement to justify religious belief on rational grounds. Thus the reliance on any kind of natural theology or evidentialist apologetics is rendered unnecessary. Under this general category stand two well-known contemporary approaches to religious belief: Reformed epistemology and so-called Wittgensteinian fideism.\textsuperscript{37} While both resist the fideist label, they do seek to demonstrate the misleading, incoherent, and question-begging nature of evidentialism as it applies to religious belief.

Reformed Epistemology and Fideism

To put the broad agenda of Reformed epistemology in its most simple terms, the movement seeks to demonstrate that Christians are justified in believing in God without being required to formulate arguments, cite evidence, or otherwise give their beliefs over to the demands of science. Of course they are responding to critics, who, as we noted above, point out the lack of evidence for religious claims and


\textsuperscript{36} Penelhum, *Reason and Religious Faith*, 379.

yet demand firm and unshakable belief. These critics often characterize religious belief as irrational adherence to a cultural artifact. Over the past two decades or so, philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff have been responding to these criticisms in very interesting ways that have implications, I believe, for how Latter-day Saint scholars could reflect on the dynamics of faith and belief in their tradition.\textsuperscript{38} I will focus here on the work of Alvin Plantinga, as his writings present the most sustained argument against evidentialism. I’ll concentrate my attention on those aspects of his argument that have the most relevance to the charge of fideism.

Beginning with his 1981 essay “Reason and Belief in God,” Plantinga argues that theistic belief may be foundational for a person and justifiably so. By foundational, he means that, in the set of beliefs a person holds, certain beliefs are more firmly rooted and serve as the basis for others. These are what Plantinga calls “basic beliefs.”\textsuperscript{39} Obviously it is the case that millions of people believe in God in a basic way. The question is whether these beliefs are properly basic, whether a person is justified in maintaining them. In the philosophical tradition of foundationalism, candidates for properly basic beliefs are those that are either (1) logically self-evident, or (2) perceptually incorrigible. Since beliefs about God meet neither of these criteria, it is argued, they are

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\begin{footnotes}{38. Though there has been some exceptionally rich and valuable work done by Latter-day Saints on the epistemology of religious belief, there remains, nevertheless, a considerable unevenness in the quality of the writings being produced. The literature in Reformed epistemology is much more developed, and for this reason I will focus on these arguments. To the extent Mormon treatments on faith, reason, and revelation are structurally similar to that of Reformed epistemology, they will share the strengths and weaknesses of the position. For further reading in the LDS literature, see Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman Madsen (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002); Paul Y. Hoskissen, ed., Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001); Robert L. Millet, ed., “To Be Learned is Good If…” (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987); Susan Easton Black, ed., Expression of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1996); Boyd K. Packer, “The Mantle is Far Far Greater Than the Intellect,” BYU Studies 21, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 259–71; Dallin H. Oaks, The Lord’s Way (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1991); Sterling McMurrin, Religion, Reason, and Truth: Historical Essays in the Philosophy of Religion (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1982).

\textsuperscript{39. More precisely, Plantinga calls this set of beliefs one’s “noetic structure” and defines it as follows: “A person's noetic structure is the set of propositions he believes, together with certain epistemic relations that hold among him and these propositions.” Plantinga also introduces the term “depth of ingression” to describe the relative strength of noetic beliefs in relation to each other. See “Reason and Religious Belief,” 48, 50.}
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not properly basic. Plantinga challenges this stringent requirement and argues that certain religious beliefs may be no more unjustified than those of memory or sense perception. On what basis should these receive exclusive priority in a person’s belief structure? Even philosophers believe all sorts of things in a basic way that are neither self-evident nor incorrigible such as the existence of other minds, the existence of the past, and certain propositions based upon testimony. Hence, according to Plantinga, classical foundationalism is too restrictive and cannot live up to its own strictures in practice.\(^{40}\)

Citing the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, Plantinga argues that “we cannot come to a knowledge of God on the basis of argument”; the Christian believer “should start from belief in God rather than from the premises of some argument whose conclusion is that God exists. What is it that makes those premises a better starting point anyway?”\(^{41}\) Furthermore, why couldn’t a person maintain that these basic beliefs about God originate from an innate awareness of divinity? Plantinga employs two concepts from the Calvinist tradition that resonate with Latter-day Saints. The first is called the sensus divinitatis, which was introduced by Calvin to describe “an instinct, a natural human tendency, a disposition . . . to form beliefs about God under a variety of situations.”\(^{42}\) In the Institutes, Calvin describes it as follows:

> There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. . . . Since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all.\(^{43}\)

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40. Even more strongly, Plantinga argues that classical foundationalism is “self-referentially incoherent” because the proposition that only self-evident and incorrigible beliefs are properly basic is neither self-evident nor incorrigible.

41. Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God, ed., Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 65.

42. Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, 171.

Hence, the *sensus divinitatis*, being properly basic, is similar to perception, memory and other human constitutive faculties. Consequently, the argument goes something like this: “If belief in God is unjustified, then, so too with perceptual, memory, and *a priori* beliefs. But since these are all *evidently* rational, then so too with belief in God.”

As a form of general revelation, the *sensus divinitatis* compares in interesting ways with the LDS concept of the Light of Christ, which is a universal endowment described by Parley P. Pratt as the “intellectual light of our inward and spiritual organs, by which we reason, discern, judge, compare, comprehend, and remember the subjects within our reach.” In recent years, the Light of Christ has been described in terms of the innate human ability to recognize good and evil than as a cross-cultural awareness of divinity.

Plantinga’s second concept is the *internal instigation of the Holy Spirit*, which functions according to intervening divine grace to produce beliefs, the propositional content of which are the central truths of Christianity, including trinity, incarnation, resurrection, and eternal life. Referring to this as a “special kind of cognitive instrument,” Plantinga maintains that it is “not part of our constitution as we came from the hand of the Maker, but instead part of a special divine response to our (unnatural) sinful condition.” Applied to a Latter-day Saint context, the central truths in this set would include the restoration of the fullness of the gospel, continuing revelation through a living prophet, the truth of the Book of Mormon, etc. According to Plantinga, these two cognitive mechanisms form a “model” for human understanding that is no more unjustified than a model that views humans as rational animals that acquire knowledge exclusively by means of “perception and reflection.”

But the question then remains: Why aren’t belief in God and the central teachings of Christianity more widespread? In a word: *sin*, which is itself a component of the model described above. Plantinga states:

> Calvin’s claim, then, is that God has created us in such a way that we have a strong tendency or inclination toward belief in him. This tendency has been in part overlaid or suppressed by sin... This is the

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47. He calls this model the “Aquinas/Calvin model.” See ibid., 167–241.
natural human condition; it is because of our presently unnatural sinful condition that many of us find belief in God difficult or absurd.\textsuperscript{48}

Why could this not be the guiding narrative for understanding the nature of human belief? It accounts for why some people so naturally believe in God and some do not. Plantinga attempts to place the burden of proof back onto the critic of religious belief to demonstrate in a non-question-begging way that a Christian model of human understanding is inferior to some species of rationalism.

Given this approach, one could articulate an analogous Latter-day Saint model of human understanding, which would include the Light of Christ, Gift of the Holy Ghost, faith, sin, etc. and adopt the structure of Plantinga’s arguments as being applicable to these truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. However, to the extent one accepts his arguments, one must accept the implications of his position and be open to the criticisms that follow.

\textbf{Analysis of Reformed Epistemology}

As might be expected, Plantinga’s position has generated a tremendous amount of discussion and debate in both the theological and philosophical communities. The most interesting criticisms for our purposes center on the charge that Plantinga’s Reformed epistemology is subject to the three aforementioned charges, namely: intellectual isolation, lack of mutual standards of rationality, and immunity from rational criticism. In the interest of brevity, we will focus attention on the criticism most relevant to our purposes, namely the possibility of rationally undermining or rebutting the central claims of Christianity.

By way of review, it can be said that because theistic belief can be properly basic, it can be rational, and because it can be rational, it can be justified. So in one obvious sense Plantinga’s position is not fideistic precisely because it claims \textit{rationality} for religious belief. Furthermore, he acknowledges there can be what he calls “defeaters” to Christian beliefs, which he describes as rational reasons for giving up a belief.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{48} Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 66.

\textsuperscript{49} More specifically, a “defeater for a belief $b$, then, is another belief $d$ such that, given my noetic structure, I cannot rationally hold $b$, given that I believe $d$.” See Plantinga, \textit{Warranted Christian Belief}, 361.
Suppose someone accepts belief in God as basic. Does it follow that he will hold this belief in such a way that no argument could move him or cause him to give it up? Will he not hold it come what may in spite of any evidence or argument with which he could be presented? Does he not thereby adopt a posture in which argument and other rational methods of settling disagreement are implicitly declared irrelevant? Surely not. But has not Plantinga already eliminated the genuine possibility of defeaters given his description of the sensus divinitatis and internal instigation of the Holy Spirit? Given his own description, no amount of evidence or argument will defeat these beliefs when a conflict arises because, on Plantinga’s own account, a person is justified in siding with the Holy Spirit, come what may from reason. “Probability with respect to public evidence,” he states, “is neither necessary nor sufficient for warranted Christian belief.” Furthermore, it is not the case for him “that the theist and atheist agree as to what reason delivers, the theist then going on to accept the existence of God by faith; there is, instead, disagreement in the first place as to what are the deliverances of reason.”

At this point one may reasonably ask of Plantinga: given this approach, what could possibly count as a “counterargument or counter-evidence” to these beliefs? It appears that he has cut the feet out from under his denial of fideism such that evidence and argument may have no relevance to a religious belief despite the possibility of widespread consensus that the belief is irrational to maintain. One may respond, as Plantinga does, that consensus as to what counts as a rational defeater may differ depending on which group (or individual) you are considering. Of course—but in order for his openness to counterargument or counterevidence to make any sense, he has to appeal to a concept of rationality that is broader than that of the religious community that holds

50. Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 82; emphasis added. In response to the Great Pumpkin Objection, Platinga states that “there is the claim that if belief in God is really properly basic with respect to warrant, then arguments and objections will not be relevant to it; it will be beyond rational scrutiny and will be insulated from objections and defeaters. . . . But obviously objection and argument are relevant to theistic belief: therefore, it isn't warrant-basic. . . . So it is not true, in general, that if a belief is held in a basic way, then it is immune to argument and rational evaluation; why, therefore, think it must hold for theistic belief?” Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, 343–44.


52. Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 90.
the belief in question.\textsuperscript{53} Consider the example of biblical scholarship to demonstrate the point.

Plantinga maintains that, because Christians can know the truth of what really happened in the Bible through the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, the results of critical biblical scholarship may ultimately be inconsequential. An argument familiar in Mormon apologetic circles is that because Christian belief and higher criticism begin from different presuppositions, the outcomes will inevitably be different and often incompatible; and because Christian presuppositions are based upon basic beliefs about God and his workings in the world, they are not subject to counterargument or counterevidence.\textsuperscript{54} Furthermore, since skeptical scholars disagree among themselves, their arguments are open to doubt and their assumptions are questionable, which is all the more reason to reject them in favor of beliefs grounded in the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{55} Consider the following quote from Plantinga:

\begin{quote}
[T]here is available a source of warranted true belief, a way of coming to see the truth of these teachings, that is quite independent of historical study: Scripture/the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit/faith. . . . By virtue of this process, an ordinary Christian, one quite innocent of historical studies, the ancient languages, the intricacies of textual criticism, the depths of theology, and all the rest can nevertheless come to know that these things are, indeed true. . . . Neither the Christian community nor the ordinary Christian is at the mercy of the expert here; they can know these truths directly.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} Plantinga does make this appeal in his statement that “[y]ou give me a defeater in the relevant sense only if you propose to me a belief which is such that a rational sophisticated believer . . . would accept it upon being presented with it.” Plantinga, \textit{Warranted Christian Belief}, 366. However, my point is that he has undercut the very appeal to the “rational sophisticated believer.”

\textsuperscript{54} See for example, Robert Millet, \textit{A Different Jesus: The Christ of the Latter-day Saints} (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).

\textsuperscript{55} See Aijaz, “An Assessment of Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology,” 10. Furthermore, couldn’t someone argue that because there is so much disagreement regarding central elements of the faith within the Christian community that are said to come from the Holy Spirit, that we have reason to reject the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit as a method for finding truth? If Plantinga can appeal to the inconclusive nature of biblical scholarship as a means to reject the method upon which it is based, then the same could be said of the method upon which he relies to the extent that it is inconclusive.

\textsuperscript{56} Plantinga, \textit{Warranted Christian Belief}, 374.
It appears then that the Christian may reject any possible rational defeater that is in conflict with what is perceived to come by way of the Holy Spirit. Despite this, Plantinga does not eliminate the possibility of defeaters when he states in the same chapter that

> [I]t is possible, at any rate in the broadly logical sense, that just by following ordinary historical reason, using the methods of historical investigation endorsed or enjoined by the deliverances of reason, someone should find powerful evidence against central elements of the Christian faith; if this happened, Christians would face a genuine faith–reason clash.\(^{57}\)

However, because evidence of this sort has not emerged, Christians need not worry (at least at this point) about having to face a conflict between the deliverances of the Spirit and powerful evidence to the contrary. At least two questions emerge here. First, based upon his own account of direct confirmation by way of the Holy Spirit, why couldn’t someone reject any evidence that came by way of “ordinary historical reason”? If one’s very conception of “the deliverances of reason” ultimately comes by way of the Holy Spirit (including that the Bible is authoritative and that the Holy Spirit has guided the Christian church ensuring that its central teachings are true), then any evidence that conflicts with the teachings of the Bible may be rejected out of hand.\(^{58}\) Thus I would argue that Plantinga has, on the one hand, effectively eliminated the condition for the possibility of genuine defeaters to Christian belief, while on the other hand, maintaining their real possibility. If I am correct about this inconsistency, it has serious implications for his project as a whole.

In short, on the one hand Plantinga maintains that reason could come up with arguments or evidence that would defeat religious belief, but on the other hand he appears to eliminate the need for a religious believer to entertain possible defeaters due to the spiritual grounding of beliefs. His position seems to imply that “defeaters provide no problem for those who are convinced of the truth of Christian theism, even if all the evidence goes against it. Thus, Plantinga’s contention of the falsifiability of Christian theism, and his criticisms of various defeaters, seems to be only a pretense.”\(^{59}\) In this way, he can keep central religious beliefs immune from criticism while maintaining that he is not a fideist.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 420.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 380.

This kind of fideism is best revealed, I believe, by Nicholas Wolterstorff, in the following passage:

From the fact that it is not rational for some person to believe that God exists it does not follow that he ought to give up that belief. Rationality is only *prima facie* justification; lack of rationality, only *prima facie* impermissibility. Perhaps, in spite of its irrationality for him, the person ought to continue believing that God exists. Perhaps it is our duty to believe more firmly that God exists than any proposition which conflicts with this, and/or more firmly than we believe that a certain proposition *does* conflict with it. Of course, for a believer who is a member of the modern Western intelligentsia to have his theistic convictions prove nonrational is to be put into a deeply troubling situation. There is a biblical category which applies to such a situation. It is a *trial*. May it not also be that sometimes the nonrationality of one’s conviction that God exists is a trial, to be endured?\(^60\)

Here Wolterstorff gives voice to one way in which arguments against Christian belief are subsumed under religious categories. One need not recognize a defeater as such because one is justified in holding religious beliefs more firmly than one holds to scientific evidence or logical argument. Thus, religious convictions may trump rational evidence in cases of conflict. If certain evidence does come to place a person’s religious faith in doubt, there are religious narratives and categories to deal with this situation as well.

If this analysis is correct, then Plantinga’s Reformed epistemology does not escape the fideistic label. In the end his approach appears to be susceptible to the traditional criticisms described above, namely intellectual isolation, lack of mutual standards of rationality, and immunity from rational criticism. The possibility of defeaters and the *prima facie* status of justification, though given lip-service, does not need to be taken seriously by Christians who have had the truths of the gospel confirmed by the Holy Spirit.

### Implications for Latter-day Saint Epistemology

I believe that the way in which Plantinga wrestles with these issues and tensions is instructive for Latter-day Saint philosophy and theol-

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\(^60\) Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Can Belief in God Be Rational?” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 177.
ogy. For example, the mantra “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” is often utilized to argue in favor of something like the *complementarity thesis*, namely that faith and reason work effectively together in the acquisition of knowledge. A careful observation, however, of some of Mormonism’s central epistemic practices reveals strong fideist tendencies. Reason, argument, and evidence are ultimately subsumed under religious categories in nearly *all* cases of perceived conflict. Evidence inconsistent with perceived orthodoxy is very often (a) rejected out of hand as irrelevant to belief, (b) held in abeyance in anticipation of subsequent evidence that will resolve the conflict, or (c) the object of cognitive dissonance.

These observations are not meant to imply that Mormons should give themselves over to some form of rationalism. Instead we should focus our attention on the set of epistemic practices that informs how the faith/reason or reason/revelation split is negotiated. Merely to say that Mormons value both reason and faith is theoretically uninteresting. What is interesting and relevant, however, is how, in practice, this relation is negotiated in cases of perceived conflict. These practices show what rationality comes to in these contexts. Latter-day Saints cannot, on the one hand, claim to share with some broader community the same conception of reason, and then, on the other hand, under pressure of criticism, appeal to an idiosyncratic conception of rationality to preserve doctrinal orthodoxy. We see this dynamic at work in Plantinga’s philosophy and, I believe, in our own tradition as Mormons wrestle with what it means to be rational beings while maintaining theologically “scandalous” beliefs.

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61. Dallin Oaks, in *The Lord’s Way*, however, argues that reason can never trump revelation. Fair enough, but this is very nearly a truism. The real question is a Lockean one: whether something is indeed a revelation. Once it is established that something is a revelation from God, who is going to argue except the most promethean among us?
Mormons have been challenged over the years over their concept of God and godhood. He treats the challenges of defining theisms of any sort, and in particular considers just what monotheism really is in the context of Christian theology. As with most of the essays in this volume, the reader finds himself dashing off to the dictionary to have new words defined. Brian D. Burch, of Utah Valley University, follows with "Faith Seeking Understanding: Mormon Atiology and the Challenge of Fideism." You likely can figure out what "atheology" is, but "fideism"? This is "the position that religious understanding is ultimately grounded in faith and not on rational argument or scientific knowledge." (p. 58) This is not new in the circles I travel in.