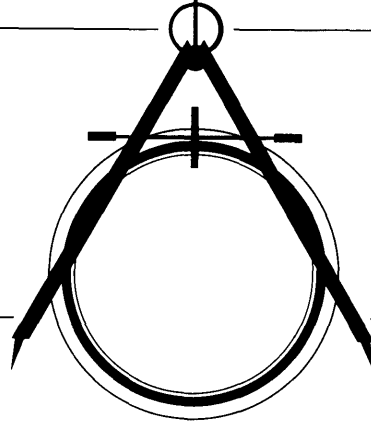


RESPONSE | COMMENT



ON A PAPER BY FLOYD M. ROSS

STERLING MCMURRIN

PROFESSOR Ross has clearly shown that important fundamental similarities exist between Mormon theology and Whitehead's metaphysics. Unfortunately, the common Mormon treatment of the problem of reality as process heretofore has been dogmatic, inadequately reasoned, and philosophically crude, while Whitehead's treatment of reality as process is perhaps the high-water mark of twentieth-century philosophical refinement. His great work *Process and Reality* is rightly regarded as one of the most difficult and most abstruse philosophical treatises ever produced, a remarkable contrast to the simple Mormon common-places regarding such matters as growth in God's experience and what Mormon theologians call "eternal progress." But, as Professor Ross has indicated, the two have some common ground and at some points there may be actual identities.

Whitehead's work is highly speculative, born of his vast knowledge of post-Newtonian physical science. His was a mind that with Bertrand Russell produced the *Principia Mathematica*, a supreme monument to the abstractive powers of the human intellect. Even some of Whitehead's personal friends were dismayed when he turned in his late years from the philosophy of science to speculative metaphysics and philosophical theology, which clearly moved him beyond the firm ground of experience and laid him open to the empirical and positivistic charge of meaninglessness. Nonetheless, Whitehead knew that all those who are genuinely sensitive to the problem of the validation of truth claims must meet the same criteria for factual meaningfulness whether those claims are grounded in revelation, scientific investigation, frank speculation, or just plain

daydreams.

The problem of *being* and *becoming* has been one of the most persistent and difficult issues in occidental metaphysics since the pre-Socratics, and it has been a major issue in oriental thought as well. How something can continue to be what it is while at the same time changing into what it is not is a problem that was exacerbated by the Aristotelian logical principles of identity, contradiction, and excluded middle. And even before Aristotle rejected Plato's conception of the independent reality of universals in his effort to account for the reality of motion, change, and development, the decision to go in the direction of *being*, with its commitment to perpetual identity and timelessness, or in the direction of *becoming* and temporality, with its risk of ontological instability and irrationality, was a fundamental problem in metaphysics.

Mormonism was born in the century that undertook to overthrow the grip of *being* and timelessness which Christian orthodoxy with its basic commitment to Platonism had fastened on the Western mind. In the nineteenth century, especially in European thought—a new commitment to movement, growth, and temporal process which changed the character of intellectual growth was born. This can be seen in such Romantics as Schelling, Goethe, and Nietzsche, but its most impressive symbols are Hegel and Darwin. Hegel's attack on Aristotelian logic through his conception of dialectic had (whatever its limitations), a powerful impact on the development not only of metaphysics and religion but also of politics and history. But it was Darwin's empirically grounded arguments against the concept of fixed species that more than anything else destroyed the traditional faith in the absolute, unchang-



ing character of the world. In the work of William James and John Dewey and their associates in this country and of Bergson and the vitalistic biologists in Europe and finally of Whitehead in both England and America, we can see the coming to some level of maturity of this vision of reality in process.

I have the impression that Professor Ross finds some favor with Mormonism at this point—its refusal to settle for a finished world, its restless sense of creative process and temporal movement. I personally feel that this is the most interesting and attractive facet of Mormon theology and what might be called Mormon metaphysics, and I fully agree with the implicit suggestion of Professor Ross's paper that the Mormon theologians might well take a very active interest in Whitehead, who is clearly the philosopher of process. Literate Mormons have for many years found support in William James's finitism, pluralism, and vision of the unfinished universe. James is easy to read and Whitehead is difficult but it is time for them to give Whitehead their serious attention. Considering the intense temporalism of Mormon theology, a quality now threatened by some writers of considerable influence whose lust for the fleshpots of Christian orthodoxy seems to know no bounds, the Mormon theologians should find much encouragement in Whitehead's statement in *Adventures of Ideas*. "I hazard the prophecy that that religion will conquer which can render clear to popular understanding some eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact" (p. 41).

In recent years there has been a noticeable discomfort in Catholicism with the scholastic foundations of dogma, especially the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas, in favor of a fundamental philosophy that accommodates process better than the scholastic Aristotelianism. In this movement, of course, the interest in Whitehead's metaphysics has been very strong though Whitehead was an Anglican, not a Catholic. Official Mormonism has the great advantage of not only an initial break with orthodoxy but also of an almost total lack of the kind of sophistication in metaphysics that would tie it to the philosophical traditions of the past. In this, it seems to me, it is in a somewhat more felicitous condition than those religions which are deeply rooted in the past intellectual formulas that may now be scientifically outdated. The trouble is that some Mormon officials seem to be unacquainted with what we have come to regard as official Mormonism and are now, through their own writing, endangering Mormonism's best insights.

I was pleased that Dr. Ross called attention to the attempt of Mormonism to be rational, especially by his reference to the work of John A. Widtsoe. I personally believe that Widtsoe did more than any other Mormon writer of the past to stress the importance of rationality in religion, even though his own efforts at times produced strange and even absurd results as he

attempted to square Mormon dogma and biblical literalism with reason and science. Those of us who are Mormons, of course, are well aware that anti-intellectualism and irrationality abound in profusion in Mormonism and that in recent decades things have been getting worse rather than better. But Ross is entirely right in his calling attention to the Mormon ideal of rationality.

I was also pleased that Ross gave attention to Whitehead's treatment of the problem of evil and the finitistic conception of God in both Whitehead and Mormonism, and to their common stress on freedom and creativity. But most Mormons and some Mormon theologians seem to be unaware of the finitism that is basic to Mormon theology. In his concluding comments where he compared Mormonism with Whitehead, Professor Ross was at times, I am afraid, somewhat too generous with Mormonism, as, for instance, when he said that both Mormons and Whitehead "shy away from absolutisms." That Mormon theology is in principle basically nonabsolutistic and that even Mormon ethics is in certain respects nonabsolutistic does not at all mean that the generality of Mormons do not have strong absolutistic tastes. On the whole they are infected with the absolutisms that are common to all types of conservatives, and they are very much the victims of the traditional language and diction that have been produced by orthodox religions. They are seduced by their own discourse, which appeals more to emotion than reason.

But Professor Ross has excellent insight into the character of Mormonism and a fine sense of the similarities of Whitehead and Mormonism. Whether Whitehead would agree with this is an interesting question. I am aware, with respect to the same kind of issues which Ross has exploited in the matter of Mormonism and Whitehead, that Professor John Dewey recognized some similarity between his own philosophy and Mormonism and that even William James had some feel for the pragmatic facets of Mormonism. I don't mean to put Whitehead, Dewey, and James in the same philosophical category, but there are important points of agreement among those three on the very issues which Professor Ross has brought to our attention.

I personally believe that Professor Ross's paper should be widely read by those who are interested in Mormon theology. I will be greatly surprised if it does not have a large impact on Mormon theological speculation in the future. It is the careful and acute observation of a person of profound religious insight whose wisdom is the product of very large experience and extensive learning. Those Mormons who read his paper with care and understanding should gain from it a greater appreciation of some of the better elements of their own theology, to say nothing of its value in refining their conception of religion.

STERLING MCMURRIN is an adjunct professor of philosophy at the University of Utah and author of *The Theological Foundations of Mormonism*.