

No "Small and Cramped Eternities": Parley Pratt and the Foundations of Mormon Cosmology

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In his book on *The Everlasting Man*, the great Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton resists the diminution of man consequent upon a thoroughly Darwinized universe. He writes:

No philosopher denies that a mystery still attaches to the two great transitions: the origin of the universe itself and the origin of the principle of life itself. Most philosophers have the enlightenment to add that a third mystery attaches to the origin of man himself. In other words, a third bridge was built across a third abyss of the unthinkable when there came into the world what we call reason and what we call will. Man is not merely an evolution, but rather a revolution."

It is the simple truth [he continues] that man differs from the brutes in kind and not in degree; and the proof of it is here; that it sounds like a truism to say that the most primitive man drew a picture of a monkey and that it sounds like a joke to say that the most intelligent monkey drew a picture of a man. Something of division and disproportion has appeared; and it is unique. . . . This creature was truly different from all other creatures; because he was a creator as well as a creature.¹

I want to explore the implications of this last phrase, for in defining man as homo-erector, rather than homo sapiens, we find a potent link between what this volume calls Mormon Thought and Engineering Vision.

When Church Father Origen wrote one of the earliest treatises on Christian belief in the early third century, he noted that some articles of the faith were "delivered . . . with the utmost clearness on certain points which they believed to be *necessary to every one*."² Ever since, theology has largely been concerned with articulating and elaborating those foundational tenets of religious faith. Such tenets consist of "the character and attributes of God, . . . the doctrines we are to believe, and the duties we are to practice," according to the 1828 Webster's definition of theology. A more recent authority, surveying the historical scope of theology, describes its purview as "the whole complex of the Divine dispensation from the Fall of Adam to the Redemption through Christ and its mediation to men by His Church."³ The limitations of theology are implicit in that formulation (fall through redemption) but are made more explicit in the greatest Christian epic in the West, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton pushed the boundaries of "God-science" further than most--at least he claimed he did--when he determined to soar "above th' Aonian Mount," in order to pursue "Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime." Yet even in his audacious claim to "justify the wayes of God to men," he knew when to recognize the limits of appropriate inquiry. God sends the angel Raphael to impart further light and knowledge to Adam, but ends by counseling the over-curious human,

Sollicit not thy thoughts with matters hid,

. . . Heav'n is for thee too high
To know what passes there; be lowly wise:
Think onely what concernes thee and thy being;
Dream not of other Worlds, what Creatures there
Live, in what state, condition, or degree,
Contented [with what] thus farr hath been reveal'd.⁴

The questions that Christian theology has by and large resisted the urge to adjudicate are legion. What of the time *before* Creation? What was God doing then? Preparing Hell for those who would ask such impudent questions, Augustine was tempted to respond.⁵ What of God's other dominions? Another mystery it falls not to theology to explain. Why is there man at all? For Milton, the boldest exponent of theodicy before Parley Pratt, it was to deprive Satan of bragging rights in having suborned a third of heaven's angels. The scriptures, however, are silent. What of human destiny in the worlds beyond? What is man being saved *for*? Dante thought a state of eternal, rapturous, contemplation, and few have proffered more specifics than that. Post-redemption theology is an oxymoron. So *traditional* theology, in other words, confines itself to defining the terms and conditions of a very limited concept of salvation, of a soul of unknown beginnings, from an evil of unknown origin, to prepare for a future of unknown nature, all in accordance with the inscrutable will of a God who is beyond human comprehending. What it *does* elaborate are the articles of faith demanding assent and the sacraments necessary to comply with in the course of human life. The focus is decidedly, emphatically, on the time frame, and the personal transformations that lead, "from the Fall of Adam to the Redemption through Christ."

Against this conservative Christian background, Parley Pratt's major work stands in sharp relief. No Mormon thinker, Pratt included, would exceed Smith's own audacity as a Christian iconoclast. Speculating on heavenly councils, Gods that were once human, and humans that could attain to Godhood--these and other doctrines blasted asunder the creedal conceptions of God and Man alike. But it fell to Pratt to assemble these ideas for the first time in something like a systematic form--in some cases apparently giving public expression to them before Smith. Here is perhaps the prime instance of Pratt playing Paul to Joseph's Jesus. If Smith was the instigator of Mormonism's essential beliefs, Pratt organized them, elaborated them, and defended them in a manner that gave them the enduring life and the complexion they had in the early church. Pratt was, in this sense, the first theologian of Mormonism.

Precedents for Pratt's atypically boundless theologizing were recent. Thomas Dick defended his *Philosophy of a Future State* as consistent with, if not affirmed by, Holy Writ, and took his fellow theologians to task for their reticence in plumbing "the nature of heavenly felicity, and the employments of the future world." He lamented "the vague and indefinite manner in which such subjects have been hitherto treated," and "the want of those expansive views of the Divine operations which the professors of Christianity should endeavor to attain." Like Pratt, Dick was consumed by the spectacle of a scientific juggernaut that was already opening worlds both immense and minute to human knowledge, and which would leave in its wake any theology too timid to follow. "Consider the boundless extent of the starry firmament," Dick rhapsodized, "the scenes of grandeur it displays, the new luminaries, which, in the course of ages, appear to be gradually augmenting its splendour, and the countless myriads of exalted intelligences which doubtless people its expansive regions." In regard to the latter, he felt ennobled rather than diminished by the titanic scope of creation involved. "And if the multiplicity of objects in one world overwhelms our

powers of conception and computation," he wrote, "how much more the number and variety of beings and operations connected with the economy of millions of worlds!" At a bare minimum, he concluded, men and angels in a future state would continue their intellectual progress in the realms of mathematics and astronomy, as a simple precondition for understanding the glory and majesty of the heavens they inherit. But why stop with those two disciplines? And Dick goes on to enumerate natural philosophy, anatomy and physiology, history, and other subjects as "some of those branches of science which will be recognized [and studied] by the righteous in a future state."⁶

This was heady doctrine, and Pratt's own work only reaffirmed and expanded upon it in at least two key regards. He wrote on the basis of what he believed was authoritative revelation rather than simple inference. And he wedded his system to a young but flourishing institution, which assured its dissemination and survival.

The real key to understanding Pratt's great synthetic work, consummated in his *Key to the Science of Theology*, is in the implications he draws from one of Mormonism's most radical claims. "Jesus Christ and his Father [are] in possession of not merely an organized spirit but also a glorious immortal body of flesh and bones." Such extreme anthropomorphosizing is startling in and of itself. But the inference that follows is what shatters the boundaries of traditional theologizing. If the Father and Son have physical tabernacles, he reasons, then they are "subject to the laws that govern, of necessity, even the most refined order of physical existence." Because "all physical element, however embodied, quickened, or refined, is subject to the general laws necessary to all existence."⁷

What this means is that by naturalizing Deity, the entire universe of God and humankind, heaven and hell, body and spirit, the eternal and the mundane—all are collapsed into one sphere. The paradigm to which this breathtaking view of things stands in opposition is neatly formulated by Pratt's contemporary and most famous amateur theologian: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who stated the matter simply: "The very ground of all Miracle," he proclaimed, is "the heterogeneity of Spirit and Matter."⁸ On that distinction stand the viability of miracles, the sacred, and God's immunity to the Babel tower of scientific materialism and the hubris of philosophical materialism.

Pratt not only declares the distinction erased and the spheres conflated into one, but he also insists that that sphere is governed by laws fully conformable to and accessible by human reason. In the aftermath of Sir Isaac Newton's momentous decipherment of the laws of the universe, the French scientist Pierre-Simon de Laplace famously told Napoleon, in his philosophical euphoria, that he no longer had need of God to make sense of creation. Secular science could henceforth exile God from his universe. In Pratt's theological euphoria, God was reinscribed in the universe, but as a part of it, rather than outside it. For this reason, it would be more accurate to say that for Pratt, science encompassed theology rather than simply co-existing harmoniously with it. That is the sense in which Pratt's title must be understood: "Key to the Science of Theology."

In an earlier work, "The World Turned Upside Down," Pratt had already signaled his intention to reinterpret all theology within the construct of a kind of scientific materialism. "Matter and spirit are the two great principles of all existence," he had written there. Both constitute the eternal--and material--constituents of the universe. The resulting interaction between the physical and the spiritual, the earthly and the divine, was almost jarring. As the physical universe was directly affected by the fall of man, so must Christ's atonement be seen as entailing "the salvation and

durability of the physical world, the renovation and regeneration of matter, and the restoration of the elements, to a state of eternal and unchangeable purity."⁹

This is more than simply innovation or heterodox speculation. Rather, it represents the most significant reconceptualizing of religious cosmology in Christian history. I am reminded in this regard of a much circulated essay by the iconoclastic theorist of computer science, Edsger W. Dijkstra. He wrote,

The usual way in which we plan today for tomorrow is in yesterday's vocabulary. We do so, because we try to get away with the concepts that we are familiar with and that have acquired their meaning in our past experience. . . . It is the most common way of trying to cope with novelty: by means of metaphors and analogies we try to link the new to the old, the novel to the familiar. . . . In the case of a sharp discontinuity, however, the method breaks down: though we try to glorify it with the name "common sense," our past experience is no longer relevant. . . . One must consider one's own past, the experiences collected, and the habits formed in it as an unfortunate accident of history, and one has to approach the radical novelty with a blank mind, consciously refusing to try to link it with the familiar, because the familiar is hopelessly inadequate. . . . Coming to grips with a radical novelty amounts to creating and learning a new foreign language that cannot be translated into one's mother tongue.¹⁰

This description applies perfectly to Mormonism, yet with an ironic qualifier: Mormonism's most striking discontinuity with Christian theology is in the radical continuity it establishes between the material and the eternal, the transcendent--even the supernatural. The result is a worldview that is shockingly--and refreshingly blithe--in its indifference to its own oddness. "When the elements melt with fervent heat," said Brigham Young, "the Lord Almighty will send forth his angels, who are well instructed in chemistry, and they will separate the elements and make new combinations thereof."¹¹ Orson Pratt would elaborate this view a few years later: "The study of science is the study of something eternal. If we study astronomy, we study the works of God. If we study chemistry, geology, optics, or any other branch of science, every new truth we come to the understanding of is eternal; it is a part of the great system of universal truth. It is truth that exists throughout universal nature; and God is the dispenser of all truth--scientific, religious, and political."¹² Humankind and God, building bridges and creating worlds, practicing chemistry and endowing the earth with its celestial glory--the mundane and the miraculous are but different degrees on an eternal scale of knowledge acquisition.

The most audacious Mormon principles followed inescapably from this monistic cosmology, and they pertained to the relationship between human beings and Deity. One of the most surprising aspects of Mormon culture was the ease with which early members, most from evangelical backgrounds, reared in strict Methodist, and Reformed Baptist traditions, transitioned into a faith that demolished some of Christendom's most sacred precepts. "An immortal man . . . perfected in his attributes in all the fulness of celestial glory is called *a god*," wrote Pratt without apology. And then, without blinking, "It may then consistently be said that there are, in a subordinate sense, a plurality of Gods."¹³ Even earlier, in 1838 (six years before King Follett!) he had written that because we will grow to have "the same knowledge that God has, [we] will have the same power. Hence the appropriateness of the appellation, "Gods, even the sons of God."¹⁴ Anglo-Saxon Protestantism had shown,

since England's Toleration Act of 1689, a remarkable effort to countenance dissent and heterodoxy in Christian faith--within a few non-negotiable parameters. Notably, religious freedom was decreed in the 1689 Act for most dissenters from orthodoxy, providing they accepted the creedal definition of the Trinity. And here was Pratt, unabashedly professing Mormonism to be, in an essential regard, polytheistic. Certainly a case could be made, and has been made by Mormon leaders, that Latter-day Saints are monotheistic in the only way that matters--they worship God the Father in the name of Christ. The point is: Pratt did not stoop to make that claim, because he was not interested in passing muster with the guardians of Christian orthodoxy. It would have sounded too apologetic--and if there is one thing Pratt never condescended to, it was apologies for Mormon heterodoxy.

The fullest expression of this idea, of course, would come in Joseph Smith's famous discourse shortly before his death. King Follett presents us with two catastrophes for conventional theology--which may not be a bad thing. The first is the humanizing and temporalizing of God. I know thoughtful and faithful Mormons who rejoice that the King Follett discourse was never canonized for that reason. It does have one virtue, however, one that we will have the boldness perhaps to someday plumb, in that it lends itself to the world's best hope for a naturalistic theology. Stripped of all invocations of transcendent entities and transcendent eternities, such a universe should be at least potentially appealing to the hardcore materialists currently working the anti-God/anti-religion circuit.

One of Mormonism's greatest strengths, surely unexplored, untapped till now, is its potential to offer an alternative to the materialist/supernaturalist impasse that stymies productive discourse in this age of increasing polarization and rhetoric that reduces to caricature proponents of each cosmology. I would point out that positions that bridge the gap have been taken at times, by some of the more unconventional of the philosophically minded. Cambridge philosopher John McTaggart, for example, considered himself an atheist, insofar as he found nothing intellectually compelling about the God of religion east or west. The human soul, however, he found too powerful a paradigm to reject. In fact, he argues that there are better grounds for skepticism about the reality of matter and *sensa*, than to doubt the reality of spirit.¹⁵ And incidentally, he found its premortal existence vastly more compelling a belief than its purported immortality.

William James also famously proposed a religious paradigm that avoided the materialist/supernaturalist alternatives. Scientific naturalism is inadequate, he concludes, because "there are resources in us that naturalism with its literal and legal virtues never reckons of, possibilities that take our breath away, of another kind of happiness and power . . . and these seem to show a wider world than either physics or philistines can imagine." On the other hand, he argues, the problems with positing a God equivalent to the Absolute is utterly untenable. (Among other problems, satisfying as the concept of the absolute is, it satisfies only intellectual rationality. It does not successfully address what he labels aesthetic or moral rationality.) The only solution, he finds, would be a God who is in some sense Finite--that is, a God who is in the universe and subject to its laws. He believes, in accordance with biblical theism but at variance with creedal Christianity, that it would be hard to "conceive of anything more different from the absolute than the God, say, of David or of Isaiah," he wrote. "*That* God is an essentially finite being *in* the cosmos, not with the cosmos in him. . . . If it should prove probable that the absolute does not exist, it will not follow in the slightest degree that a God like that of David, Isaiah, or Jesus may not

exist, or may not be the most important existence in the universe for us to acknowledge."¹⁶

And as a third example, I would point to the avowed atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel, who found both theism and scientific physicalism with its Darwinian evolution inadequate to the task of giving a general account of the human self. "I am denying," he writes, "that what rationality is can be understood through the theory of natural selection." To the question of what it is, he confesses, "I don't have a proper positive response. . . . [But] the physical story, without more, cannot explain the mental story, including consciousness and reason." He is loathe to invoke the specter of religious belief, and yet, he concludes after his wrestle with the non-God, "We are simple examples of minds, and . . . the existence of mind is certainly a *datum* for the construction of any world picture: At the very least, its *possibility* must be explained. And it hardly seems credible that its appearance should be a natural accident, like the fact that there are mammals."¹⁷

Positions like these should be of acute interest to Mormons, it seems to me. Because all of them begin with what Nagel calls the datum of the human soul in a universe where a transcendent God is not an a priori condition. Reversing the usual sequence, the soul is, in these cases, not the emanation, not the temporal or logical consequence of a creator God. It is the starting point for the development of a cosmology, as it is in the King Follett address.

The second of the King Follett assaults on orthodoxy, of course, is its premise that a human being can become a god. This I find the most daunting prospect Mormonism holds out to us. It is also, of course, the most feared theological tenet in the whole history of Christendom--and even beyond. In the earliest creation myth of which we have record--the Mesopotamian *Atrahasis*--the man created at the instigation of a Divine Assembly is made to forget his origin in the heavens, lest he aspire to return to his place among the gods. The early Church Father gave fullest expression to the horror with which guardians of God's sanctity faced down the possibilities of theosis. In these early Christian centuries, the premortal soul provided by far the most compelling solution to numerous dilemmas associated with incarnation, but in preexistence lurked a cardinal danger as well. Tertullian attributed the idea to the pagan philosopher Plato. And Plato, he wrote, has conceded to the soul

so large an amount of divine quality as to put it on a par with God. He makes it unborn, which single attribute I might apply as a sufficient attestation of its perfect divinity; he then adds that the soul is immortal, incorruptible, incorporeal--since he believed God to be the same--invisible, incapable of delineation, uniform, supreme, rational, and intellectual. What more could he attribute to the soul, [he asked in outrage,] if he wanted to call it God? We, however, who allow no appendage to God (in the sense of equality), by this very fact reckon the soul as very far below God: for we suppose it to be born.¹⁸

Like much else in Mormonism, the prospect of theosis can appeal to vainglorious and ignoble reasons, as well as to more pure-hearted ones. Of course, given the context of Enoch's weeping God and the Christ of Gethsemane, we know that acquiring the divine nature is more about infinite vulnerability than infinite power (as my wife, Fiona, has spoken and written about so eloquently).

At the same time, I would argue, the God of Joseph Smith and Parley P. Pratt is a God of power, and unprecedented power at that. And here is why. The heavens

are for Pratt, as they were for Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria and for Church Father Origen, great defender of premortal existence, seething with activity, populous with humans, spirits, and gods, all going and coming, ascending and descending, like the angels on Jacob's ladder. The differences among them derive from "the varied grades of intelligence and purity and also in the variety of spheres occupied by each in the series of progressive being."¹⁹ This is theology that comes fittingly out of the age of Thomas Malthus and G. W. F. Hegel, conformable to Darwin's universe of flux and agon and dynamism. If, by Pratt's day, the dour face of Puritanism had long been in retreat and Calvinism was fast becoming a "one-horse shay," the Christianity of yesteryear was not receding quickly enough to suit him. The gospel he taught and embraced was, like the age of progress, one of unfettered optimism and boundless possibilities, not one of guilt, rules, and hellfire. He urged upon his contemporary religionists the importance of "ceasing to teach and impress upon the youthful mind the gloomy thoughts of death, and the melancholy forebodings of a long slumber in the grave." The "wayward and buoyant spirits of youth," he continued, were already too "weighed down and oppressed," and he hated to see "the more cheerful faculties of the soul . . . thus paralyzed."

His embrace of human theosis, this "doctrine of equality," his more general application of the appellation "gods"--all are susceptible to the charge, if not of blasphemy, then of a dangerous collapse of sacred distance, a risky diminution of the grounds for reverence and awe that constitute reverence before God's transcendent holiness. But for Pratt, the invitation to fellowship with the gods was cause for unalloyed celebration of God's superabundance.

What a glorious field of intelligence now lies before us, yet but partially explored. What a boundless expanse for contemplation and reflection now opens to our astonished vision. What an intellectual banquet spreads itself invitingly to our appetite, calling into lively exercise every power and faculty of the mind, and giving full scope to all the great and ennobling passions of the soul. . . . All the virtuous principles of the human mind may here expand and grow, and flourish, unchecked by any painful emotions or gloomy fears.²⁰

As for God's motive in giving earthly existence and eternal salvation to man, Pratt outlines the meaning and purpose of life in one eloquent paragraph, reminiscent of Plato's god described in *Timaeus*:

Wisdom inspires the Gods to multiply their species and to lay the foundation for all the forms of life to increase in number and for each to enjoy himself in the sphere to which he is adapted, and in the possession and use of that portion of the elements necessary to his existence and happiness.²¹

Plato, I will remind you, had said this about God and his motives. The creator "was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible."²² That's why he created the world and human souls to people it. Similarly with Pratt. God creates those conditions most favorable for the endless advance of his progeny "through every form of life, birth, change, and resurrection, and every form of progress in knowledge and experience." This great work of the Father, like the universe itself, will be "endless or eternally progressive. . . . While eternal charity endures, or eternity itself rolls its successive ages, the heavens will multiply and new

worlds and more people will be added to the kingdoms of the Fathers. Thus, in the progress of events, unnumbered millions of worlds and of systems of worlds will necessarily be called into requisition and be filled by man, beast, fowl, tree, and all the vast varieties of beings and things ever budded and blossomed in Eden."²³

"There is such a thing," Chesterton wrote, "as a small and cramped eternity. You may see it in many modern religions."²⁴ The cosmology of Joseph Smith, explicated by Parley Pratt, is no small and cramped eternity. And the possibilities it bestows upon humankind, the divine potential with which it endows a fallen race, is no blasphemy. It is in fact the highest tribute to God. Because it bespeaks the worship of a God as unencumbered by jealousies and insecurities as the capacious God of Plato. Such a conception of God should invite an equally unencumbered imaginative response.

NOTES

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Everlasting Man* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 1993 printing), 26, 34-35.
2. Origen, *De Principiis*, Preface, 3 Translated by F Crombie, in A Roberts and J Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 4:239.
3. F. L. Cross, "Theology," in E A Livingstone, ed. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1,604.
4. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. 8, lls 167-177.
5. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 11, chap. 12. Tempted, because he actually thought the question was meaningless, since time began with Creation.
6. Thomas Dick, *Philosophy of a Future State*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Biddle, 1845), v, 136, 145, 166.
7. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News, 1893), 23.
8. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks*, edited by H. J. Jackson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985), 555.
9. Parley P. Pratt, *The World Turned Upside Down* (Liverpool, UK: James and Woodburn, 1842), 5, 14.
10. E. W. Dijkstra, "On the Cruelty of Really Teaching Computing Science," E. W. Dijkstra Archive. <http://userweb.cs.utexas.edu/users/EWD/transcriptions/EWD10/EWD1036.html> (accessed February 2011).
11. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 27 vols. (Liverpool, England: Franklin D. Richards and Samuel W. Richards, 1851-86; rpt. Salt Lake City, 1974), 15:127.
12. Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:157.
13. Pratt, *Key to Science of Theology*, 42.
14. Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion's Watchman Unmasked* (New York: Pratt and Fordham, 1838), 27.
15. John McTaggart and E. McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, edited by C. D. Broad (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1927), 2:87ff.
16. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 305-354.
17. T. Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 132-38.
18. Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, Bk. 24 (ANF 3:203).
19. Pratt, *Key to Science of Theology*, 21.
20. Pratt, *World Turned Upside Down*, 18-19.

21. Pratt, *Key to Science of Theology*, 52.
22. Plato, *Timaeus* 29e, in *Plato: Complete Works*, translated by D J. Zeylm, A. Nehamas, and P. Woodruff, edited by J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1997), 1,236.
23. Pratt, *Key to Science of Theology*, 53.
24. G. K. Chesterton, (2004). *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dover, 2004), 12.