Book Reviews

How Well-trod The Divide: A Review Article

Millet, Robert L., and Gerald R. McDermott. *Claiming Christ: A Mormon–Evangelical Debate.* Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007. ISBN 1-58743-209-9; 238 PAGES; PAPERBACK, $16.99

Millet, Robert L., and Gregory C. V. Johnson. *Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation between a Mormon and an Evangelical.* Foreword by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson. Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing, 2007. ISBN 0-97668-436-5; xxxii, 185 PAGES; PAPERBACK, $14.95

Cordial dialogue between evangelicals and Mormons, or Latter-day Saints (LDS), is a laudable exercise. This does not mean that the way such dialogue has occurred has been without controversy. In 1997, New Testament scholars Craig Blomberg (evangelical) and Stephen Robinson (LDS) co-authored a book entitled *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation* (InterVarsity) in which they explored their theological differences and agreements. At the time, many evangelical critics of the LDS religion expressed concern that the book conceded more common ground than actually exists. In 2005, Eerdmans published a book by LDS theologian Robert L. Millet (a professor at Brigham Young University) entitled *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, in which Millet presented an apologetic for the LDS view of Christ. Again, many evangelicals were critical of Eerdmans, a Christian publishing company with a broadly evangelical heritage, for publishing a book defending Mormonism.

Millet has emerged in recent years as the leading LDS scholar writing and speaking to defend Mormon beliefs against evangelical criticisms. In 2007 Millet (long a prolific writer) had three books published in this vein. He is the sole author of *The Vision of Mormonism: Pressing the Boundaries of Christianity* (Paragon), in which he defends Mormonism as an authentic form of Christianity. His other two 2007 books, both co-authored with an evangelical, are the subject of this review. *In*

Claiming Christ: A Mormon–Evangelical Debate, Millet represents the LDS perspective while Gerald McDermott (religion scholar at Roanoke College in Virginia) represents the evangelical side. *In Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation between a Mormon and an Evangelical*, we read what is presented literally as a conversation between Millet and Gregory Johnson, a former Mormon who converted to evangelicalism and became a Baptist pastor in Utah.

Many evangelicals are likely to view *Claiming Christ* as the most troubling of the "LDS–evangelical" books to appear so far. For one thing, McDermott distances himself from the evangelical tradition on various issues, notably in his slighting of biblical inerrancy and his outright rejection of *sola scriptura*—the belief that Scripture is the sole infallible standard for doctrine and practice in the church (9, 16-19). In the context of a debate with a Mormon scholar, the repudiation of *sola scriptura* is a huge concession. He asserts that "some Mormon emphases are, in fact, theological improvements to some contemporary evangelical beliefs" (56) and repeatedly argues that evangelicals can learn much from Mormons theologically (especially 224-25). Millet, for his part, neither distances himself in any way from the LDS tradition nor offers similar concessions of what Mormons might learn from evangelicals.

McDermott also makes controversial concessions regarding the soundness of LDS theology and religion. According to McDermott, Mormons agree "that Jesus was fully God" (16) and therefore, unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses, affirm the "deity of Jesus Christ" (63). The reality is that Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses both affirm the "deity" of Christ but then redefine what that *means*. Mormons view Jesus as the first of God the Father's procreated spirit sons and as having attained the status of a God; Jehovah's Witnesses view Jesus as the first of God's created spirit sons and as such the greatest of many subordinate gods. At one point, McDermott expresses delight that Millet agrees "that Jesus is God and is the only way to salvation (although evangelicals and Mormons disagree on what these things mean)" (60). But if we use the same words while meaning two different things, we don't really agree after all. Most troubling to conservative evangelicals will be McDermott's conces-

sion that Millet and other Mormons "participate in orthodox Trinitarian love of the one God among the three persons," even though "this is not the way [Millet] would think about it" (88).

Despite these controversial claims, the book offers some useful contrasts between orthodox and LDS positions on crucial issues. After Millet professed to believe that Christ is "the Eternal God" (46, 47), McDermott's cross-examination forced Millet to explain that in Mormonism "Eternal" can mean merely for a very long time (61-62). McDermott rightly argues that Mormons believe in "a different God," in Jesus as "one of (at least) several gods," and that humans are of the same species as God (64-72). Such trenchant criticisms make his generous assessment of the spirituality of Mormons that much harder to understand.

In *Bridging the Divide*, Millet and Johnson put into print form a conversation they report having had many times both privately and publicly. Johnson, it turns out, had facilitated the initial exchanges between Robinson and Blomberg that led to their book *How Wide the Divide.* That book sparked further discussions between evangelical and LDS scholars. Millet's book *A Different Jesus*, published by the non-LDS firm Eerdmans, was one outcome of these discussions. In 2001, Johnson left his pastorate to found Standing Together, a ministry focused on fostering respectful dialogue between evangelicals and Mormons. Millet and Johnson began holding public meetings together in which they would ask each other questions and present their own views before live audiences. To date, they report having such public conversations more than fifty times.

Bridging the Divide presents a dialogue in the same format as those public meetings. After an introductory conversation (Part I, 1-32), "Bob" and "Greg" take turns asking each other questions and offering their responses. These questions include such matters as the LDS claim to be the "only true church," what is an evangelical, their views on grace and works, and the nature of God and man (Part II, 33-60). The longest part of the book is a selection from the authors' answers to questions from their audiences on their view of Scripture, evidences for the Book of Mormon, the Trinity, baptism for the dead, whether Mormons believe

in "a different Jesus," and the like (Part III, 61-124). After a brief conclusion, Millet offers an appendix explaining why LDS theology is often difficult to pin down (131-48), while Johnson offers a lengthy appendix defending his advocacy of a "missional," relational approach to Mormons in place of a "confrontational," counter-cult apologetic approach (149-80). The book concludes with 25 "Guiding Principles of Constructive Conversation" (181-85).

In theory, *Bridging the Divide* is an attempt to help evangelicals and Mormons understand each other better. In fact, the book focuses more on evangelicals viewing Mormons more sympathetically. In both Parts II and III, Millet does the majority of the talking, and much of what Johnson says is concessive: evangelicals need to be nicer to Mormons (70-71, 107-8, 124), evangelicals have often misunderstood Mormons (66), evangelicals can learn something from Mormon practices (100-101), evangelicals have some unfortunate divisions (45, 86-89), some evangelicals exalt faith and grace at the expense of works (47-49), and so forth. Again, Millet rarely makes such concessive statements (see 77, 87, 127 for the closest Millet comes to making such statements).

Especially in this book, Millet shows himself a master at glossing over difficulties with LDS beliefs and practices. Consider, for example, the criticism that Mormonism encourages its members to base their faith on subjective experience by telling them to pray for a revelation confirming that the Book of Mormon is true. Millet responds by asking how some poor little old evangelical woman in Montgomery, Alabama, can ever have faith in Christ, if such faith must be based on knowledge of objective evidences. (The stereotypical assumptions here are arguably offensive, but let that pass.) Millet thus leads Johnson to agree that the woman could know the Bible is true by the witness of the Spirit—leading Millet to conclude that they believe the same thing about faith and reason after all (25-27). Millet's argument here nicely avoids the real issue, namely, that Mormons routinely appeal to their "testimony" to deflect reasoned objections to the Book of Mormon (or to any other aspect of Mormonism).

There is no denying that evangelicals need to do a better job of

speaking in love to Mormons, and need to avoid some of the caricatures and virulent rhetoric that LDS associate with all "anti-Mormons." Johnson has some good things to say on this point. Nevertheless, we also need to develop a strong, cogent apologetic response to Mormonism, especially in view of the success LDS scholars are having in getting their perspective heard. We do not need to choose between "relational" and "confrontational" approaches, or between "missional" and "apologetic" models—nor should we. Rather, we need to be both tough-minded and tender-hearted, both relational and forthright, speaking the truth in love. And if those of us who are apologists have problems with the way that McDermott or Johnson or others have engaged LDS scholarship, it is incumbent on us to do better.

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A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth -Claims to the Worldview Test

Kenneth Richard Samples. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007.
ISBN 978-0-8010-6822-5; 300 PAGES, PAPERBACK, $17.99.

This book is an introductory-level exercise in what may be called cumulative case apologetics. For the scope and depth of its coverage it may be the best available apologetics text representing that methodology. Cumulative case apologetics essentially tests worldviews abductively, comparing and contrasting their respective merits in light of various epistemological and aesthetic criteria. In this book, Kenneth Samples argues that the Christian worldview passes these tests better than any of its competitors.

The book is divided into three parts. In part one, Samples addresses various prolegomena to his task. Chapter one defines the concept of a worldview. It is "a cluster of beliefs a person holds about the

most significant issues of life," or, following Ronald Nash, "a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality" (p. 20). In accordance with the typical discussions of worldviews, Samples states that each worldview contains beliefs about: theology, metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, humanity, and history. (I think this list is adequate, but I would have included beliefs about plight and solution.)

Chapter two discusses the criteria by which worldviews may be tested. Here Samples offers a list that is somewhat more extensive than is found in other texts. Whereas other books list five or six test criteria, Samples gives these nine: (1) Coherence: Is the worldview logically consistent? (2) Balance: Is the worldview simpler (though adequately explanatory) than alternatives? (3) Explanatory Power and Scope: Does the worldview adequately explain a wide range of facts? (4) Correspondence: Does the worldview correspond to well-established empirical and experiential facts? (5) Verification: Is the worldview empirically testable (verifiable or falsifiable)? (6) Pragmatic: Is the worldview practically livable? (7) Existential: Does the worldview address the internal needs of humanity? (8) Cumulative: Is the worldview supported by multiple, converging lines of evidence? and (9) Competitive Competence: Can the worldview successfully compete in the marketplace of ideas? I think that Samples's expanded list is helpful, though it seems to me that (4) is redundant with (3), and (8) simply makes a methodological point about the use of the other criteria.

Chapters three and four constitute a primer on logic, the former discussing the laws of logic and the various forms of reasoning (deductive, inductive, abductive), while the latter explains several common informal fallacies. Though these chapters are well-written and will prove informative to readers, they seem largely unnecessary to the author's purpose for the book. Given the abductive nature of cumulative case apologetics, it would have served Samples better to eliminate the chapter on informal fallacies altogether, abbreviate the discussions of deduction and induction, and give a much-expanded treatment of abduction (as it is, he spends less than one page on abduction).

Part two contains seven chapters exploring the nature of the Christian worldview. Chapter five presents a Christian perspective on truth, knowledge and history, providing critiques of relativism and skepticism, and grounding our ability to know the existence and nature of God. Samples also briefly discusses the noetic effects of sin, and argues for the compatibility of faith and reason. Concerning history, Samples underscores the Christian belief in God's sovereignty over the course of history, and surveys the stages of redemptive history. The material in this chapter is presented clearly and persuasively. Yet, Samples does commit a serious gaff in his discussion of epistemology when he describes *modest* foundationalism as affirming that properly basic beliefs are "either self-evident. . ., logically necessary, inescapable, or incorrigible. . ." (p. 81). What he describes here is not modest, but *classical* foundationalism—a view that most philosophers consider untenable.

The rest of part two could be considered a mini-systematic theology. In chapter six, Samples outlines the main contours of Christian belief via a commentary on the Apostles' Creed. At various points he helpfully intersperses, in a catechetical format, remarks on the worldview implications of Christian doctrines. Chapters seven through ten subsequently treat the Christian belief in the inspiration, authority, and canonicity of Scripture (including a detailed defense of *Sola Scriptura*); the nature of the triune God; the incarnation of Jesus; the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit; creation and providence (with brief discussions of the kalam cosmological argument and God's permission of evil); the creation of man in God's image; man's fall and original sin; as well as man's significance and meaning in the world. Samples does an excellent job in these chapters explaining and clarifying important Christian beliefs. Any person who is not already familiar with Christian theology would greatly benefit from reading them. As a work of apologetics, though, I wonder if these chapters could have been shortened or condensed somewhat to allow room for other things that are not treated in such depth (see below).

Part two wraps up with a chapter on Christian morality. Samples defends the dependence of morality on God, responds briefly to the

Euthyphro Dilemma, outlines the unacceptable implications of moral relativism, and explains that God alone can endow his creatures with meaning and significance.

In part three, Samples subjects several worldviews to the tests elaborated on in part one. Naturalism, though simpler than theism, fails the test of coherence. Samples provides brief discussions of the argument from reason and Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism to show that naturalism is self-defeating. Further, naturalism cannot adequately explain important phenomena such as the origin of the universe, the existence of moral and aesthetic values, and consciousness. Lastly, naturalism fails the existential test because it cannot provide an objective basis for human meaning and significance, or a hope for life after death, or ultimate justice.

Postmodernism also fails the test of coherence in that its central claims—that there are no objectively true metanarratives, that there can be no knowledge of reality, and that all truth-claims are a matter of perspective—are self-defeating. It also proves unlivable, at least in its literary expression (deconstructionism), because not even postmodernists can live as if meaning does not reside with authorial intent. Postmodernism also provides no basis for objective morality or human meaning, thus failing the existential test. It further fails the competition test because, given its relativistic stance, it offers no answers to any of life's ultimate questions, unlike other worldviews which at least attempt to do so.

Samples argues that pantheistic monism also fails the test of coherence for several reasons, most of which are standard fare among Christian apologists. For example, its identification of atman (self) and Brahman (God) is ultimately self-defeating as is its distinction between illusion and reality and its belief in reincarnation. Moreover, pantheism cannot explain the origin of personhood and personal consciousness, failing the test of explanatory power. Samples also argues that pantheism fails the correspondence test because its assertion that people suffer "metaphysical amnesia" and that the world is an illusion are counterintuitive and unexplainable. In addition, pantheism fails the pragmatic and existential tests for reasons similar to those of other worldviews.

Ultimately, it does not "offer individuals a viable reason to live and die" (p. 244).

Perhaps unique to a book of this type, Samples offers an evaluation of Islam. Because Islam is a theistic religion it does not suffer from some of the same problems facing the other non-Christian worldviews. Nonetheless, Samples contends that it does fail the coherence test regarding its view of the alleged revelation of God in the Qur'an. It is unclear, however, exactly what Samples thinks the incoherence is. As he initially explains it, "On the one hand, Islamic theology teaches that Islam is part of and dependent upon the truth of the biblical revelation. . . .But on the other hand, Islamic theology considers biblical revelation inadequate and untrustworthy" (p. 257). He goes on to explain how the Muslims defend these apparently conflicting claims by arguing that the Bible has been corrupted in transmission. Of course, once one adds this latter assertion, there would be no incoherence in the Muslim view. And challenging the Muslim claim that the biblical text is corrupt is a factual matter, not strictly a matter of coherence. I am not sure if this is what Samples intended, but it seems that a clearer candidate for a possible incoherency is to argue that Islam (1) affirms the truth of the biblical revelation and (2) contradicts the biblical revelation in some of its central tenets as contained in the Qur'an. The Muslim claim that the Bible is corrupted can then be seen as an attempt to cover up this inconsistency. In fairness, this may have been what Samples intended to argue, but it is not clear from what he writes. Nevertheless, Samples does provide a lucid defense of the Bible's textual reliability and appropriately challenges the reliable transmission of the Qur'an. He also challenges Islam on the basis of the existential and explanatory power tests.

The book's last chapter puts the Christian worldview to the test. Samples walks through the nine worldview criteria that he outlined in part one and attempts to demonstrate that Christianity succeeds on all counts. Though I agree with his conclusions in each case, I found this to be the most disappointing part of the book. The book's subtitle is "Putting Christian truth-claims to the worldview test," which suggests

that this is the major focus of the book. Yet Samples devotes all of 12 pages to the task. And there are important challenges to Christianity vis-à-vis several of the nine criteria that Samples does not, in my opinion, address adequately, and some he does not address at all. For example, he defends the coherence of the trinity by remarking, rightly, that Christians do not claim that "God is one and not one and that God is three and not three" (p.267). And he makes the appropriate distinction between one substance and three persons. Yet, the challenge to the trinity posed by critics of Christianity is more complex than this and seeks to undermine the very distinction that Samples relies on to establish coherence. Though this is an introductory text, it would serve even the novice reader to understand the challenges to the trinity a bit more deeply and be aware of the resources that some contemporary Christian philosophers (e.g., J.P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, and Michael Rea) have provided in addressing this problem. Similar concerns beset his discussions of the incarnation and the problem of evil. (In fairness, Samples does cite more thorough treatments of these issues in the endnotes.) Also, Samples completely ignores some of the most common challenges to the coherence of theism, namely, attacks on the coherence of the divine attributes (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence). Moreover, his section on the correspondence test would have been improved much by a discussion of the challenge of macro-evolution, and his treatment of the resurrection was also undeservedly short. My suggestion for future editions of the book would be to significantly reduce part two and significantly expand this last chapter. This would make the book a much more usable textbook and give unbelievers who read it a more robust defense of Christianity.

Despite its shortcomings, I think *A World of Difference* is a welcome addition to contemporary apologetic literature. Not only is the presentation clear and engaging, but as indicated earlier, Samples gives us probably the most thorough single-volume defense of the faith from the cumulative case school. Moreover, he includes some useful pedagogical tools that make the book practical such as study questions, informative sidebars, and an account of his own experience with suffering that runs

throughout each chapter and allows him to illustrate many of his points in a poignant way.

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At the Origins of Modern Atheism

Michael J. Buckley, S.J. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
ISBN-13: 978-0300-0489-71; 460 PAGES; PAPERBACK, $40.00.

Michael Buckley is a Jesuit professor of theology who has held academic positions at Notre Dame, Boston College, and now at Santa Clara University. His twenty-year-old book, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, is held to be a contemporary classic in some (rather restricted) circles, but it has gotten very little attention in mainstream apologetics conversations. It is my claim in this review that the "Buckley Thesis" needs to be more widely engaged by apologists for the Christian faith today.

Buckley's thesis is that the theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries treated atheism as if it were a philosophical problem rather than a religious one, and in so doing denied the relevance of the person of Jesus Christ in answering skeptics and atheists of the time. Instead, they tried to defend an idea—the "god of the philosophers" as it has come to be known—rather than the Christian Trinity. This led to deism and ultimately to the atheism that characterized much of the French intelligentsia of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and continues to dominate academia today.

> The remarkable thing is not that d'Holbach and Diderot found theologians and philosophers with whom to battle, but that the theologians themselves had become philosophers in order to enter the match. The extraordinary note about this emergence of the denial of the Christian god which Nietzsche celebrated is that

> Christianity as such, more specifically the person and teaching of Jesus or the experience and history of the Christian Church, did not enter the discussion. The absence of any consideration of Christology is so pervasive throughout serious discussion that it becomes taken for granted, yet it is so stunningly curious that it raises a fundamental issue of the modes of thought: How did the issue of Christianity vs. atheism become purely philosophical? To paraphrase Tertullian: How was it that the only arms to defend the temple were to be found in the Stoa? (33).

This lengthy quotation is representative of Buckley's writing. At times the language reaches the kind of rhetorical flourish associated with the superficial writings of the New Atheism, but there is careful discussion and documentation throughout Buckley's substantial book.

The principal figures of the sixteenth century to whom Buckley points as beginning the slide toward atheism are Lessius and Mersenne. Leonard Lessius was a Jesuit theologian teaching at the University of Louvain in Belgium. In 1613 he wrote a treatise called, "Against the Atheists and Politicians of These Days." Profession of atheism was a crime in Europe at the time, so while Lessius was sure there were people professing it in secret, there were not public declarations of atheism that he was confronting. Instead, he turned to attack the thought of public atheists from the pre-Christian era like Democritus and Lucretius. "Atheism is taken as if it were simply a matter of retrieving the philosophical positions of the past, rather than a profound and current rejection of the meaning and reality of Jesus Christ" (47). The centrality of Christ to understanding Christian theism is relegated to a non-essential and even overly restrictive component of theism. Natural theology, for Lessius, is divorced from metaphysics (to which Christology might have something to contribute) and instead looks to the new scientific developments. Natural theology becomes just, "an effort to provide a preamble to Christian convictions about god which does not include Christ" (55).

Similarly, Buckley charges that the better-known and well-connected Father Mersenne responded to atheism philosophically rather than religiously. In 1624 he published *The Impiety of the Deists, Atheists, and Libertines of these Times*. He did round up some contemporary or relatively recent figures to attack: the skeptic Pierre Charron, the determinist Geronimo Cardano, and the rationalist Giordano Bruno. None of these may have been atheists, strictly speaking; but their ideas of God hearken back again to pre-Christian times, corresponding to the skeptical academy of Careades, the peripatetic school of Aristotle, and the rationalism of the Stoics. These were species of atheism or forerunners of atheism, according to Mersenne, and he engaged them philosophically, but not religiously.

Buckley summarizes the situation: "In the absence of a rich and comprehensive Christology and a pneumatology of religious experience Christianity entered into the defense of the existence of the Christian god without appeal to anything Christian" (67).

To their defense, Buckley notes two factors that led to the methodology these theologians adopted. First, skeptics like Charron were vehemently claiming that certainty could not be achieved through philosophical reasoning, and good Catholics could only be so through a kind of fideistic reliance upon revelation. To Lessius and Mersenne, then, to respond to the threat of atheism with revealed truth would seem to side with the skeptics against reason. Secondly, Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* had become the principal text (replacing Lombard's *Sentences*) in university study; it elaborates a doctrine of God which is philosophical, but was set in a thoroughly theological context. Buckley maintains, however, that it encouraged a habit of mind such that when challenges were made from outside of the context Aquinas had in mind, the natural response to them was philosophical (66).

The rest of the book continues down the road that was begun with Lessius and Mersenne. Descartes would write in the dedication of his *Meditations* that he had always been of the opinion that the question of the existence of God should be demonstrated by philosophy rather than theology. And for Newton, the existence of God was a conclusion

demanded by his system of mechanics. In both of these instances, the "god" in question bears less and less resemblance to the Trinitarian God of Christian confession. And so the story would go until the only theology countenanced was natural theology, and natural theology became just a species of natural philosophy. "Theology gives way to Cartesianism, which gives way to Newtonian mechanics. The great argument, the only evidence for theism, is design, and experimental physics reveals that design" (202). Science dictated what kind of "god" was needed to make the system work—until LaPlace would famously quip, "I have no need of that hypothesis."

Buckley's book raises very important questions about the relationship of theology and philosophy in the apologetic enterprise. The issue here is not to find some sort of strict line of demarcation between the two disciplines and to stay away from all things philosophical. Neither is there the claim that there are no good philosophical responses that are relevant for Christian apologetics. Rather, Buckley wants us to see that the rejection of Christian theism is first and foremost a religious problem—not a philosophical problem. This is what the Christian theologians of the sixteenth century failed to appreciate.

Much of Christian apologetics today is the heir to the modern project of responding to atheists and agnostics with philosophical argumentation. There is no doubt at all that this has been successful in some quarters. It would behoove us, though, to bear in mind the story that Buckley tells and ask, "What is the place of revelation in our apologetic?" Is theism without revelation necessarily a non-Christian theism? What does it mean to answer challenges to theism by presenting the person of Jesus Christ? We may not always come to the same answers that Buckley does, but his questions are well worth consideration and careful reflection—perhaps more so today than when they were first penned.

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