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WORSHIPWORTHINESS AND THE MORMON CONCEPT OF GOD

A. A. Howsepian argued in a recent article in this publication that Mormons are atheists.[1] It is the purpose of this article to respond to Howsepian by showing: (1) Howsepian has oversimplified Mormon thought in general and the views of individual Mormons in particular to the point of distortion and caricature; (2) Howsepian has not accurately assessed the options available to Mormons; (3) a central argument in Howsepian's approach falls victim to the basic logical fallacy of composition; and (4) the Anselmian criterion that any being that can count as God necessarily must be the greatest conceivable being (the 'GCB criterion') should either be modified or understood in a sense that allows for potentiality within God; and (5) Mormon beliefs can satisfy the GCB criterion if modified to provide that the GCB must be unsurpassable by any being distinct from God but may be self-surpassable in some respects.

If I have properly understood him, Howsepian's argument takes the following form:

(1) Mormons believe that there are numerous gods 'above' the God whom Mormons worship and an infinite number of individual gods 'above' any given god.
(2) It is logically necessary that for any being to count as a God that that being must be the greatest conceivable being ('GCB').
(3) Because: (a) there is always a greater individual divine person for any given divine person in Mormon thought, no given divine being is the GCB; or (b) any being that could possibly worship another being cannot be a GCB, therefore, no entity countenanced as being God by Mormons qualifies as a genuine deity.

Howsepian thus concludes that the Mormon view of 'God(s)' amounts to the denial that a being worthy of worship exists. In what follows I will demonstrate that premise (1) is not true for all Mormons and certainly not for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the 'LDS Church'). I will also show that Howsepian's argument commits the fallacy of composition and erroneously excludes the prevailing doctrine of God among modern Mormons even if Anselm's criteria of the GCB is accepted. Finally, I will show that the interpretation of Anselm's criterion implied in Howsepian's

[1] 'Are Mormons Theists?', *Religious Studies* 32 (1996), 357–70.

argument is hostile to the Christian view of a suffering God and suggest an alternative which is congenial to Christian beliefs in general and the Mormon views of God in particular.

What options are available to Mormons? Howsepian reviews three 'options' which he suggests are the only ones open to Mormons, and rejects each of them on the ground that each option leaves Mormons saddled with a supposed god that is not a GCB. Taking each of the supposed gods individually won't work because each of these beings is 'eternally progressing', and therefore *a fortiori* could be greater (p. 364). He also rejects the notion that the Mormon view of a necessarily existent intelligence could be a GCB because such a nonpersonal material element cannot be considered 'omnibenevolent or omnipotent or omniscient or in any other sense maximally or unsurpassably great...' (*idem*). Finally, he considers the possibility 'whether the entire collection of entities in a Mormon ontology when considered together constitutes a genuine God?'. However, he rejects this last possibility on the grounds that since 'any given subset of Mormon gods' could be 'greater' due to the Mormon doctrine of 'eternal progression', therefore 'the entire collection of entities purported to exist within a Mormon ontology also could not be a greatest possible being and hence could not constitute a genuine God' (*idem*).[2]

However, Howsepian's argument commits the (rather obvious) logical fallacy of composition. It is equivalent to saying that since two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen do not have the properties of water, therefore these three atoms when considered together in a molecular unity cannot have properties of water. But that reasoning is plainly false. The set of individuals does not necessarily have the same properties as the individual members of the set or any particular subset of individuals. Few truths are better established in human experience than the fact that the sum can be greater than the parts. Thus, Howsepian's assertion that a unity of divine persons cannot have different or greater properties than the individual divine persons considered separately is plainly wrong. Moreover, the best demonstration of the fallacy of Howsepian's reasoning is the doctrine of the Social Trinity.

The task of assessing Mormon beliefs demands a more careful assessment of the way the word *God* functions in Mormon thought than Howsepian has allowed. Howsepian uses *God* throughout his article as if it were synonymous with *divine person*. Because there are many divine persons whom Mormons call gods, he concludes that Mormons appear to believe in many gods. However,

[2] Howsepian presents a fourth option, asserting that Mormons may appear to believe in God(s), but in reality do not believe in any God(s) because 'in the case of Mormonism, such a discrepancy between appearance and reality might have become manifest... because Mormons have been intentionally deceptive about what their actual theological beliefs are...' (*idem*, p. 361). Such a view appears to me to express an obvious religious prejudice against Mormons and as such is a reprehensible *ad hominem*. Howsepian does not support this slander in any way, he merely throws it out gratuitously as a live possibility and then refuses to pursue it. What is the purpose of such an allegation aside from besmirching the collective character of a rather decent group of people?

Howsepian simply ignores Mormonism's well established doctrine of the unity and oneness of the Godhead and of all divine persons. Howsepian's failure to address the Mormon view of divine unity is puzzling not only because it is prominent and constant in the history of Mormon thought and throughout Mormon scriptures, but provides an option that directly addresses the issues raised by him. Howsepian's failure to distinguish between such uses of *God* would make a mess not only of Mormon thought, but of Christian thought in general. Consider the havoc that Howsepian's reasoning combined with the GCB criterion wreaks upon the Christian view that Christ is God:

(1) Christians believe that: (a) Christ is God; (b) Christ issues from the Father; (c) the Father is greater than Christ; and (d) Christ properly worshipped the Father.
(2) Christians also believe that the Father is God and that the Father is not identical with Christ.
(3) It is logically necessary that to count as being a God that that being must be the GCB.
(4) Because: (a) the Father is greater than Christ, therefore Christ is not the GCB; or (b) any being that could worship another being cannot be a GCB; or (c) any being that depends upon another for its existence cannot be the GCB, therefore, the Christ worshipped by Christians does not qualify as a genuine God.

This argument is based on criteria of adequate beliefs regarding what type of being may be considered 'God' rather than mere doxastic attitudes. As such, the criteria themselves are open to question. Nevertheless, the point of the argument is not to show that Christ cannot be 'God' in some appropriate sense of the word, but to show the resources available to Christians to avoid the argument – precisely because Mormons have the same resources to solve the problems raised by Howsepian's argument.

First, although each of the assertions contained in premise (1) is arguably scriptural, and therefore something many Christians would feel bound to affirm, there is an equivocation in the use of *God* between premises (1) and (4). When (Anselmian) Christians refer to God as the GCB, they are not referring to any of the divine persons 'in' the Godhead or Trinity, but to the Trinity itself. The three divine persons constitute one God, and this one God is taken by Anselmians to be the GCB. Thus, Christ *simpliciter* is not God if to be called a God one must also be the GCB. Thus Christ *simpliciter* is not God in traditional thought; but Christ *qua* Second Person of the Trinity is God, or at least 'in' God as a divine person. However, it is still appropriate to refer to the Father as God, Jesus Christ the Son as God and to the Holy Ghost as God.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which there are three Gods even in

traditional Christian thought – in the sense that the divine persons are appropriately referred to *simpliciter* as God.[3] For example, Jesus clearly worshipped the Father as God. The apostle Thomas worshipped the resurrected Christ as God. The Gospel of John refers to the Father as 'the' God and to the Word as a God 'next to' the Father, but perhaps the Son is 'God' in a different sense than the Father.[4] When the individual divine persons are referred to as God or gods, the word functions logically much differently than when all three are referred to as one God. For example, it is appropriate to say that God the Son became a mortal man in Jesus Christ and that Christ died and resurrected, but it is not appropriate to say that the Trinity became mortal, died and resurrected. Moreover, even though the three divine persons are one God, there is a distinction that separates them as divine persons (defined variously by different thinkers in the history of Christian thought). But all Christians agree on at least one point: The Son is not identical to the Father. The Son has properties that the Father does not have. In traditional thought, Jesus is identified with the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, in a way that the Father and Holy Ghost are not (though exactly what that unique relation is supposed to be in creedal Christianity has always escaped me). Thus, Howsepian's argument that the collection (or unity) of divine persons must have the same properties as the divine persons considered individually is simply wrong.

Similarly, sometimes Mormons use the word *God* to refer to the one 'great, matchless, governing, and supreme power over all things, by whom all things were created and made, whether visible or invisible, whether in heaven, or in the earth, under the earth, or throughout the immensity of space',[5] and sometimes to refer to various divine persons or agents taken individually. The word *God* has many different uses and meanings within the biblical record, and Mormons have adopted these meanings. Howsepian seems to have assumed that all uses of *God* in Mormon thought are univocal – all referring to separate divine persons – but that is not the case. The Mormon

[3] See, e.g. David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (LaSalle: Open Court Publishing, 1985); Cornelius Plantinga, 'The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity', *Calvin Theological Journal* **23** (1) (April 1988), 43. I am not of course suggesting that either Brown or Plantinga would accept the Mormon view of threeness/oneness. For the historical tension regarding the issue, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

[4] Raymond Brown observes: 'The Prologue's "the Word was God" offers a difficulty because there is no article before *theos*. Does this imply that "God" means less when predicated of the Word than it does when used as a name for the Father? Once again the reader must divest himself of post-Nicene understanding of the vocabulary used... [P]erhaps there is some justification for seeing [in John 1:1] the use of the anathorous *theos* [for the Word] something more humble than the use of *ho theos* for the Father. It is Jesus Christ who says in John 14:28, "The Father is greater than I", and who in 17:3 speaks of the Father as "the only true God". The recognition of a humble position for Jesus Christ in relation to the Father is not strange for early Christian hymns, for Philippians 2:6–7 speaks of Jesus as emptying himself and not clinging to the form of God.' *The Anchor Bible Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 24–5.

[5] *Lectures on Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 1835 edn, vol. 1. The *Lectures on Faith* were in part authored and the publication overseen by Joseph Smith. The *Lectures* were first published in 1835 and come as close as anything Mormonism has ever developed to a creedal statement.

uses of *God* are at least as varied as those found in the biblical record. Indeed, early Mormons relied upon the Old Testament references to 'gods' to help define their understanding. For example, Mormons have adopted the Old Testament usage to refer to members of the divine council presided over by the head God as gods.[6] Mormons recognize that the members of the divine council are not gods in the sense of being the one controlling power in the universe, or even in the sense that the Father is God. Thus, the uses of *God* are equivocal in Mormon works and thought.

Nevertheless, the primary uses of the word *God* among Mormons can be reduced to three: First, each of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost are referred to as three distinct divine personages within the Godhead and *in this sense* as three Gods. The Father sometimes is called 'Elohim' by Mormons as a matter of convenience or policy to indicate a distinction of individual personality; however, Mormons recognize that such nomenclature is neither biblical nor consistently embodied in Mormon scripture. The Father possesses a glorified body. Mormons believe that, just as for the Son, there was a period during which the Father experienced something like mortality and became embodied. However, Mormons do not believe that the Father could not have been primordially divine prior to a mortal sojourn, for they also affirm that the Son was very God before he took upon himself a mortal body. The Son also possesses a glorified (i.e. resurrected) body. The Son is called Jehovah by Mormons for the same reasons and with considerable biblical support, though they recognize that such a name is not consistent either in the biblical or in Mormon scriptures. The Holy Ghost is a distinct personage of spirit who has not yet experienced a mortality like either the Father or the Son.

Second, the three divine persons are consistently referred to throughout the history of Mormon thought as the Godhead and *in this sense* as one God. Moreover, this one God is the Supreme Being. The Book of Mormon is replete with assertions that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are (is) one God.[7] The collection of revelations (received primarily by Joseph Smith) accepted by Mormons as scripture, the *Doctrine & Covenants*, also affirms consistently that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one God, the governing power of the entire universe.[8] Indeed, the earliest declaration of Church beliefs asserted that 'the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one God, infinite and eternal, without end' (*D&C* 20:28). The 1835 *Lectures on Faith* were drafted as a theological statement of the LDS Church's beliefs. They refer to the Father,

[6] For example, in 1839 Joseph Smith received a revelation which declared: 'According to that which was ordained in the midst of the Council of the Eternal God of all gods before this world was...', *Doctrine & Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President, 1989), 121:32 (hereafter '*D&C*'). This revelation clearly states that the Father is the God of all gods. Similarly, the Book of Abraham, produced by Joseph Smith between 1836 and 1842, refers to the divine council of gods presided over by the Father as the Head God. See Book of Abraham 3:19.

[7] 1 Nephi 17:35; Mosiah 15:2–5; Alma 11:44; 3 Ne. 11:27, 36; Mormon 7:7.

[8] *D&C* 35:2; 50:43; 93:3.

Son and Holy Ghost as the one God who is the Supreme Being, the great, matchless governor of the entire universe (i.e. all that exists in any way).[9] Although the divine persons are located in a particular space-time in virtue of their corporeal existence, the spirit proceeds from their united presence 'to fill the immensity of space'.[10] The spirit of the Godhead 'is in all things, ... giveth life to all things, ... is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God ... '.[11] Although each of the divine persons is distinct and a person in the fullest sense of the word, when united as one in love and unity they live on a level of existence that transcends but includes their individuality. What one divine person knows, all know as one. What one divine person wills, they all will as one. What one divine person does, all do as one. There is a single divine act for any state of affairs brought about by the one God.[12] Thus, there are three divine persons but only one Lord of all.

Third, Mormons believe in human *apotheosis*. The notion that humans may be divinized through Christ has a long history in Christian thought. Mormons believe that humans have been lovingly invited into the unity shared by the divine persons based upon Jesus's statement in John 17:20–21.[13] When persons enter into the divine relationship of complete unity, Mormons believe that they become gods *in the sense that* they share fully in God's glory, power and knowledge, having one will and mind. However, we must be careful to point out that humans can become 'gods' only in a subordinate sense. The divinity of humans is derivative from the relationship of love and unity with the members of the Godhead. The source or font of that glory and divinity is God the Father.

If the individual members of the Godhead do not have all the same properties as the Godhead as a whole, then what is the relation of the distinct divine persons to the Godhead in Mormon thought? Well, if I understand Mormon thought correctly, *Godhood* refers to the immutable set of properties necessary to be divine.[14] There is only one Godhood or divine essence *in this*

[9] The *Lectures on Faith* were drafted by Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, Parley P. Pratt, and Oliver Cowdery as a formal statement of the Church's theology of the adequate object of faith. They were promulgated together with the scriptures of the LDS Church until 1921. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate, Jr., *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1990), pp. 2–10. [10] *D&C* 88:12. [11] *D&C* 88:11–13.

[12] T. W. Bartel discussed how it is possible for three distinct divine persons to act as one Lord in 'Could There Be More Than One Lord', *Faith and Philosophy* **11** (3) (July 1994), 357–378.

[13] John 17 states: 'neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe in me through their words; that they may be one; as thou art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.' *The Lectures on Faith*, v, 3 interpret this scripture as follows: 'As the Son partakes of the fullness of the Father, through the Spirit, so the saints are, by the same Spirit, to be partakers of the same fullness, to enjoy the same glory; for as the Father and the Son are one, so, in like manner, the saints are to be one in them. Through the love of the Father, the mediation of Jesus Christ and gift of the Holy Spirit, they are to be heirs with God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.' I have treated the Mormon view of *apotheosis* at some length in Blake T. Ostler, 'The Concept of Grace in Mormon Thought', *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* **24** (1) (Spring 1991).

[14] My hesitation here is that discourse regarding a set of great making properties adopts philosophical categories that are simply absent in Mormon discourse regarding God. Mormon discourse centres on the categories of interpersonal encounter and self-revealing personality rather than such abstract universals.

sense. Each of the distinct divine persons shares this one set of great-making properties which are severally necessary and jointly sufficient for their possessor to possess divinity. Each of the divine persons has this 'essence' though none is simply identical with it. The divine persons possess these properties when associated as one in the relationship of divine love with God the Father. However, it must be understood that the relationship is contingent and not necessary. Love is a voluntary attitude freely chosen. Thus, the relation of the individual divine persons to one another is contingent and not necessary. As such, Mormons believe that the scriptures contain a view of God at odds with some traditional views motivated by Greek metaphysics which require that God's being is necessary in every respect. However, Mormons have rejected ideas of God premised on Greek metaphysics. The divine persons can kenotically empty themselves of the divine glory by separating themselves from the divine unity of the Godhead. In fact, Mormons believe that the condescension or incarnation consists precisely in Christ's (and the Father's) emptying himself of the divine glory and becoming mortal by 'setting aside' the unity of the Godhead to become a separated individual. However, there always has been and always will be a God in the sense of divine persons united as one. The divine persons obviously can so plan that there will always be at least two joined as one to govern the universe.

Is the Mormon God a GCB? It may still be argued that God, conceived as one God in Mormon thought, cannot be the GCB because such a 'God' eternally progresses in some respects. Although Mormons are and always have been divided on these issues, some Mormon leaders have asserted that 'God' progresses in knowledge, power and dominion eternally.[15] It is unclear, however, whether they are referring to progression of individual divine persons or the Godhead as a whole. I am not aware of any Mormon scripture or even a statement by any Mormon which asserts that the Godhead or God-as-divine-persons-in-relationship is involved in eternal progression. All such discussions appear to address only the progression of the individual divine persons. Thus, Howsepian's argument fails because he assumes that if the individual divine persons are involved in eternal progression, then so must be the 'entire collection of entities in Mormon ontology' (p. 364). Once again, such reasoning commits the fallacy of composition.

That said, I believe that it remains the case that if the GCB criterion requires some immutable, absolute, upper limit of perfection in all respects (e.g. the Thomist *actus purus*), then Mormons should clearly reject such a criterion. For example, while Mormons can agree that the set of great-making properties defining Godhood must include maximal power, they would reject the notion that the one God possesses absolutely controlling

[15] See Blake T. Ostler, 'The Mormon Concept of God', *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* **17** (2) (Summer 1984), 64–93 wherein I discuss various statements by LDS Church leaders regarding the respects in which divine persons may be said to progress and respects in which they do not.

power. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what an absolute-upper-limit of power could be. Just as there is no greatest conceivable integer, there does not seem to be a maximum power. Thus, Mormons would deny that such a condition places any real limitation on God because power is necessarily an ever increasing attribute shared among many free beings. Nevertheless, it is impossible that any being have greater power than God as divine-persons-in-relationship. Thus, God could grow in efficacious power to the extent persons freely cooperate to achieve God's plans. Similarly, many Mormons may believe that although omniscience is an essential attribute of God, nevertheless God can grow in knowledge in the sense that he learns what free persons will choose. However, they would reject the view that such growth is a limitation on God's perfection because it is impossible to foreknow free acts.

When construed as an immutable, absolute, upper limit of perfection, the GCB criterion is at odds with the revelation that God is love. Such a god is necessarily self-sufficient or *a se* in a sense that requires metaphysical simplicity, impassibility, immutability, timelessness, and perhaps that God has no real relations to the world. For example, consider a god A who exists *a se* and chooses not to create anything at all. Such a god exists timelessly in perfect, untouched bliss. Compare this god with god B who creates a less than perfect world and chooses to redemptively suffer because the creatures exercise free-will to inflict pain on one another. God B does not have perfect bliss because he lovingly feels the pain of the creatures as his own pain.[16] The tradition regarded god A as 'greater than' god B because suffering is seen as a defect – precisely because such suffering necessarily entails potentiality. Yet such suffering seems to be entailed by God's love for his creations. Such a God cannot be characterized by perfection as an absolute upper limit in all respects. However, the biblical God who suffers *qua* God for the sins of Israel, or the Christian God who empties himself of his divine glory to suffer with, for and because of mortal sin and pain is regarded as greater than such an unmoved god by Mormons. The divine person who undergoes *kenosis* is surely subject to change, temporality and passibility in several respects. Thus, the GCB criterion is unacceptable if interpreted to require a being that cannot have potentiality in any sense.

However, there is a modified version of the criterion that I believe maintains the intuitive appeals the criterion was intended to capture but which does not jettison the God of Israel and Jesus in favour of the god of the philosophers. The appeal of the GCB criterion, it seems to me, lies in its provision that God must be unsurpassable in greatness and can have no rivals for demand upon religious devotion and faith. Certainly, the God of religious

[16] Such a view does not, of course, entail that God's empathetic pain just is the experience of the creatures whose pain he feels. Rather, God experiences that pain as his own experience but within the context of the fullness of the divine life.

faith must be able to save all beings who exercise faith in him. God must have power and knowledge sufficient to deliver those who put their trust in him from the power of all beings that might seek their destruction. God must also be omnibenevolent in the sense that those who place their faith in God can be assured that God is committed in love to their ultimate well-being. Further, God must be capable of blessing those who trust him with unspeakable glory and happiness. The intuitive thrust of the GCB criterion seems to be based on the needs and requirements of religious faith. Anything more is merely a superfluous philosophical contrivance. But the personal and living God who is the adequate object of worship need not be, indeed cannot be, the absolute upper limit of completely actualized existence implied by Howsepian's interpretation of the GCB criterion. Conceiving perfection as being necessarily unsurpassable by any other being in all relevant respects, but self-surpassing on some respects, permits a more religiously acceptable criterion.

It is important to note that there cannot be a greater being than God *qua* the divine persons united as one Godhead in Mormon thought. God is necessarily unsurpassable by any other being. The divine power and knowledge arise in dependence on and from this relationship of complete unity and love. The divine attributes of governing power over and knowledge of all things cannot be possessed outside of the complete unity which characterizes the relationship between the community of divine persons.[17] Thus, God as a divine community cannot have any rivals. Mormons deny that there are many Lords of the universe, even though there are numerous divine persons. It is the community of divine persons who necessarily agree in one that has ultimate authority and power.[18]

Further, God as a community of persons is the greatest conceivable love. God as a community of divine persons *is* love – the love of the divine persons for one another. Further, this loving relationship has been extended to mere mortals. Thus, God is omnibenevolent. This love gives rise to life and glory on a new level of supreme existence which proceeds from god's presence to fill the immensity of space like light from the sun fills the solar system. Thus, there can be no rivals to God because in this sense God comprehends all reality within the scope of his governing power, knowledge and love. God enjoys life on a level of existence different from mere individuals. Though in Mormon thought the ontological status of the divine persons is not different

[17] C. Stephen Layman explains how power, love, and knowledge can be shared attributes of a community of divine persons in 'Tritheism and Trinity', *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (3) (July 1988), 291–8.

[18] Richard Swinburne explains how three distinct divine persons can agree among themselves to avoid conflicts in 'Could There Be More Than One God?', *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (3) (July 1988), 230–1. Joseph Smith's own view was that the three distinct persons of the Godhead entered into a covenant of love and planned the creation in unity. Moreover, these statements were made during his last sermons, showing that he did not abandon the notion of a single, ruling Godhead in his later theology as some have claimed. See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1980), pp. 366–9.

than that of humans, the level of existence of God is vastly different. His knowledge, compassion and power are supreme. No individual being could consistently know more or have more efficacious power – or even approach the kind of knowledge and power possessed by the Godhead.

It may be argued still that Howsepian could still maintain that Mormons cannot properly worship God the Father, who is not only surpassable, but Mormons believe, Howsepian maintains, that there are actually gods who 'surpass' the Father (in the sense that supposedly they became divine persons earlier in time than God the Father). The response that Howsepian has committed a category mistake with respect to the Godhead will not fully exonerate the Mormon view, because Mormons believe that each of the Father is a God is worthy of worship, the Son is worthy of worship and the Holy Ghost is worthy of worship.

First, Mormons could respond that the Father is worshipped precisely in virtue of his relationship to the community of divine persons. Further, the Son is worthy of worship not as a merely mortal man, but as the one who graciously effected the at-one-ment, or making persons one with him and the Father. The individual divine persons of the Godhead (though not mortals who become one independence on them) are worship-worthy precisely because they so perfectly love others and have the power and knowledge to bring them to their same glory.

Moreover, Howsepian's argument is based upon a view that Mormons are not bound to accept. Howsepian asserts that 'Mormons believe' a view hinted at by Joseph Smith in one uncanonized sermon and adopted and taught by Brigham Young, namely, that (A) *there was a time before God the Father became God through a process of moral development* and (B) *before the Father was God there were other gods who* (Howsepian infers without any support) *the Father worshipped.*

Are Mormons required to accept or believe either or both of (A) and (B)? Decidedly not. Why not? Well, for several reasons. First, neither (A) nor (B) are taught in or even hinted at in any work accepted by Mormons as scripture or in any way binding upon Mormons. Second, there are numerous scriptures accepted by Mormons that expressly deny both (A) and (B).[19] Moreover, Joseph Smith's statement does not expressly state either (A) or (B), though some Mormons have inferred them from his statement. However, in context, Joseph Smith's statement is open to the interpretation that (A*) the Father has been God from all eternity except during a period when he became

[19] For example, The Book of Moses prepared by Joseph Smith between 1830 and 1832 states: 'Behold I am the Lord God Almighty, and endless is my name; for I am without beginning of days or end of years; and is not this endless?', Book of Moses 1:3. The 1830 Declaration of the LDS Church stated: 'By these things we know that there is a God in heaven who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth and all things which are in them', *D&C* 20:17. The Book of Mormons states: 'For I know that God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being; but he is unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity', Moroni 8:18.

mortal like the Son would later become mortal.[20] Further, rather than (B), Joseph Smith can be interpreted to assert that (B*) there are numerous persons who may become united as one in a relationship of complete unity with the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and in this sense can be regarded as 'gods', however, these gods are not either the Head God or the Godhead and therefore are not to be worshipped. Neither Brigham Young nor Joseph Smith ever taught that the Father (or Son or Holy Ghost) worshipped other 'gods'. Third, many of Brigham Young's ideas (including the idea expressly stated by Howsepian to be a Mormon belief, that the God humans should worship is merely the God of this earth), have been expressly rejected by the LDS Church.[21] Finally, not a single work, manual, or publication by the LDS Church in the past fifty years teaches either (A) or (B).

I conclude that Mormons do not teach or believe (A) and/or (B). Because Howsepian's argument must presume (A) or (B), his argument fails.

CONCLUSION

Mormons have several options available to them to fend off the claim that they do not worship at least one adequate object of faith. One of those options is Social Trinitarianism, a particular expression consistent with monotheism. In this entire discussion, it must be remembered that Mormons have not had their council of Nicea or Chalcedon. The Mormon Church is only 185 years old. Mormonism finds itself in the position of the Christian church(es) *c.* 185 A.D. when Justin Martyr first picked up a pen to make sense of Christianity from the perspective of Platonic philosophy. At that time, there were numerous competing ideas of God and the relation between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit circulating among Christian thinkers. These early Christians were no less Christians and certainly not less theists because they explored various ideas of God ranging from subordinationist binitarianism to modalism.

Howsepian finally asserts that Mormons should be excluded from the class of theists because the LDS Church has consciously rejected 'all current theistic forms of religion'.[22] However, this assertion is misleading.[23] Mormons

[20] Joseph Smith merely states that there was a time when the Father became mortal. His controlling text asserts that God the Son, the Mediator, does only what he has seen that 'God the First', the Father has already done. Lyndon Cook and Andrew Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1984), pp. 382–3. Thus, by parity of reason, he concludes that the Father also experienced a mortal period. However, such an example will not support the additional assumption that the Father was *not* divine prior to a mortal experience, for Joseph Smith also clearly affirmed that the Son was fully God prior to his mortality. Elsewhere Joseph Smith asserted in 1840 that: 'I believe that God is eternal. That He had not beginning and can have no end. Eternity means that which is without beginning or end', *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 33.

[21] Arthur A. Bailey, q.v., 'Adam: LDS Sources', in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism* ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992).

[22] pp. 365 and 365 n.22.

[23] Howsepian makes several assertions regarding Mormon thought that are simply irresponsible. For example, he assumes that there is a single, monolithic view of God that has been adopted by thinkers as various as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Moreover, Howsepian's assertion that 'Mormons are

have not rejected all forms of theism; rather, Mormons have rejected the strangle-hold of Hellenistic philosophy on Christian thought embodied in the various creeds. The LDS Church teaches that traditional Christianity took a wrong turn when it replaced the personal God of biblical revelation with the metaphysical absolutes derived from Greek philosophy. Anyone at all familiar with the history and development of traditional Christian thought is aware that Christian theology has imbibed a good deal of Hellenistic philosophy. From the Mormon perspective, the nature of God (if 'nature' is not too Greek a word to use in this context) is revealed by Jesus Christ more fully than any human philosophy or creed can capture. Perhaps out of fear of tarnishing their new revelation with mere human philosophies, the LDS Church has chosen to forego theological councils to review and clarify doctrine and adopt creeds, choosing instead to permit several ideas of God to compete in field of inquiry where admittedly there is not only much that humans do not, but cannot understand about God and gods. But this refusal to adopt Greek metaphysics should not be seen as a denial of theism. In the absence of creeds to guide them, Mormon doctrines are more open-textured in certain respects than more traditional Christians may assume. Admittedly, the Mormon scriptures alone do not determine an exact concept of God. It is left to humans to work out their best understanding of God and gods based upon scripture and statements of the prophets.

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taught that they ought to marry for eternity but that they ought not remain worshipfully faithful to the Godhead for eternity' (p. 370) is false. Howsepian makes this assertion without any support whatsoever and, so far as I know, no one in the entire history of Mormon thought has ever made or implied such an assertion. Further, the assertion is directly contradicted by the Mormon view that 'eternal life' is a godlike mode of existence in eternal unity with the Godhead outlined above. Finally, Howsepian's so-called 'Mormon Principle of the Fidelity of Marriage' bears no relation to Mormon teachings either past or present. One even remotely acquainted with Mormon sources and thought should not make such irresponsible assertions which merely caricature the Mormon faith.