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MONOTHEISM

# Defining the Mormon Doctrine of Deity

RELIGION

What can theological terminology tell us about our own beliefs?

By Van Hale

For centuries, Christians have attempted to codify, clarify, and classify history's many divergent doctrines of God. This process has consisted of answering a number of questions: Who is God? Who is the Son? Who is the Holy Ghost? Who is

Jesus? Who is the Word? Who is the Father? How are they one? How are they distinct? The variety of answers which has been proposed to these seemingly simple questions have led to controversies of a life-or-death magnitude. Christians have not only banished or

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exiled each other over these conflicts (as with Athanasius in the fourth century), but have even executed other believers (as with Michael Servetus in the sixteenth century). In Mormon history disagreement over these doctrines was a major cause of dissension between Joseph Smith and his second counselor William Law. The resulting excommunication and apostasy led to the murder of the Prophet on 27 June 1844. Even today, a major conflict between the LDS church and the fundamentalist Mormon movement concerns the doctrine of deity.

Because an individual's concept of deity historically has been vital to his spiritual (and in many instances temporal) standing, it may be helpful to become familiar with the terms, classes, and categories used in discussing this topic. While analyzing a list of terms may not seem important—after all, it is understanding the doctrine of deity which is important, not the language used to express it—the comparing and contrasting of ideas required for this exercise can result in a fuller, sharper understanding of many of the divergent teachings about the nature of God.

While other Christians have an array of terms to describe their concept of the Almighty, there is no commonly recognized term to define the Mormon doctrine of deity. There are three ways Mormons might wish to solve this problem: Borrow an appropriate term; combine or modify existing terms; or, create new terms. The use of historical Christian terms is probably most useful, since it allows communication with the Christian community.

Of course, there are some problems in attempting to apply these terms to Mormonism. First of all, because of the complexity of ideas and the frequent ambiguity of terms, it is seldom easy to define precisely any one doctrine of deity. Second, doctrines of deity are often broadened, deepened, or in some way changed through continued pondering, debating, or perhaps the mere passing of time. Thus, perfect consistency is not to be expected.

This tendency toward change and development is particularly acute in Mormonism because of its denial that God's revelation of himself reached its fulness at the beginning of the Christian era. Mormonism is *not* simply looking back trying to comprehend a completed revelation; it is actively seeking further insight through current and future revelation. There is no better example of this in Mormonism than Joseph Smith himself whose doctrine of God clearly passed through stages of development—development which he himself acknowledged. An 1831 revelation for the elders of the Church reads, "Ye are little children and ye cannot bear all things now" (D&C 50:40), and also that "revelation upon revelation . . . knowledge upon knowledge" were to be expected by those who asked (D&C 42:61). The following year, another

revelation promised that "the day shall come when you shall comprehend even God" (D&C 88:49, emphasis added). In a letter to the Church in 1838, Joseph Smith pointed to "a time to come in which nothing shall be withheld, whether there be one God or many gods, they shall be manifest (D&C 121:28, emphasis added). And in 1844 he indicated that it was while working on the Book of Abraham (no earlier than 1835) that he had learned "that God, the Father of Jesus Christ, had a Father . . . and that He had a Father also" (*History of the Church*, 6:476). This principle of developing insight through continual revelation makes the defining of doctrine precarious and demonstrates the need for several words to define doctrine at its various stages of development.

The terms describing different theological positions can be organized into three groups of questions: (1) In Mormon doctrine how many gods are there? Specifically, is Mormon doctrine monotheistic, polytheistic, tritheistic, or henotheistic? (2) What is the Mormon concept of the Godhead? That is, is it unitarian, binitarian, or trinitarian? (3) What is the Mormon doctrine of the oneness of the Godhead? Is it monarchian, modalistic, homoousion, or homoiousion?

#### MONOTHEISM

Is Mormon doctrine monotheistic? Etymologically, *monotheism* means, of course, "one god." But since the term *one god* is subject to some interpretation, many differences exist. One attempt to define Mormonism as monotheistic is that of Bruce R. McConkie, who states in *Mormon Doctrine* that monotheism, when properly interpreted, means "that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—each of whom is a separate and distinct godly personage—are one God, meaning one Godhead" (p. 463). This, however, is redefining monotheism and does not account for the fact that Mormonism teaches the existence of gods who are not the Father, Son, or Holy Ghost. Such a redefinition would only confuse or mislead those who understand the term as it is commonly used, that is, to refer to the belief in one lone supreme personal being without superiors, equals, or even any others of the same nature. The value of a term is destroyed if it must be redefined in order to use it.

Another way to define Mormonism as monotheistic is that of Orson Pratt and B. H. Roberts, who believed in an impersonal power or attributes which is the "Divine Nature" shared by all who are gods. This divine nature Roberts called the "God of all other Gods." This approach suggests that this impersonal force or set of attributes is the one true God, thus making Mormonism monotheistic. (*BYU Studies*, 15:289; *Dialogue*, 13:2:11.) However, this point of view has not been very popular among Mormons, and was strongly denounced by Brigham Young and other Church authorities in 1860 (*Dialogue*

13:2:17-20, 33-35). In addition, this approach represents another misapplication of *monotheism* which would mislead those with a traditional understanding of the term.

Also it has been argued that in its early stages, Mormonism was monotheistic. For example, early Mormon scriptures not only declare Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be one God (D&C 20:27, 28; Alma 11:44), but also state that Jesus and the Father are identical (that is, Jesus was the Father come in the flesh) (Mosiah 7:27; 15:1-5; Ether 4:12). In addition, there are several statements in early Mormon scriptures which deny the existence of more than one God. For instance, in the Book of Mormon, Amulek tells Zeezrom that there is not more than one God and explains that the Son of God is the very Eternal Father (Alma 11:26-39; cf. D&C 20:17-19, Moses 1:6).

On the other hand, other passages of early scripture do not support this contention of simple monotheism. Throughout 3 Nephi a clear distinction is made between the Father who is in heaven and the Son who is on earth (3 Ne. 11:6-8, 32; 15:1, 18, 19; 18:27; 26:2, 5, 15). This distinction is also apparent in the earliest parts of the Book of Moses. In addition, any argument on this point must consider Joseph Smith's interpretation of his early teachings. In 1844 he said: "I wish to declare I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years. I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit." (HC, 6:474.) From the last several years of Joseph Smith's life to the present, then, it would be misleading to call Mormon doctrine monotheistic.

Thus, that Mormonism initially was monotheistic can only be said with reservation, and it is certainly inaccurate to define Mormon doctrine since the 1840s as monotheistic.

#### POLYTHEISM

Mormonism has never been willing to adopt the term *polytheism*. But since polytheism technically refers to belief in the existence of more than one god—clearly a Mormon doctrine—why have Latter-day Saints refused to use this common, widely understood term to define their doctrine of God? The answer is that while the term is technically appropriate, the technical definition is not the only consideration. Through the centuries, *polytheism* has been used to refer to ancient systems of gods totally foreign and obnoxious to Mormonism. These gods were depicted as immoral, quarrelsome, and often guilty of adultery, fornication, incest, rape, lying, thievery, drunkenness, and murder. As a result, tradition has imbued this word with a very negative connotation.

In contrast, Mormon doctrine teaches the existence of many gods, not in the sense of many contending gods, some good and some bad, but rather in the sense of many divine beings of impeccably moral character working in perfect unity for a common end. It is understandable, then, that virtually the only ones applying the term *polytheism* to the LDS church are its active opponents, who are frequently less interested in accurately explaining its doctrine than in harnessing it with an offensive, negative term. It seems only fair to allow a religious body to reject any descriptive terms which it finds unacceptable. A term acceptable to Mormons is *plurality of gods*. This phrase conveys the doctrine of many gods without polytheism's connotations of many sordid beings.

#### TRITHEISM

*Tritheism* literally means three gods. The term was coined in the sixth century by the opponents of John Philopon to refer to what they considered to be his heretical doctrine of the Godhead: "According to him, there are many men each with his own essence but 'through their common form all men are one,' so that in this sense they all have the same essence. In similar fashion he conceived the relation of the three persons of the Trinity." (*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 12:24.) Because Philopon saw the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as having distinct natures, his opponents claimed that he believed in three Gods, although it appears that he would not actually have confessed such a belief.

Joseph Smith, on the other hand, did confess belief that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost "constitute three distinct personages and three Gods" (HC, 6:474). Thus *tritheism* may be a valuable term for discussing Mormon doctrine. It is both simple and transparent and although it was created by opponents of the idea, it does not carry *polytheism's* offensive connotation. However, it does have the limitation of referring only to the number of gods in the Godhead without acknowledging the existence of any other gods.

#### HENOTHEISM

*Henotheism* is defined as the worship of one God while acknowledging, or at least not denying, the existence of other gods. Initially this term seems to have promising application for Mormonism, especially in light of this statement from Joseph Smith's last public discourse, 16 June 1844: "Paul says there are Gods many and Lords many. I want to set it forth in a plain and simple manner; but to us there is but one God—that is *pertaining to us* . . . I say there are Gods many and Lords many, but to us only one, and we are to be in subjection to that one" (HC, 6:474). Mormonism, then, while proclaiming the existence of many gods, has never advocated

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**Why has Mormonism, which clearly teaches the existence of more than one God, refused to adopt the term "polytheism"?**

the worship of them. Worship is directed solely to the god "pertaining to us."

However, it is important to understand the background of henotheism. The term was invented by the nineteenth-century German scholar Max Muller to refer to what many scholars believed was the faith of early Israel. It denotes the worship of a god who is confined to one geographical area. For example, it has been claimed that originally Jehovah was believed to be the god of Sinai whose jurisdiction did not extend to Canaan, which was another god's territory. This specific use of the term renders it inappropriate for use in defining Mormon doctrine. While the basic concept is similar to Mormonism, *henotheism* would not accurately communicate Mormon beliefs to those familiar with the term.

#### UNITARIAN

The terms *unitarian*, *binitarian*, and *trinitarian* have been applied to divergent doctrines of the Godhead. Unitarianism holds that there is but one member of the Godhead, and is committed to oneness—one God, one person, one nature. This concept was proclaimed by a sizeable number of early Christians prior to the formulation of the opposing trinitarian creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries. However, the term *unitarian* does not generally refer to the beliefs of that early period, but rather was coined in 1600 to identify a strong antitrinitarian movement which started in Europe and was transplanted to the United States in the eighteenth century. In America, the unitarian controversy peaked between 1815 and 1833 in the New England states, in close proximity to Joseph Smith during his early years.

In an article published in a 1940 issue of *Church History* entitled "Evolution of Mormon Doctrine," one writer, George Arbaugh, argued that initially Mormon doctrine was unitarian. He speculated that Reverend Solomon Spaulding was a unitarian who wrote an Indian story containing unitarian doctrine, that Sidney Rigdon revised it, and that Joseph Smith published it as the Book of Mormon. However, the assertion that the Book of Mormon teaches unitarian doctrine seems highly unlikely. In a work published in 1981, *God's Last Metaphor: The Doctrine of the Trinity in New England Theology*, Bruce M. Stephens shows that a central issue in the 1820s was the deity of Christ. The Unitarians denied that Jesus was God. Yet this teaching is precisely the opposite of that of the Book of Mormon, which, beginning with the title page, repeatedly declares the deity of Jesus Christ. Mormonism certainly does not accept unitarian doctrine today, nor does it appear ever to have done so.

#### BINITARIAN

The term *binitarian* was coined in 1890 to refer to some early Christian theologians who believed

in two persons in the Godhead. While the term clearly does not describe Mormon doctrine since the 1840s, there is one important doctrinal statement which does appear to have a strong binitarian emphasis. "The Lectures on Faith" which appeared in all editions of the Doctrine and Covenants from 1835 to 1921, states that "there are two personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things. . . . They are the Father and the Son." Elsewhere it instructs, "How many personages are there in the Godhead? Two: the Father and the Son." The lecture goes on to teach that these two personages possess the same mind, "which mind is the Holy Spirit . . . and these constitute the Godhead, and are one." This lecture does not present the Holy Ghost as a spirit being, a doctrine clearly taught a few years later. The Father and Son are personal; the Holy Spirit is impersonal. I believe there is value in using the term *binitarian* in reference to the doctrine of this lecture.

#### TRINITARIAN

The first person to use the term *trinity* appears to have been Tertullian about A.D. 200. Since that time, the term has often been used loosely to refer to virtually any idea which mentions three and one in reference to the Godhead. However around the fifth or sixth century, the term acquired a very precise definition which provides the basis for meaningful use of the term.

The classic statement of the trinity is found in the well-known Athanasian Creed. In part, it reads:

*We worship one God in trinity, and trinity in unity;*

*Neither confounding [i.e., confusing, mixing] the persons; nor dividing the substance.*

*For there is one person of the Father: another of the Son: another of the Holy Ghost.*

*But the Godhead of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one. . . .*

*So the Father is God: the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God.*

*And yet there are not three Gods; but one God.*

Historically, this has been the orthodox definition; there are three distinct persons of one undivided substance.

Throughout Christian history there have been many who have departed from the doctrine of this creed toward one extreme or another, emphasizing either the oneness or the threeness. Some have declared the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be only one divine person; others have declared that the substance is divided into Father, Son, and Holy Ghost and have been charged with tritheism. However, these extremes cannot technically be called trinitarianism.

Has Mormon doctrine ever been trinitarian? A number of Mormon writers have used the word *trinity* to define the Mormon doctrine of the Godhead, even such men as Apostle James E. Talmage in his 1890 work, *The Articles of Faith* (p. 39), and Apostle Richard L. Evans in 1952 in an article he wrote on Mormonism for the book *Religions in America* (p. 131). Nevertheless, such usages clearly exhibit a redefinition of the term *trinity*, whose technical denotation does not apply to Mormonism at all.

Some have claimed that the Book of Mormon and early revelations suggest that Mormon doctrine started out trinitarian. However, this also must be rejected since these early Mormon writings so emphasize the oneness of the Father and the Son as to declare "that the Son is the Father, and the Father is the Son" (JST, Luke 10:23, cf. Mosiah 15; 16:15; Alma 11:38, 39; Ether 4:12; 3:14.) Clearly, Mormon doctrine has never been trinitarian.

#### MONARCHIAN

Finally, what is the Mormon doctrine of the oneness of the Godhead? Is it monarchian, modalistic, homoousion, or homoiousion?

*Monarchianism* is a term coined by Tertullian to denote a doctrine which flourished in the third century. It was a result of the effort of some Christians to avoid any possible charge of polytheism by proclaiming the oneness of God, and by accounting for Jesus and the Holy Ghost in a manner which could not in any way be thought to compromise that oneness. In other words, it was strict monotheism.

This doctrine appeared in two forms. The first was dynamic monarchianism. *Dynamic* meaning power, the term referred to the doctrine that the power of the one God rested upon Jesus, who was not himself a god. Since Mormonism has always taught that Jesus was God before coming in the flesh (e.g., Mosiah 3:5; 4:2; 7:27; 1 Ne. 11:16), there appears to be no value in applying this term to any doctrine in our history.

The second form of monarchianism was modalism, which taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are not three persons or distinctions, but rather three modes of divine action of the one God. This doctrine, then, proclaimed both the oneness of God and the deity of Jesus. While this modalistic concept of oneness is foreign to current Mormon doctrine, there is a striking resemblance between the teachings of several early modalists and some statements in the Book of Mormon.

About the year A.D. 200, a modalist named Praxeas was teaching that, as Tertullian records, "the Father Himself came down into the Virgin, and was Himself born of her, Himself suffered, indeed was Himself Jesus Christ" (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:597). This concept that Jesus was the Father, took upon himself flesh by birth, and

suffered for mankind seems to be taught in several Book of Mormon passages (Mosiah 7:27; 13:34; 15:1-5; 16:15; Ether 3:14; 4:7-12).

But before concluding that *modalism* is the term to define Book of Mormon doctrine, it must also be recognized that the book contains a number of other passages which contradict the oneness demanded by modalism. (3 Ne. 11:6-8, 32; 15:1, 18, 19; 18:27; 26:2, 5, 15) Thus, while there may be value in using the term *modalism* when discussing Book of Mormon doctrine, one would be well advised to avoid using this term comprehensively.

#### HOMOOUSION/HOMOIUSION

Two other terms worth examining are *homoousion* and *homoiousion*, which are two Greek terms very prominent in the theological controversies of the fourth century. *Homoousios* was the term used in the Nicene Creed to identify the substance of the Son as the substance of the Father. That is, the Son was considered by some as *homoousios* (of the same substance) with the Father. The term *homoiousios*, on the other hand, was used by some opponents of the Nicene Creed to declare that the Son was not of the same substance, but rather of like substance with the Father. For example, three glasses of water are of like substance (*homoiousios*). When they are poured into a pitcher the water is the same substance (*homoousios*). *Homoiousios* might well be used in defining Mormon doctrine, which does declare the Father and Son to be of like substance, but not of the same substance.

By now it may be clear that even though Mormon doctrine may be compared and contrasted to a dozen historic Christian terms, a precise theological term for the Mormon doctrine of deity is still not apparent. One solution might be to adopt B. H. Roberts's phrase, "the Mormon doctrine of deity." But this is so vague as to be utterly useless. Another solution might be to combine historic theological terms to define the Mormon doctrine of deity as a development from a homoousion, modalistic monarchian form of monotheism to homoiousion, tritheistic henotheism. But this much jargon is too ludicrous for even a freshman theology student.

Perhaps there is some solace in this unfruitful quest for a precise definition. For should we ever succeed in producing the technical terminology to define the Mormon doctrine of deity, we might succumb to the long-resisted temptation to produce our own Mormon creed, stifling the open-ended nature of revelation and suppressing the possibility of acquiring new insight in the future.

*VAN HALE* is cohost of the KBBX radio talk show "Mormon Miscellaneous" in Salt Lake City and has authored a number of articles and pamphlets on LDS doctrine.

**Both  
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