

**A Layperson's Approach to Catholic-Mormon Dialogue:
Intersections between "Scripture" and "Tradition"**

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Ecumenical relations between the Catholic Church and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seem to have improved in recent years. Cardinal Francis George, president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, recently spoke to a sympathetic audience at BYU on the topic of religious freedom and shared family values.¹ Last year's national convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America included a session entitled "Barriers and Bridges: The Challenges of Mormon-Catholic Dialogue," whose presenters included Richard Bushman, Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University, and Father James Massa, executive director of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.² The recent discussion in Claremont between Father Alexei Smith of the Los Angeles archdiocese and Robert Millet of BYU³ on the topic of priesthood and sacraments represented a similar step in the right ecumenical direction. These encouraging developments signal what many Catholics and Mormons hope will lead to continued and substantive dialogue between our churches, in much the same way Evangelicals have extensively and fruitfully dialogued with Mormons in print and at conferences.⁴

In an effort to bolster future dialogue, I want to argue from the perspective of a Roman Catholic that substantive dialogue between Catholics and Mormons might improve by recognizing and comparing the extent to which we both depend on extra-Biblical sources for doctrine. It might be argued that all Christian traditions implicitly or explicitly depend on extra-Biblical sources (*contra sola scriptura*) but there is a special sense in which this is self-acknowledged by Catholics and Mormons and deserves comparative theological attention. For Mormons the canon of Scripture is "open" and the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price are considered co-equal in authority with the Bible. For Catholics the canon of Scripture is "closed" and limited to the Old and New Testaments, but the Bible is considered on par with ecclesiastical Tradition. Tradition in the capital T sense (sometimes called "Sacred Tradition") refers in large part to the Magisterium's divinely revealed interpretation of church history and the Bible, on which much (though not all) Catholic doctrine is found either directly or germinally.⁵

Given Catholic and Mormon dependence on extra-Biblical sources, a fruitful entry point for Catholic-Mormon dialogue might be to jointly consider the theological and ecclesiastical dynamic of the relationship between scripture and tradition. In particular, I am interested in evaluating how well the Catholic dynamic between Scripture and Tradition is (or is not)

comparable to the Mormon dynamic between Scripture and “continuing revelation” through prophetic guidance. However, if the distinction between scripture and tradition might be too limiting, or might imperialistically impose a Catholic distinction when it might not apply for Mormons, perhaps much the same theological dynamic can be evaluated by comparing the relationship between (1) Catholic Scripture and the institution of the papacy and the relationship between (2) Mormon Scripture and the office of prophet.

My intuition, which I am interested to explore outside this paper in direct conversation with Catholics, Mormons, and interested others, is that either route might essentially lead to the same conclusion. That is to say, I think it will turn out that the office of pope (and with it the entire Magisterium) and the office of prophet (and with it the First Presidency and General Authorities) are the ultimate authoritative foundations for delineating *what counts as scripture* and *what counts as tradition* for each church.

For Catholics, I think the distinction between Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition reveals a *static* view of scripture but a *dynamic* view of tradition. This is why Sacred Scripture is limited to the Old and New Testaments but Catholic doctrine is not found in the Bible alone. As documents of the Second Vatican Council and afterward help make clear, Catholic doctrine might be found germinally in the Bible but often find additional expression and articulation in other sources. These other sources include but are not limited to the writings of the Church Fathers, the decrees of previous ecumenical councils, Doctors of the Church who have influenced the course of Catholic theology (e.g. Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas to alliteratively name a few), the Magisterium of bishops (led by the pope who is the bishop of Rome), and specifically the pope who infallibly speaks on matters of faith and morals per the First Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council document “*Dei Verbum*” (Latin for “Word of God”) helps clarify the dynamic nature of Sacred Tradition:

And so the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time. [...] This tradition which comes from the Apostles develop in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.⁶

Here we find a distinction between Sacred Scripture (“inspired books”) and the Sacred Tradition that comes from the apostles, is passed on, and expands down the centuries through (1) “[...] the contemplation and study made by believers” (e.g. theologians) and (2) “the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth” (i.e. the pope). Together as the Church these forces work toward the “fullness of divine truth” that is germinally

found in the Bible but not in the Bible alone. In other words, “*Dei Verbum*” seems to support the idea that Sacred Scripture is static in the sense that it is now set in the form of the Old and New Testaments,⁷ but the *interpretation* of these God-inspired texts is enhanced as the Church comes to a greater understanding of the Word of God in the context of a Sacred Tradition that spans more than two thousand years.

The Mormon distinction between scripture and tradition, on the other hand (if my Mormon friends will indulge my use of that distinction), seems to imply a dynamic view of *both* scripture and tradition, in which tradition by means of prophetic “continuing revelation” that can function semi-permeably to *become* scripture. This explains why two texts in the Mormon Scriptural canon, Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price, contain material that was first part of Mormon history or tradition but later assembled and elevated to the status of canon on the basis of church authorities who understood them to be revelation worthy of such inclusion.⁸ Moreover, it is also the case that this dynamic, evolving view of Mormon Scripture continues *even after* scripture becomes canonized. In the case of Doctrine and Covenants, for example, revelations and teachings have been added, and in some cases removed, over time (cf. the “Lectures on Faith” which were included at the beginning of D&C from 1835 to 1921 but removed from later editions).⁹

But for both Catholics and Mormons, this idea of dynamism is ultimately a function of a *supervening ecclesiology*, in particular the appropriate doctrinal authorities who are believed to be led by God in their decision-making processes. In other words, what it means for the Catholic canon to be “closed” and the Mormon canon to be “open” seems to depend on the extent to which the Magisterium and General Authorities, respectively, view the *bounds* of “Scripture” and “Tradition” as either static or dynamic.

Since I referenced a document from the Second Vatican Council to elucidate the Catholic position in this regard, I would now like to reference a statement from J. Reuben Clark, who served the Mormon Church in a number of high positions including apostle and counselor in the First Presidency to Mormon Presidents Heber J. Grant and David O. McKay. Clark’s piece “When Are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?”¹⁰ provides a number of helpful clarifications on the Mormon relationship between tradition and scripture that also reveal parallels to the Catholic dynamic described above.

Clark begins by quoting a revelation given to Joseph Smith, which is found in Doctrine and Covenants 68:4:

And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation.¹¹

Realizing that the criterion “whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture” is somewhat broad and nondescript when taken as a proof-text, Clark

offers an interesting exegetical remark that what it means to be moved upon by the Holy Ghost is two-dimensional and self-authenticating: “We can tell when the speakers are ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost’ only when we, ourselves, are ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost.’”¹² The implication seems to be this: if the Holy Ghost moves or compels LDS church leaders to speak or write on a theological topic, and this communication correlatively moves church members to perceive the divine origin and truth of what has been received, then a writing or sermon automatically becomes a possible candidate for scripture and admission to the “open” canon.

But Clark makes clear that only certain individuals in the church are even qualified to be moved by the Spirit in this manner. First among these individuals is the president, who is also a prophet, seer, and revelator: “He is God’s sole mouthpiece on earth for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the only true Church. He alone may declare the mind and will of God to his people. No officer or any other Church in the world had this right and lofty prerogative.”¹³ However, other individuals in the church may be called “[...] to declare the mind and will of God to his people, subject to the over-all power and authority of the President of the Church.”¹⁴ Typically these individuals are called from the group of General Authorities who serve church-wide administrative functions.

I think we are now in a position to see that the Catholic and Mormon positions have a number of parallels. In particular, Clark’s insights remind me of the language of “*Dei Verbum*” that inquiring believers are part and parcel of a papally-guided tradition that reveres Scripture and moves toward the “fullness of divine truth.”¹⁵ But the largest parallel is the relationship between Catholic Scripture and the Magisterium, on the one hand, and Mormon Scripture and the First Presidency/General Authorities on the other. Not surprisingly, the static or dynamic relationship between “Scripture” and “Tradition” provides the ultimate authoritative foundation for these authoritative bodies to delineate *what counts as scripture* and *what counts as tradition* for each church. Or, to put it less tautologically, “Scripture” and “Tradition” are not disparate enterprises of church life for Catholics and Mormons but mutually dependent and even *interpenetrating*. This is the point I attempted to bring out by using the idea that scripture and tradition are *dynamically* related.

Earlier I set the goal of evaluating how well the Catholic dynamic between Scripture and Tradition is (or is not) comparable to the Mormon dynamic between Scripture and “continuing revelation” through prophetic guidance. The two are abundantly comparable and could easily set the stage for future productive dialogue between the two churches. The key difference between Catholics and Mormons, however--aside from particulars of *doctrine* which are briefly explored below--is that the Scriptural canon is “closed” for the former and “open” for the latter, which arguably amounts to saying that Catholic theology is (potentially) less dynamic than Mormon theology.

Addendum: The Future of Catholic-Mormon Dialogue

I want to turn my attention to the survey of special considerations and problems related Catholic-Mormon dialogue in general. In particular, I want to survey the present status of relations between the Catholic Church and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Before proceeding further, I feel obligated to reveal something of my background and motivation for exploring the topic of Catholic-Mormon dialogue because it will also helpfully reveal my methodology for this remaining exercise in comparative theology. As a Roman Catholic layperson, it must be remembered that I do not represent the Roman Catholic Church in any official capacity, except that I am a baptized, confirmed, and active member who seeks an equally active role as an ecumenical facilitator. I cannot tell if this “unofficial” capacity is a theological liability or asset for the purpose of dialogue. All I can say is that I seek to represent the Roman Catholic Church best I can. To the extent that I am successful, thanks be to God. To the extent that I am not, the mistakes are completely mine.

I cannot speak for other Catholics, or other Christians for that matter, but my ultimate motivation for dialoguing with Mormons is not merely academic but spiritual. Just as with the Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Quakers, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, non-denominational Evangelicals, and other Christians, my real motivation for dialogue with Mormons is this: I believe they are my brothers and sisters in Christ. The theological differences between Catholics and Mormons are real, to be sure, and ought not be swept under the rug for the sake of political correctness, but for me this common spiritual denominator is the ultimate foundation for discussion. Other Christians may disagree with this ecumenical assumption but all Christians ought to take seriously the call of the Second Vatican Council document on ecumenism “Unitatis Redintegratio”: “We should therefore pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others, and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity towards them.”¹⁶

It is 2010 and Catholics are still appreciating the wide-reaching theological implications of Vatican II, including in the arena of ecumenical and interreligious affairs.¹⁷ To be fair, the Roman Catholic Church has done a laudable job participating in dialogue with numerous Christian churches and denominations--and on an ongoing basis. For example, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs participates in ongoing ecumenical relationships with the following groups: Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Polish National Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Southern Baptist, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and African American Churches. In addition, the committee participates in other ecumenical relationships through its association with the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together in the USA, and, less formally, the World Council of Churches. The committee also facilitates interreligious dialogue in the United States with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus.¹⁸

But what about Mormons? Given that the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs devotes itself to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue *in the United States*, it is disappointing that a substantive and ongoing dialogue has not been commenced between the Catholic Church and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Instead, Catholics and Mormons have met on intermittent (though meaningful) occasions such as the ones described in the first paragraph.

Why? I suspect this lack of formal and ongoing commitment is partly because the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity helps sets the ecumenical and interreligious agenda for the worldwide church, which means that only a limited number of churches and denominations can possibly be involved. However, I think a deeper reason might be at work: the Catholic Church is still not sure what to make of the Mormon Church. Are Mormons Christian or not? How should Catholic-Mormon dialogue progress given that the Catholic Church does not recognize Mormon baptisms?¹⁹ What about the differences between Catholics and Mormons on doctrinal matters such as the Trinity and the nature of man's relationship to the Triune God? If Catholics do dialogue with Mormons on an ongoing basis, does that count as *ecumenical* or *interreligious* dialogue? Perhaps some nebulous area in between? Does Mormon doctrine provide enough theological common ground for a productive exchange? Are we just too different theologically? To quote the title of a book on Mormon-Evangelical dialogue, "How wide the divide?"²⁰

To these last two questions I respond: the differences are real but so are the similarities, including the intersections between "Scripture" and "Tradition," and those similarities are likely more than enough to sustain a long-term dialogue. There is evidence that Mormons sense these similarities too. In a textbook published by BYU Press entitled *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View*, we find the conclusion that "Latter-day Saints and Roman Catholics actually have much more in common than do Latter-day Saints and Protestants."²¹ Time will tell whether ecclesiastical similarities are enough to sustain dialogue about doctrine. Thomas F. O'Dea, a Roman Catholic sociologist of religion who wrote one of the first serious books on the Mormon Church, put it well when he described his approach to the study of Mormonism as an outsider: "I have striven throughout to combine intellectual objectivity with intelligent human sympathy."²² Even if Christians have doctrinal disagreements with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we can still engage in civil conversation to learn more about one of the fastest growing religious groups in the United States and world.

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Endnotes

¹ For the press release from the LDS Church see: <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/cardinal-george-addresses-religious-freedom-in-speech-at-byu>. For the full text of Cardinal George's remarks provided by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops see: <http://www.usccb.org/seia/catholics-latter-day-saints.pdf>.

² For the program of the Catholic Theological Society of America's 2009 national convention, which includes a description of the aims of the session on Mormon-Catholic dialogue, see: http://www.ctsa-online.org/CTSA_2009_Convention_Descriptions.pdf

³ For the full audio of Father Smith and Professor Millet's remarks, including the Q&A session, see the following provided by the Claremont Mormon Studies Student Association: <http://www.claremontmormonstudies.org/media/catholic-mormon-conversation-priesthood-and-sacraments>

⁴ Professor Robert Millet of BYU has arguably been the most active participant on the Mormon side of the ongoing Mormon-Evangelical dialogue. Two recent collaborative books on the subject include: Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 1997) and Millet, Gregory C.V. Johnson, and Craig L. Blomberg, *Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation Between a Mormon and an Evangelical* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish, 1997). Another well-known book on the subject is Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997). More recently, in November 2009, Evangelicals and Mormons came together for the National Student Dialogue Conference, held at Biola University and sponsored by Standing Together. Standing Together is a non-profit 501(c)(3) Evangelical ministry led by Gregory C.V. Johnson dedicated to (among other things) ongoing Mormon-Evangelical dialogue. Their website: <http://www.standingtogether.org/index.html>.

⁵ For Second Vatican Council documents that helpfully describe the relationship between Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, see "Dei Verbum" (especially chapter 2) and "Lumen Gentium" (especially chapter 2, section 14), both accessible at the Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm.

⁶ "Dei Verbum," chapter 2, section 8, Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

⁷ My use of the phrase "[...] that it is *now* set in the form of the Old and New Testaments" is intentional because obviously the process of canonizing the Old and New Testaments was itself a dynamic process for the early Christian church. For the purposes of dialogue, I am attempting to use words like "static" for Sacred Scripture and "dynamic" for Sacred Tradition as *heuristic devices* for comparison, rather than commentaries about their final place in Catholic historical theology.

⁸ For more about this history with regard to Doctrine and Covenants and, to a lesser extent, Pearl of Great Price, see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 276, 282-285, and Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 192-194.

⁹ For a fascinating overview of the history of the de-canonization of the "Lectures on Faith" from the 1921 edition of Doctrine and Covenants, see Richard S. Van Wagoner, Steven C. Walker, and Allen D. Roberts, "The 'Lectures on Faith': A Case Study of Decanonization," in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (3): 71-77.

¹⁰ Clark's address can be found online at BYU-Idaho: <http://emp.byui.edu/MARROTTR/ClarkWhenAreWritings.pdf>. I have cited from J. Reuben Clark, Jr., "When Are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?" in *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 12 (2): 68-81.

¹¹ The Doctrine and Covenants, as well as the King James Version of the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Pearl of Great Price can be found at the following website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: <http://scriptures.lds.org>. It should be noted that Clark quotes D&C 68:2-4 but I have chosen D&C 68:4 to emphasize its implications for the nature of scripture.

¹² J. Reuben Clark, Jr., "When Are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?" in *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 12 (2): 68.

¹³ Ibid., 72-73.

¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵ "Dei Verbum," chapter 2, section 8.

¹⁶ "Unitatis Redintegratio," chapter 2, section 7, Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

¹⁷ In 1996 an interviewer asked then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) whether there might soon be a *Third* Vatican Council since issues in the church seemed to merit one. The cardinal's response is just as perceptive today and might help Catholics participate in the ongoing realization of the vision of the Second Vatican Council: "In fact, a council, as we are seeing, is an event that stirs up the whole Church, an event that

requires long periods of time to assimilate. We have not yet assimilated Vatican II by a long shot. A Third Vatican wouldn't be the medicine to help digest it." See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium: An Interview with Peter Seewald*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 252.

18. These ecumenical and interreligious relationships are listed on the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' website: <http://www.usccb.org/seia/index.shtml>. It should be noted that both the USCCB and Vatican consider its relationship with Jews to be institutionally separate from its relationship with other non-Christian groups. For example, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity maintains a special Commission for Relations with the Jews.

19. "Response to a 'Dubium' on the Validity of Baptism Conferred by 'The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,'" called "Mormons,"" Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010605_battesimo_mormoni_en.html.

20. See Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

21. Spencer J. Palmer, Roger R. Keller, Dong Sull Choi, and James A. Toronto, *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View* (Provo: BYU Press, 1997), 209.

22. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), vii.