LDS Theology and the Ontology of God and Man

How is man like God? How is God like man? These are very simple and seemingly innocent questions but in no sense are they empty ones. In fact, how one answers these questions will determine their theological trajectory. In the two extremes, one can end up with a mankind that is completely dissimilar from its creator (thus not including an imago Dei) or one can end up with a mankind that shows no meaningful distinction between the two. In effect, God’s relation to his creation would be vastly different in these two scenarios.

This question of the relation between creator and creation is one that is asked and addressed by the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (henceforth LDS or LDS church). There are many areas in which the theology of the LDS church and historical Christianity depart from one another but this topic of the likeness of God and man is one that sets the stage for the debates that follow it. In this work, I will examine the departure in this topic of theology proper. I will display that the LDS view of the ontology of God and man is both composed of non-biblical and philosophically unsupported categories and does not reflect the theology of the church throughout history.
Historical Christian Ontology

In properly addressing this topic, it would be best to examine the manner as it arises in the biblical text and is addressed throughout church history. In this section, I will display both of these. Doing so will allow us to examine the theology of the LDS church from an established starting point.¹

Creation

Since our topic deals with creator-creation we would do well to ask what it means for mankind to be a creation. Historically, Christians have perceived God’s act of creation as being out of nothing (commonly referred to with the Latin phrase “ex nihilo”). Of course, this perception comes from what naturally arises in the biblical text.

It should be mentioned here that there is no place in the biblical text in which this concept of creation out of nothing is clearly stated in terms we 21st century thinkers may want to see. However that does not make this idea an unbiblical one. Naturally, the Genesis creation account is profitable for this endeavor. In his work, God in Creation, Jürgen Moltmann investigates the word bârâ’ (the word used Gen 1:1 to translate to mean “create”). He mentions that bârâ’ is a verb that is exclusively used for creation with respect to the divine. This is emphasized by the fact that it does not take an accusative object of material thus to show that this variant of a creation act has no conditions or premises. It is the uniquely divine act of bringing forth something from nothing at all.² Or, as William Lane Craig prefers to describe it, God’s divine act

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¹ Skyler Gerald, “LDS Theology and the Nature of the Godhead” (Moody Bible Institute 2020) 2-3
² Jürgen Moltmann, “God In Creation” (Minneapolis, MN SCM 1985) 73-78
of creation is unique from the creation narratives of the pagan gods of Moses’ contemporaries in that God uses no material substratum in his creating.\(^3\)

This concept is not merely a Genesis 1 idea. Perhaps the best example of ex nihilo thought in the New Testament rests in Revelation 4:11 in which it reads that all things exist by the will of God. That certainly drives a wedge between the idea of creation as a formation of pre-existing material and creation as creatio ex nihilo. Perhaps one could insert a particular reading of “create” into the biblical accounts and recounts of creation by saying that we as human beings can create things. There are human craftsmen. No one is saying that a carpenter creates a chair out of no pre-existing material. When a craftsman says that he made or “created” a chair, it is the general assumption that he used pre-existing wood and pre-existing nails. However, the usage of the word “exist” in this text in Revelation, would not allow such a reading.

We do not commonly understand human craftsmen of any sort to be bringing things into existence by their will. And so, by that notion, we can further see that the particular variant of creating that God accomplished was a variant dissimilar from the human craftsmen. This leaves us with the doctrine of creation ex nihilo and thus the beginning of an ontological distinction between the creator, the pre- eternal God, and the created; nonpre-eternal mankind.

Ontological Distinction

With this creator-created dynamic necessarily comes an ontological distinction. This distinction is crucial to understanding anything of Christian theology as it answers the questions, “What is God?” and “What am I?”. The biblical text certainly is not silent in this matter and is

\(^3\) William Lane Craig, “Defenders: Doctrine of Creation part 1” (available at https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-3/s3-doctrine-of-creation/doctrine-of-creation-part-1/)
actually very emphatic in responding these two questions with an answer that displays an ontological distinction in the creator-creation dynamic.

It would seem that the Bible is most emphatic in answering these questions in Psalm 90:2 which reads, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” From everlasting to everlasting is quite an emphatic way of explaining how long God has been God. The 19th century pastoral theologian, Charles Spurgeon, commented on this verse saying, “The eternal existence of God is here mentioned to set forth, by contrast, the brevity of human life.” Without an ontological distinction in the creator-creation dynamic, there really is no meaningfulness in Moses’ contrasting statements of ‘everlasting to everlasting’ and ‘our days pass away’.

We can also look to John 8:58 which reads in the ESV as, “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’”. The Greek word that is translated here as ‘was’ is γενέσθαι. This word has been sometimes translated as “was born” in this passage (such as in the NIV and NASB). It would seem that this is due to the word being passive in voice. Perhaps seeing a translation of “was” may cause us to expect a form of εἰμί, in fact we could ask why John did not simply use a form of εἰμί so as to prevent confusion between an understanding of ‘was’ instead of ‘was born’. However a “was” meaning can be meaningfully drawn also from γενέσθαι. To put it into perspective, the KJV (which is the translation used by the LDS church) renders the various forms of γίνομαι as a form of “be” quite often.

4 It is important in looking at this passage to remember that we understand the word “formed” in light of the entire counsel of God’s word which would point to a forming ex-nihilo and not ex-materia.

5 Charles Spurgeon, “The Treasury of David” (New York, NY Funk & Wagnalls 1885) 199

6 Matt 1:22, Mar 4:22, Luk 22:42, and Jhn 10:16 compile a diverse set of examples for this rendering of various forms of γίνομαι.
This lexical use has driven Bible translators often to translate γενέσθαι in John 8:58 as to speak in more of an ontological category and the previously cited ESV rendering shows this. The NET renders this verse as “before Abraham came into existence, I am!” and include a footnote which reads, “Grk ‘before Abraham was.’”. The NET translators have gone to show us that a very literal reading of the Greek will lead us to the word “was” with the force of that word being purely ontological and they display that by using the phrase “came into existence”.

This is incredibly important for our purpose. It presents that Jesus was before Abraham was. This passage comes as an answer to the objection raised by the Jews in the previous verse. They objected to Jesus’ statement that he saw Abraham by arguing that it could not be so since Jesus was not even fifty years old. Why would they not object in this way? They had the assumption that Jesus was merely another man. This would then put forth necessarily an ontological sameness between Jesus and Abraham. An assumption of ontological sameness between Jesus and Abraham would certainly lead to this question they asked. And so, Jesus’ statement comes as a powerful declaration of the ontological distinction between him and Abraham; his creation. This passage’s display of the ontological distinction in the creator-creation dynamic gives additional force to the distinction as it is presented in earlier and famously in John 1:1-18. Jesus is the pre-eternal creator God and man is the nonpre-eternal creation. It would be quite difficult to find a more basic ontological difference than this.

St. Augustine, in his musings on the Holy Spirit, wrote in his confessions concerning the nonpre-eternal reality of creation. He writes, “For verily that heaven of heavens which Thou createdst in the Beginning, is some intellectual creature, which, although no ways coeternal unto
Thee, the Trinity, yet partaketh of Thy eternity”7 Here Augustine says quite well that maximal eternity is God’s and God’s alone. If creation is to in any way exemplify a form of eternity it is only because it merely partakes of the eternality of God.8 This sentiment beautifully resembles Paul’s usage of Greek poetry in Acts 17:27b-28 which reads, “yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘in him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’” In no meaningful way can mankind be eternal in the post-eternal sense if God is not maximally eternal. This maximal eternality would necessarily include both pre-eternity and post-eternity.

**Traditional LDS Ontology**

Now that it has been observed and established through the witness of the biblical text and church history of an ex nihilo model of creation and, necessarily thus, an ontological dissimilarity in the creator-creation dynamic, we can observe LDS thought in the matter. We now know how both the Bible and Christians past have answered the questions, “How is man like God and how is God like man?” But how does LDS theology answer these questions?

The Doctrine of Creatio Ex Materia

In examining traditional LDS thought in the matter of ontology, just as was done in establishing Historical Christian Ontology, we must inquire of the topic of creation. What does traditional LDS theology teach in the matter of creation? 20th Century LDS Apostle, Bruce R. McConkie wrote very passionately on this matter in his famous work *Mormon Doctrine*. He

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7 Confessions of St. Augustine Book XII emphasis added

8 In thinking of various forms of eternity, we can rightfully acknowledge that something can come into being and exist eternally forward while another thing can additionally exist eternally backward and conclude that this second thing as being of a superior quality of eternal than the former. That which is (or who is) both eternally backward and eternally forward would be maximally eternal.
wrote, “To create is to organize. It is an utterly false and uninspired notion to believe that the world or any other thing was created out of nothing or that any created thing can be destroyed in the sense of annihilation.” In this McConkie, commenting on D&C 93:33, equates the act of creation with organization and declares the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo to be “utterly false and uninspired”. This position has often been regarded, perhaps to show its contrast to the position Historical Christian Ontology presents, as creatio ex materia.

This resembles quite well the ideas of Joseph Smith who regarded God as not a creator in the ex nihilo sense. Rather, he regarded God as a grand organizer who organizes matter (or, element, as he calls them) which have no beginning or end. To support this, he argues for an ‘organize’ translation of bârâ’. However, in reviewing the aforementioned Revelation 4:11, we witness some discontinuity between this LDS thought process and the biblical text. We do well, as demonstrated in the previous section, to make note of the presence of “exist” in Revelation 4:11 alongside “create”. In fact, “exist” is a very particular word to describe the Lord’s creation act and, as I have shown, is much stronger of a notion than merely creating. For something to need the will of another thing or person in order to have its existence, especially within the context of creation, would necessarily entail there to be a point wherein it was not. A doctrine of creatio ex materia would not be able to deal rightly with this passage and would not be able to establish a framework for a proper creator-creation distinction as the Bible displays.

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10 Joseph Smith, “Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith” (Provo, Ut Deseret Book Co, 1938) 350-352; Argumentation against this rendering of bârâ’ can be reviewed on pages 2-3.
The Doctrine of Intelligence

After having examined to the LDS thought of the eternality of matter, one might wonder that if matter is eternal if anything else is eternal alongside it. Indeed that is the case within historical LDS thought. The most explicit stating of this in LDS scripture lies in D&C 93:29-30 wherein it reads, “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence.” In this text arises a fascinating declaration, mankind is equally eternal to God. In fact, man’s most primal form is ‘intelligence’. It is this intelligence form, we read in Abra. 3:22, that God crafts to become what will later be mankind which once again reminds us of the wedge that is being driven between biblical creation and LDS theology. In no way can one, in reference to Rev 4:11, say that God gives mankind its existence by his will when he is merely utilizing pre-existing intelligence create mankind almost as though mankind ontologically consists of an eternal beating heart that God merely wraps in flesh.\(^\text{11}\)

However, we might ask what significance there is for mankind, in intelligence form, to exist eternally backward with God. To answer this inquiry we can look to Joseph Smith’s exposition of this text. He wrote, “The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal with God himself… That which has a beginning may have an end. There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-equal with our Father in heaven.”\(^\text{12}\) This then puts God in this same category as man has been placed. LDS theology has described mankind as

\(^{11}\) Sanjay Merchant personal correspondence 2020
\(^{12}\) Joseph Smith, “Teachings if the Prophet Joseph Smith” (Provo, Ut Deseret Book Co, 1938) 353
having its most primal form being intelligence with this reality being not unique to mankind but descriptive of God as well. Therefore, when LDS theology states that God is eternal\textsuperscript{13} (wherein they are referring to both pre and post eternality) they can only describe a god who existed in eternity past as intelligence; not as deity. This presents an enormous issue. To put it plainly, if intelligence is what is eternal about Jesus, and I am equally intelligence, then I am equal to the most basic reality of Jesus in the present time. If mankind is ontologically identical in the most basic sense, namely intelligence, then in no meaningful sense does there exist a distinction between the creator and his creation.

The Doctrine of Eternal Progression

Of course, that does lead one to ask how, in LDS thought, this can be the case when, as ontologically same as they may be, God is still a god and man is not. A very crucial question that leads to what is known as the doctrine of eternal progression. Elder James E. Talmage wrote on this in his work \textit{Articles of Faith} where it reads, “…the child may achieve the former status of the parent, and that in his mortal condition man is a God in embryo”\textsuperscript{14}. For mankind, godhood is a possible future reality. This doctrine of eternal progression is a very dense subject and it can certainly lead outside the scope of this paper. However, in a brief view of it, we are able to witness how this doctrine, who’s basis is the doctrine of intelligence, brings with it the final blow to a proper biblical understanding of the creator-creation distinction.

D&C 132 offer much content to the subject of eternal progression and verses 20-21 perhaps act as a climax. They read,

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\item \textsuperscript{13} 2 Nephi 26:12
\item \textsuperscript{14} James E. Talmage, “Articles of Faith” (Salt Lake City, UT The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) 530
\end{enumerate}
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Then shall they [those who abide by God’s law] be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them. Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye abide my law ye cannot attain to this glory.\(^{15}\)

This brings us to conclude that not only is mankind ontologically identical to God but that God’s current deity status can identically be attained in the future by mankind through the stipulation of abiding to his law. Herein lies the only significant difference between mankind and God in the LDS worldview. What God already has, man has not yet attained. However, this is not a meaningful difference in any ontological respect.

To illustrate this point I will exemplify my former roommate, Nicholas. Nicholas and I are ontologically identical in that we are both created by God in his image. However, Nicholas is a graduate of Moody Bible Institute. I am not yet a graduate of Moody Bible Institute but likely will be very soon. There may be a difference in status between Nick and I but there is no ontological difference that can be discerned. So it is in the LDS worldview as it pertains to the creator-creation dynamic.

**Conclusion**

As has been observed via LDS Scripture and general authorities, there is no meaningful ontological difference that can be observed between God and man in the LDS worldview. This presents a major difficulty due to the fact that, as we have witnessed, the biblical account of the creator-creation dynamic entails a wide ontological gap. It is from this discrepancy that LDS

\(^{15}\) Doctrine and Covenants 132:20-21; In this text, the concept of being “from everlasting to everlasting” is defined only post-eternity by the notion of “because they have no end… because they continue”. It is by this confusing definition that LDS thought can attempt to agree with Psalm 90:2.
ontology should be regarded as blatantly foreign to the bible’s witness of ontology. As man now is, God never was; as God now is, man will never be.