

ments and ideas are not distinct and successive, one that is wholly simple and totally immutable, is a mind which has no thought, no reason, no will, no sentiment, no love, no hatred; or in a word, is no mind at all. It is an abuse of terms to give it that appellation.<sup>26</sup>

Mormons have generally been aware that their idea of God requires that he be involved in process even though he may stand in a different relation to time than do mortals. For instance, Orson Pratt told the Reverend F. Austin: "God and all his magnificent works are limited to duration and time. It could not be otherwise."<sup>27</sup> B. H. Roberts told the Reverend Vander Donckt that in taking Jesus Christ as the revelation of the nature of God, there is necessarily a "succession of time with God — a before and an after; here is being and becoming."<sup>28</sup> However, the notion that God is timeless has recently been introduced into Mormon thought. Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, writes, "The past, present, and future are before God *simultaneously*. . . . Therefore, God's omniscience is not solely a function of prolonged and discerning familiarity with us — but of the stunning reality that the past, present, and future are part of an 'eternal now' with God"<sup>29</sup> (italics in original). The idea of God's eternity here appears to consist not in the Hebrew notion of God's eternal duration *in time* without beginning or end; but of transcendence of temporal succession. In fairness to Elder Maxwell, we must recognize that his observations are meant as rhetorical expressions to inspire worship rather than as an exacting philosophical analysis of the idea of timelessness. Furthermore, in a private conversation in January 1984, Elder Maxwell told me that he is unfamiliar with the classical idea of timelessness and the problems it entails. His intent was not to convey the idea that God transcends temporal succession, but "to help us trust in God's perspectives, and not to be too constrained by our own provincial perceptions while we are in this mortal cocoon."<sup>30</sup>

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not know which states of affairs are now actual. "Omniscience and Immutability," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 43:14 (1966). Consider the problem formally:

1. A perfect being is not subject to change (i.e., is immutable).
2. A perfect being knows everything (i.e., is omniscient).
3. A being that knows everything knows what time it is (i.e., which states of affairs are now actual).
4. A being that always knows what time it is must be subject to change (i.e., to say of any being that it knows something different from what it used to know is to say it has changed in relation to the objects of its knowledge).
5. Hence, a perfect being is subject to change (2, 3, 4).
6. Hence, a perfect being is not a perfect being (1, 5).
7. Hence, there is not a being that is both immutable and omniscient (6).

<sup>26</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1948), p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Orson Pratt, *The Kingdom of God*, Liverpool, 21 Oct. 1848, No. 2, p. 4. See Kent Robson, "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Thought" *Sunstone* 5 (May-June 1980): 17-23 for a general treatment of temporal referents in Mormon scriptures.

<sup>28</sup> B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News, 1908), pp. 95-96.

<sup>29</sup> Neal A. Maxwell. *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979), pp. 95-96.

<sup>30</sup> I refer to this private conversation and to excerpts from Elder Maxwell's letter with his permission. He writes, "I would never desire to do, say, or write anything which would

The deity of Mormonism, in particular could not be timeless because he is corporeal and therefore has spatial position. If our idea of space entails a number of consecutive temporal positions, then even a perfected body must relate to time. Further, if matter is uncreated, then time is an eternal aspect of reality. Indeed, for Mormons spirit and matter are described as essentially the same, and therefore spirit also occupies space, has location and moves in spatio-temporal dimensions.<sup>31</sup> The Mormon God, like the biblical God, is described in terms distinctively human such as caring, judging, forgiving, responding, and freely choosing. Nelson Pike demonstrated, in what is probably the most thorough treatment of the idea of timelessness to date, that the idea is incoherent when applied to anything that possesses such human attributes, for all of these actions logically entail a succession of time.<sup>32</sup>

I believe that the idea of a God who is in no place and in no time is an idea of no God. If God is incorporeal in the sense that he lacks all spatial extension, then he also lacks temporal identity. He cannot consistently be conceived as a personal identity because he lacks all criteria of identity. There is no way to distinguish him from any other identity. If God does not have temporal identity or "bodily" extension, *person* has no cognitive content when applied to him.<sup>33</sup>

#### *A Mormon Concept of Omniscience*

Mormonism has often demonstrated an innate genius in dealing with the problems of God's omniscience. Indeed, Mormons have quite willingly modified their understanding of omniscience. The proposition elucidated by Orson Pratt that "God cannot learn new truths" was officially pronounced false doctrine by Brigham Young and his counselors in 1860 and again in 1865.<sup>34</sup> Brigham Young declared, "According to theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power, but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are His children."<sup>35</sup> Wilford Woodruff taught, "God Himself is increasing

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cause others unnecessary problems. . . . I would not have understood certain philosophical implications arising (for some) because I quoted from Purtil who, in turn, quoted from Boethius. Nor would I presume to know of God's past, including His former relationship to time and space." Elder Neal A. Maxwell to Blake T. Ostler, 24 Jan. 1984. My thanks to Elder Maxwell for his helpful and generous comments on this and numerous other subjects.

<sup>31</sup> "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine and pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; we cannot see it" (D&C 131:7-8). "The elements are eternal . . ." (D&C 93:33).

<sup>32</sup> Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 121ff. Much of my analysis of the problem of timelessness is indebted to Pike.

<sup>33</sup> Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Spirits* (London, 1970), pp. 54ff.; Paul Edwards, "Some Notes on Anthropomorphic Theology" in S. H. Hooke, ed., *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 241-50; See also Richard Swineburne's rejoinder in *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 106-25.

<sup>34</sup> The 1860 statement is in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 2:214-23; the 1865 statement is in *Millennial Star* 26 (21 Oct. 1865): 658-60.

<sup>35</sup> Parley P. Pratt, *Journal of Discourses of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, England, 1856), 11:26. Hereafter cited as JD by volume and page.