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Response to Robert Benne

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RESPONSE LETTER

I would like to respond to Professor Benne's characteristically generous comments in the last issue of *Intersections* about my review essay of his and the other contributions to *The Future of Religious Colleges*, edited by Paul Dovre. It was certainly not my intention to misrepresent his position, and I am grateful for his clarifications. I believe our disagreements are minor alongside our fundamental agreement that the epistemology of the Enlightenment -- the dominant epistemology throughout higher education -- poses the most serious threat to the continuing vitality of our Lutheran colleges. That is why I began my essay with the arguments of Douglas Sloan that mainstream Protestantism had not succeeded in finding a way by which its truth claims could be adjudicated in the academy -- and returned to those arguments at the conclusion.

Practicing scholars in the academy, who are seldom preoccupied with epistemology, look for a methodology that can place conflicting explanations side-by-side and provide a means of adjudicating the relative power of those explanations. Despite the persuasiveness of many of its critics, the Enlightenment model continues to be the one to which most scholars will default. So long as practicing historians, for example, wish to speak to the larger profession rather than to a particular faith community, the specter of David Hume, even more so than that of Rene Descartes, will continue to hover over historical explanation.

Let me put the threat concretely. If I am lecturing to a class of students on early Mormon history, I do not find a compelling alternative to the Enlightenment model when evaluating the truth claims of The Book of Mormon. I respect, and make the class aware of, the very different interpretation of that text offered by a practicing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, but as a scholar exercising professional judgment, I do not grant that interpretation equal status as an "historical" account. I agree completely with Benne when he argues that the assumptions of my methodology act as a solvent on Mormon faith claims. The same methodological solvent has acted for two centuries to challenge basic Christian assertions about the "historical Jesus." As I write, Jews and Christians can pick up a popular news magazine and read how "scientific" archeology (as offered, for example, in *Uncovering the Bible*) is disproving their cherished beliefs about David, Solomon, the Exodus, and the entire biblical account of the history of ancient Israel.

In *The Meaning of Revelation*, H. Richard Niebuhr offered one possibility ("inner" and "outer" history) for reconciling faith and Enlightenment history. Walter Brueggemann offers another in *The Theology of the Old Testament* (treat the text as authoritative without concern for its "historicity"). Such approaches may be comforting to believers (personally, I find myself drawn to both), but they do not in my judgment offer an epistemology that can stand alongside of, and command equal respect with, the Enlightenment model in evaluating truth claims in the academy. That, I believe Benne and I agree, continues to be a fundamental challenge for church-related higher education.

Sincerely,

Baird Tipson
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