



STATEMENT DM506

What Does Jerusalem Have to Do with Provo?

by Francis J. Beckwith

The most prestigious professional group of Christian philosophers in North America is the Society of Christian philosophers (SCP). Founded in 1978, SCP is now the largest subgroup within the American Philosophical Association (APA), the leading professional society of American philosophers. According to SCP's statement of purpose, "the Society is broadly ecumenical in composition with respect to Christian denomination, theological perspective, and philosophical orientation. Membership is open to any person who classifies himself/herself as both a philosopher and a Christian."

As a member of SCP — as well as someone who has studied the major cults in America — I have long feared that the society's vague statement of faith would allow pseudo-Christian religious bodies to join and use its prestige to gain mainstream legitimacy. It appeared as though my worst fears might be coming true in December of 1991 when I received an invitation to attend and submit a paper at SCP's inaugural inter-mountain meeting at the Mormon church's Brigham Young University (BYU), March 12-14, 1992.

In January 1992 I submitted a paper for the meeting, "Mormon Theism and the Argument from Design: A Philosophical Analysis." In a January 25 letter Professor David Paulsen, the meeting coordinator, wrote: "I regret to report that our reader [evaluator] has not approved [your paper] for presentation at the meeting....To be appropriate for *this* forum, a paper must be of *general* interest to Christian philosophers; as is, your paper seems only of denominational interest." Although he invited me to chair a session (which I agreed to do), Paulsen went on to suggest that my paper would be acceptable if revised by "(i) omitting all references to Mormon theism, and (ii) setting out and evaluating the arguments of [philosophers] Hume, Kant, and Mill to the effect that the teleological data [i.e., evidence of design in creation] support some version of theistic finitism [i.e., that God is a finite being] better than any version of classical theism [that God is infinite]." Consequently, it was not the paper's quality that was at issue, but the fact that I addressed a philosophical argument for Mormon theism.

There are several problems with Paulsen's reasoning, two of which I will cite here. For one, my paper had nothing to do with "denominational interests," but was a straightforward philosophical paper. It dealt with a particular version of the design argument employed to support a particular version of finite theism — *Mormon* theism. To critique such an argument is no more an assault on Mormonism as a religious body than a critique of Anselm's ontological argument (a philosophical argument for the existence of God) would be an assault on Roman Catholicism. I did not argue for or against any denominational distinctives — whether the authority of the Pope, the doctrine of Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper, infant baptism, or any such thing.

Second, Paulsen contradictorily allowed at least one BYU professor to deliver a paper that was clearly denominational, as Paulsen defines that term. In this paper Dr. Daniel Graham makes a distinction between personal and ecclesiastical revelation, and argues that the latter "seems to have been lost from the early Christian church after the death of the apostles." This, of course, supports the Mormon view that prior to the revelation of Joseph Smith, genuine Christianity had been lost through universal apostasy following the end of the apostolic age.

Graham makes it clear throughout his paper that he is attacking the "Protestant" and "Catholic" views of revelation. In one place Graham takes swipes at both Protestants and Catholics: "Historically Protestants have both attempted to suppress dissension from

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their organizations by force, and have dissented frequently, proliferating organizations with differences of doctrine and organizational structure. If we return to the postulate of the unity of faith mentioned earlier, the Protestant movement seems rather far removed from the ideal. The Catholic movement is able to enforce greater unity, but it is questionable whether that unity derives from faith or from constraint” (p. 7).

How could such a paper, clearly “denominational” and not philosophical, be accepted while my paper, clearly philosophical and *not* “denominational,” was rejected? In a situation where 34 of 65 conference participants (paper presenters and session chairs) were either BYU professors or graduate students, and where all seven members of the paper selection committee — including Daniel Graham — were affiliated with BYU, there certainly was room for a professor from another institution to deliver a paper. Why, then, was my paper rejected? Frankly, I suppose the answer is that it would have brought a critical, though appropriately philosophical, perspective to the Mormon concept of God. And it would have exposed this bizarre concept to an influential group of philosophers whose members remain relatively ignorant of it. This wouldn’t have been good for the public relations of a religious body that is promoting an image of itself as “just another Christian denomination.” SCP’s presence at BYU served that purpose. My paper, no doubt, would not have.

Given SCP’s vague statement of faith, it would be next to impossible, and unethical, to remove the Mormons from the society. But what is disturbing about what happened at BYU is the way in which the apparent Mormons “took over” the meeting and censored any opinions that would have shined a light on their aberrant theology. This has no place in an academic setting, especially in a group of Christian philosophers who take their cue from both Socrates and Jesus: “The unexamined life is not worth living,” and, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”