

## Myth, Symbol, and Truth

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My path of commitment to and belief in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints developed around four basic religious questions I encountered as I grew up. First, is there a living God? Second, was Jesus a teacher worthy to be worshipped? Third, was Joseph Smith a prophet deserving of allegiance? And fourth, is our Latter-day Saint culture meritorious--worth defending and working for?

As these questions may reveal, I believed the intellect to be enormously important--more important than the heart, more important than tradition. If my mind could not confirm the truth of my religion, I felt I would be unsettled and apprehensive. Nevertheless, I felt very comfortable with poetry, music, art, drama, testimony, ritual, ceremony, and other expressions of religious feeling and thought. I was also comfortable with people who contended that religion was a matter of spirit, not mind, and that testimonies could come only through the assurance of the Holy Ghost.

My struggle with the first question began when I was a freshman at the University of Idaho and continued until the third year of graduate school. I acted as a believer, willing to assume there was a loving and powerful Creator. But I was not satisfied until I had studied the matter through and came to a conviction that my intellect could defend. My first satisfying experience was with Lowell Bennion's *What about Religion?* This manual, used in the church's Mutual Improvement Association for the youth, taught a crucial truth, namely that the restored gospel represents truth and enlightenment, not superstition and ignorance. Scholarship and education are part of the gospel; Mormonism undertakes to foster the discovery and spread of truth; God has commanded that we study and learn and become acquainted with all good books; the glory of God is intelligence; and it is impossible for a man or woman to be saved in ignorance (Doctrine and Covenants 90:15; 93:36; 88:118; 131:6). The manual also quoted with approval Brigham Young's statements in the *Journal of Discourses* that we accept truth no matter where it comes from, that Mormonism comprises all truth, and that there is an indissoluble relationship between religion and learning (1:334; 11:375; 15:160). These became articles of my religious faith and continue to remain so.

When I went to the university, my roommate, anxious to test my mettle, provoked me into reading *Why We Behave Like Human Beings*, by George A. Dorsey. This widely read treatise by a noted anthropologist and behavioral scientist gave a rather mechanistic interpretation of the ultimate questions and was not intended to inculcate faith in religion. Men and women were little more than complete biophysical machines. The book did not make me cynical, as it apparently had done to my roommate, but it did help to keep alive within me a quest for certainty. I vividly remember one phrase from it. Dorsey quoted Dr. John B. Watson, the famous behaviorist, as saying that thinking was no more

than "laryngeal itch." That stimulated me to read several books on organic evolution, including *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, by Charles Darwin.

Dissatisfied with the superficial and uninformed views that were being conveyed in certain publications to which I was referred, I concentrated on the works of philosophers. First I read *The Story of Philosophy*, by Will Durrant, which introduced me to the names of the most prominent persons who had pondered the great issues. For the same purpose I read C. E. M. Joad's *Guide to Philosophy* and Wilhelm Windelband's brilliant but tedious *History of Philosophy*. I then systematically read some of the great thinkers--Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, Josiah Royce, and William James. I read some philosophical novels: Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* and George Santayana's *The Last Puritan*. I read Robert Shafer's *Christianity and Naturalism* and George Santayana's *Reason in Religion*. I read the autobiographies of St. Augustine, John Henry Newman, and John Stuart Mill. I read several books that reviewed what the great thinkers had said about God, humanity, and the universe, and had personal experiences that confirmed their views in an intimate way. By the time I began my third year of graduate work, I had satisfied myself about the existence of God. And my religious experiences in my mature years have merely served to corroborate what I had then come to believe. While philosophers have not always argued that the existence of God is demonstrable, they have presented arguments that have been persuasive to me. My experiences suggests that Francis Bacon was correct when he contended that "a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion."

My conceptions of Jesus emerged when I was still in high school. I must confess that I read the Bible through when I was thirteen but, country boy that I was, I was turned off by the King James Version, which was to me a strange and unfamiliar idiom. When I went to the university, George Tanner, my LDS Institute of Religion instructor, gave direction to my search for Jesus as a person, as a leader. He introduced me to new translations of the Bible, and I read through the New Testament version of James Moffatt and Edgar Goodspeed, and Richard G. Moulton's *Modern Reader's Bible*. These were very helpful and I still often use them. At his suggestion I also read Shirley Jackson Case's *Jesus: A New Biography*, Ernest Renan's *The Life of Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, and James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ*. All of these persuaded me that Jesus was, indeed, a historical figure, that the values he taught were superior to anything humanity had ever devised, that Jesus was indeed a divine person, and that his life provided a model worth imitating in meeting today's difficult problems.

As to Joseph Smith, I am grateful that I was not introduced to some of the views of his philosophy and theology that are being advocated today--views of his life and thought that clash with impressions I have acquired and confirmed in my

years of research in the Church Historian's Office. I was very fortunate in having been given, as a teenager, John Henry Evans's book *Joseph Smith, An American Prophet*. I read the books while still in high school and was very impressed with the prophet. I remember giving some two-and-one-half minute talks that were based on the book. Unquestionably Joseph had a marvelous intellect and also acute spiritual sensitivity. He honestly sought to resolve the many intellectual, spiritual, social, and personal problems that arose in his lifetime. He was an imaginative thinker and leader. He accepted truth from many sources. And he had good values; people were more important than money, and the law of eternal progression pointed us all in the right direction.

What about the prophet's accounts of his own experiences: the first vision? the visit of the angel Moroni to tell him about the golden plates of the Book of Mormon? the return of John the Baptist to confer the Aaronic Priesthood, and of Peter, James, and John to confer the Melchizedek? Can one accept all of the miraculous events that surrounded the restoration of the gospel? I was fortunate to have read Santayana's *Reason in Religion* before confronting these historical problems. I do not say that I fully understood it or that I agreed with his basic premise, but the book gave me a concept that has been helpful ever since--that truth may be expressed not only through science and abstract reason but also through stories, testimonies, and narratives of personal experience; not only through erudite scholarship but also through poetry, drama, and historical novels. Santayana used the term "myth"--a term well understood in recent religious literature--to refer to the expression of religious and moral truths in symbolic language.

The word "myth" has some pejorative connotations in modern English. It can mean a story of belief asserted to be true but without any basis in fact. It can be an invented explanation of some natural or historical phenomenon or a wholly fictitious supposition or belief. However, this is not what Santayana had in mind. What he called myth was a traditional account of events and happenings that have religious significance. To say that something is a myth is not to say that it was deliberately fabricated but to identify it as an account that may or may not have a determinable basis of fact or natural explanation. The truth of a myth is beyond empirical or historical accessibility. Examples are the Christian story of the Resurrection, the Virgin Birth, and the creation of the world as described in the Book of Genesis. These are ways of explaining events or truths having religious significance that may be either symbolical or historical.

To go one step further, even in the Shakespearean tragedy where, unlike episodes of Mormon and Christian history the characters and events are wholly fictional, one can find philosophical and religious truth. Examples of novels disclosing religious truths that I had read during the formative stages of my religious beliefs include: Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*, William Henry Hudson's *Green Mansions*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*, and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. And,

for that matter, the philosophical drama in the Old Testament's Book of Job.

Because of my introduction to the concept of symbolism as a means of expressing religious truth, I was never preoccupied with the question of the historicity of Joseph Smith's first vision--though I find the evidence overwhelming that it did occur--or of the many reported epiphanies in Mormon, Christian, or Hebrew history. I am prepared to accept them as historical or as metaphorical, as symbolical, or as precisely what happened. That they convey religious truth is the essential issue, and of this I have never had any doubt. Ineffable experiences, messages, and value affirmations do not always lend themselves to scientific, literal, or precise articulation. It does not bother me at all that, in describing a religious experience that transcends his or her ability to express it, a narrator, a testimony-giver, often resorts to traditional phrases in presenting it. Indeed, I do it myself, as those who have heard me speak in testimony meetings can vouch. The Italians have a useful expression for this sort of thing: "Se non e vero, e ben trovato," which means, roughly, "Whether it is literally true or not, it is still true."

This brings me to my fourth basic question: Are Mormon values, policies, practices, and leadership sufficiently superior to justify a lifetime of devotion? Can one work as effectively in furthering the work of God through Mormonism as through other causes? I came to the conclusion that Mormonism was indeed a positive influence worth contributing to and perpetuating.

In 1985 Alfred Knopf published Brigham Young: American Moses. In preparing that biography I learned that Brigham saw and read the Book of Mormon in 1830, when he was twenty-nine. Why then did he wait almost two years before joining the infant Church of Christ, as it was then called? When asked to explain this, he replied that he wanted time to observe the character of those who were leading the movement. "I watched," he said, "to see whether good common sense was manifest" (Journal of Discourses 8:38). After twenty-two months of observation and investigation, he decided that the movement did indeed manifest "good sense." He joined in 1832 and spent the rest of his life laboring on its behalf.

My examination of Mormon cultural institutions did not begin until 1941, when I was twenty-three and in my second year of graduate work. This study was the result of my surprising discovery at that time that there was a historically based Mormon culture. I had grown up on a farm in a non-Mormon community in southwestern Idaho, the son of parents who had grown up in North Carolina, Tennessee, southern Indiana, and Oklahoma. Neither parent had had any experience with the Mormon way of life. There were no Mormon schoolteachers or administrators in our local school system, and none of our close neighbors was Mormon.

Then I went to the University of Idaho, where there were few Mormons in attendance. (At that time, most Idaho Mormons went to Brigham Young University or to Utah State University in Logan.) After four years in Moscow,

Idaho, I went to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill where I was the only Latter-day Saint in the university and the community. So all these years I was outside the Mormon cultural community.

My major at the University of North Carolina was economic theory. While doing some teaching at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, I took a minor in agricultural economics and rural sociology. One day, as I was perusing some books for a class, I happened to come across a description of the Mormon village in a new book on *The Sociology of Rural Life*, by the young sociologist T. Lynn Smith. I did not know at the time that T. Lynn was a Latter-day Saint and a graduate of BYU, but I was absolutely fascinated with his pages on the Mormon village--something I had never heard of before. I hunted for discussions on the subject in other texts and was delighted to find that Mormon rural life was of great interest to sociologists.

About the same time, partly as the result of the curiosity aroused by discovery that there was a recognized Mormon rural life pattern, I ran across an article by Bernard DeVoto in *Harper's Magazine* which was about his grandfather, a Mormon farmer who had lived at Uinta, southeast of Ogden; and also two articles by Juanita Brooks, whom I had not heard of before, that were also in *Harper's*: "The Water's In" and "A Close-Up of Polygamy." These introduced me to the literature on Mormon culture--something I had not been aware of because I had not grown up in Utah or in a Mormon village. Basically, I have spent the rest of my life trying to keep abreast of this literature and trying to make some contributions myself to that body of writing.

My study of this literature very quickly told me that Mormon culture was praiseworthy--that my people did indeed believe in education and were willing to sacrifice to put their children through college; that Mormon educators were remarkably loyal to the church, were well respected, and sought to preserve the best values of the culture; that the people were not provincial but, partly because of missionary contacts, had an interest in the peoples of the world; and among the influential leaders of the faith were a number of impressive intellectuals. This was a great church, I came to believe. It perpetuated fine ideals of home, school, and community life; its approach and philosophy enabled its members to reconcile religion with science and higher learning; its strong social tradition taught its members to be caring and compassionate; and its strong organizational capability empowered its people to build better communities. As Brigham Young said, a central doctrine of Mormonism is that God's primary work is through people, and so our principal concern was with the here and now.

In short, it was a religion and a church worth working for. I went into the American armed services soon after reaching these conclusions, and upon my return at the end of World War II, I expected to live in a Mormon village to rear my children and to perform my life's labor.

After three years overseas in North Africa and Italy, I did return, obtained a professorship at Utah State University in the Mormon village of Logan, and remained there to rear our family in what Grace and I always regarded as sacred space, because in Logan we actually experienced the way of life we had read and dreamed about. Except for three sabbaticals, we did not leave our beloved Cache Valley until I was called to be Church Historian in 1972. With my appointment, as well as the appointments of others to the historical department, we inaugurated a number of books on aspects of Latter-day Saint history; began a series of important edited documents, beginning with Brigham Young's letters to his sons; discovered and catalogued previously unknown historical materials; assisted archivists with the preparation of registers and guides to archive collections; gave papers on LDS history at historical conventions; and produced articles for church magazines, professional journals, and encyclopedias. In my capacity as Church Historian I was able to examine the most intimate records of the church--records that are replete with faith-promoting incidents that served to strengthen my belief in the divinity of the latter-day work. Particularly meaningful to me was my private knowledge of the divine circumstances that led up to the announcement in 1978 by the First Presidency that the priesthood might be conferred on all worthy males without regard to race or color.

Although now released from the position of Church Historian, I am still devoted to carrying out responsibilities that I trust continue to help build the Kingdom of God on earth. Many satisfying spiritual experiences, as well as my continued study of the Saints and their leaders throughout our history, have intellectually and emotionally validated my decision to serve the faith that I committed myself to many years ago, and that I believe to be based on true principles. "Blessed is he who has found his work," wrote Thomas Carlyle; "he need to ask no other blessedness."

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