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Some Notes on Faith and Reason

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SOME NOTES ON FAITH AND REASON

Daniel C. Peterson

Philosophers and theologians, believers and unbelievers, friends to faith and enemies, scientists, historians — these and many others have devoted a very great deal of time and attention for centuries to the relationship between faith and reason.

There is little if any general consensus on the matter, and I have no intention, in just a few pages here, of trying to settle things. I'm inclined, though, to share a few thoughts on the topic from my Latter-day Saint perspective.

No Uncommitted Thinking

What we now know as Section 4 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received very early in the history of the Restoration — in February 1829. That was more than a year before the publication of the Book of Mormon and the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and it was roughly three months prior to the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods.

In that revelation, given through the Prophet Joseph Smith to his father in Harmony, Pennsylvania, the Lord announced:

Now behold, a marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men. Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day. (D&C 4:1–2)

The mind, according to this revelation, serves an instrumental role in the building up of the Lord's Kingdom. I take this to mean that, just as we are to exert ourselves to the extent of our physical strength in God's service, we are to use every bit of intellectual ability, training, education, and skill, where appropriate and needed, in doing the Lord's work.

In at least one sense, this is easily understandable. The metaphor of redemption that runs through scriptural accounts of the Atonement of Christ — so familiar to us that we seldom remember that it *is* a metaphor — is borrowed from, among other things, the slave markets that existed in every sizeable town of the ancient world. "Redemption" signified deliverance from captivity or bondage.

Jesus, our Redeemer, has purchased us with the blood of his sacrifice on our behalf from the bondage of Satan. Provided we accept the Savior's action — we are graciously allowed the freedom to do so or to reject it, even though, from the perspective of eternity, only a fool would prefer to remain in bondage to the devil — we belong to him. He is a kindly master, and he allows us far more freedom than our previous owner or owners did, but we remain his. "I beseech you therefore, brethren," writes the apostle Paul to the Roman saints, "by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

We are to place everything upon the altar, to consecrate not merely our money and our time but our skills and abilities. All of them.

In May 1829, preparatory to missionary service, Hyrum Smith received this revelatory admonition from the Lord through the Prophet, his younger brother:

Seek not to declare my word, but first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then,

if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men. But now hold your peace; study my word which hath gone forth among the children of men, and also study my word which shall come forth among the children of men, or that which is now translating, yea, until you have obtained all which I shall grant unto the children of men in this generation, and then shall all things be added thereto. (D&C 11:21–22)

When the Latter-day Saint school system — which now includes high school, college, and university education as well as seminaries and institutes — was first being established in Kirtland, Ohio, the instrumental use of the mind (and, thus, of education and training) was a major priority.

“And I give unto you a commandment,” said the Lord through Joseph Smith at the end of 1832 or the beginning of 1833,

that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand; Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms — That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you. Behold, I sent you out

to testify and warn the people, and it becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor. (D&C88:77–81)

Ideally, there is to be no uncommitted thought among the disciples of Christ. In his second letter to the Saints at Corinth, the apostle Paul writes of “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Here is the New International Version’s treatment of that overall passage from 2 Corinthians. Notice that it, too, has a missionary focus:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3–5 (NIV))

But if the thrust of this passage is for missionaries to seek to capture the thinking and imagination of others for Christ, surely it’s reasonable to assume that their own thoughts and imaginations, ought also, ideally, to be subjected to Jesus as Lord.

And why not? If all of our actions should be brought into conformity with the Gospel, why should our thoughts remain unsubmitted and, to that extent, unredeemed?

“Be not conformed to this world,” wrote Paul to the Romans:

But be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:2)

Of course, it is the work of more than a lifetime, and perhaps the work of a very long period of training and effort beyond the grave, to bring ourselves — both our actions and our thoughts — into complete conformity with the divine will. But that is the plain goal, and, it seems, the overall purpose of the Plan of Salvation.

No Unthinking Commitment

Moreover, if there is to be no uncommitted thought in Christian discipleship, there is also to be no unthinking commitment. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine how there *could* be. The point of bringing all the resources of our mind to bear on building the Kingdom is, precisely, to think about how to do it and how to do it better.

That seems trivially obvious.

But, here, I would like to look at another aspect of thoughtful faith. The fact is that none of us can believe without at least some intellectual investment in our belief. At a minimum, for example, we need to know what it is that we believe. Faith inescapably has content; it cannot avoid focusing on at least some ideas.

But it also involves judgments as to what is believable and what isn't, what makes sense and what doesn't.

Obviously, not everybody is a scholar. Not everybody will approach the gospel in the manner of students in a graduate seminar or academics debating at a scholarly conference. (And I candidly hope that nobody, not even the most intellectually inclined among us, will view it as solely a matter of academic interest, however intense. It's far too important for that.) I'm not talking solely about judgments regarding the Book of Mormon and the Isaiah problem, say, or concerning archaeology and the Nephites, although I certainly include such matters.

But the ordinary faith of ordinary people still involves trying to make sense of things — of suffering and death, for

example, of seemingly unanswered prayers, of the application of gospel principles to daily life, of how the teachings of Christ and of the living prophets give meaning to our earthly existence, with all its ups and downs. If the doctrines of Christianity and Mormonism didn't help believers to understand life, or if (even worse) they seemed to make it more confusing, few if any believers would remain — not even among the least academic or scholarly.

There has been a scripturally warranted place for thinking from the very beginnings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Even an essential place. It's not just an option. In a revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery in April 1829, the Lord said:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong. (D&C 9:7–9)

Thinking is, thus, inextricably bound up even with the process of revelation itself. And such thinking is open to, and indeed, inevitable for, every believer.

Indeed, the history of Mormonism begins, amidst “a strife of words and a contest about opinions,” when Joseph Smith's desperate personal questions drive him to the Bible and then to his knees. He wasn't asking academic questions. He wasn't merely idly curious. He was hoping to make sense of the existential situation in which he found himself.

In his 1838 account of his First Vision, the Prophet specifically says that “[his] mind was called up to serious reflection,” recalls that “[his] mind became somewhat partial to the Methodists” at one point, remembers that “[his] mind at times was greatly excited,” and describes the confusion that he felt as a very young boy in the face of the “reason and sophistry” deployed by the various competing religious factions in his neighborhood. He wanted forgiveness for his sins and to know which church to join (Joseph Smith — History 1:5–14).

The restoration of the priesthood and the experience of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon occurred in response to questions sparked by passages in the still incomplete translation of that book (Joseph Smith — History 1:68–73).¹ Many of the revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants, too, came as answers to questions posed by the Prophet Joseph Smith and by others. President Joseph F. Smith received his great 1918 vision of the redemption of the dead as he pondered scriptural passages regarding the atonement of Christ and the condition of those in the world of spirits (D&C 138:1–11).² Likewise, President Spencer W. Kimball’s 1978 revelation on priesthood “came to him after extended meditation and prayer” (D&C — Official Declaration 2). The 1997 revelation to President Gordon B. Hinckley authorizing the construction of smaller and simpler temples was given in response to his reflections about the problem of making the

1 See also the prefatory note to Doctrine and Covenants 17, which specifically lists 2 Nephi 11:3, 27:12, and Ether 5:2–4 as the passages providing the background for the story of the Witnesses.

2 It probably isn’t coincidental that he was meditating on such topics as the end of World War I, with its roughly 17 million military dead and missing; the great 1918 influenza pandemic, which would kill somewhere between 50 and 100 million people worldwide; and the sudden and untimely death of his son, Elder Hyrum Mack Smith of the Council of the Twelve Apostles.

blessings of the temple more easily accessible to the Saints, specifically to those in Colonia Juárez, Mexico.³

Revelations, however, come to and through the hearts and minds of imperfect, fallible human beings. They're given through error-prone mortals, and they're interpreted by error-prone mortals. They will always demand intellectual effort to be properly understood and applied.

“For now,” wrote the apostle Paul to the Saints at Corinth — notably including even himself, a great apostle and prophet, in his generalization — “we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).⁴ Part of the task of mortality, though, surely, is to clean that glass as much as possible, or, more accurately (since the ancient *esoptron*, a “looking glass” in the world of the King James translators, was actually made of metal rather than of glass), to polish the mirror in which we perceive the divine. We do so by developing spiritual sensitivity and through repentance, obviously, but, surely, we also do it through clear thinking and reflection.

Brigham Young recognized this as one of the challenges of life in a fallen world. “I do not even believe,” he said,

that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fulness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, groveling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all

3 Virginia Hatch Romney and Richard O. Cowan, “President Hinckley’s Inspiration,” *The Colonia Juárez Temple: A Prophet’s Inspiration* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), accessed June 6, 2014, <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/colonia-juarez-temple-prophet’s-inspiration/2-president-hinckley’s-inspiration>.

4 The King James Version’s *darkly* renders the Greek *en ainigmati*. Compare English *enigma* and *enigmatic*.

its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities....

If an angel should come into this congregation, or visit any individual of it, and use the language he uses in heaven, what would we be benefited? Not any, because we could not understand a word he said. When angels come to visit mortals, they have to condescend to and assume, more or less, the condition of mortals, they have to descend to our capacities in order to communicate with us. I make these remarks to show you that the kingdom of heaven is not yet complete upon the earth. Why? Because the people are not prepared to receive it in its completeness, for they are not complete or perfect themselves.

The laws that the Lord has given are not fully perfect, because the people could not receive them in their perfect fulness; but they can receive a little here and a little there, a little today and a little tomorrow, a little more next week, and a little more in advance of that next year, if they make a wise improvement upon every little they receive; if they do not, they are left in the shade, and the light which the Lord reveals will appear darkness to them, and the kingdom of heaven will travel on and leave them groping. Hence, if we wish to act upon the fulness of the knowledge that the Lord designs to reveal, little by little, to the inhabitants of the earth, we must improve upon every little as it is revealed.⁵

The Prophet Joseph Smith, who had as much experience with divine revelation as anybody in modern times or, for

5 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 2:314.

that matter, in any period of human history, also knew that revelation and scripture weren't entirely transparent or always completely perspicuous. Lamenting the limits of human communication in a late 1832 letter to William W. Phelps, he wrote:

Oh Lord God, deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.⁶

Critics of Mormonism sometimes attack Latter-day Saint scholars and apologists for, as the critics see it, adjusting Mormon doctrine and views of Mormon history in order to align them better with the latest science and scholarship. And, obviously, this criticism isn't without potential merit because there are limits beyond which the claims of the Restoration cannot be adjusted or attenuated without surrendering the essence of Mormonism, which makes it distinctive, and (in the view of believers) powerful.

And, surely, some degree of tension with the ever changing consensus of science and scholarship is unavoidable. If we scurry too hard to make our theology match the latest journal articles, we're likely to find our theology out of sync with the next issue of that very journal. The final synthesis of science and religion is still quite some distance away — partially because scientific discovery itself is nowhere near coming to a halt. I wouldn't expect it before the Millennium, at the very least.

But, surely, given the fact that our understanding of the gospel and of the scriptures isn't infallible, there can be no serious objection, in principle, to fine-tuning our concepts and images as we gain more information. Are the critics really suggesting that our views of scripture, our understandings of

6 Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church*, 1:299 (November 27, 1832).

scripture, and our conceptions of the gospel should be static, frozen, and rigid? That they cannot grow as we ourselves grow, mature, and gain experience? At what age, exactly, should a Latter-day Saint's doctrinal and historical understanding be declared unalterable?

Some may say they cannot rely on or trust people who, having written something, later change their minds. But how could they ever trust someone or rely on someone who, claiming to be committed to the truth, never learned anything new and never altered a viewpoint?⁷

Science and scholarship are always, or, anyway, should always be, open to correction. This is because human reason is fallible, human understanding finite, and human culture constrains the pursuit of both science and scholarship. There are things that we can see that our ancestors simply couldn't, and there are things that we cannot see that our posterity will deem completely obvious.

But those same constraints apply to our grasp of revelation and of scripture as well. Revelation and scripture don't lose their value because of human restraints any more than the enterprises of science and scholarship do, but recognition of our limits, of our finitude, and of our historical situation should make us humble.

The great Galileo Galilei famously wrote of two books from which humans might learn about God — nature and the scriptures. His view seems sound, and I cannot see why we shouldn't also describe the two books as reason and revelation, thus permitting us to include not only the physical and biological sciences but scholarship (including history and archaeology) among the sources in which we can discern truth about life and about God's dealings.

7 Compare to Joseph Fielding McConkie, "Bruce R. McConkie: A Special Witness," *Mormon Historical Studies* 14/2 (Fall 2013): 201.

I've always been fond of a formula that seems to have emerged from the 17th century Dutch Reformed Church: *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*, which means "The Church is always to be reformed."

I don't cite this to suggest that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is corrupt and, thus, in need of a Reformation. Please don't come away with that impression. But I do regard it as obvious that the membership of the Church, each individual one of us, needs to continually monitor what we're doing and saying and teaching, in order to be certain that they're in line with the gospel and the will of God — and to correct them if they're not. *Semper reformanda*. Like a car that always needs a hand on the wheel to keep it from veering gradually and often imperceptibly off to the right or the left, we should be always correcting.

Scholars have their role in this, too. We should constantly be trying to refine our understanding, deepen our knowledge, avoid error, share new knowledge and understanding, and, as gently as possible, correct error where necessary. Additionally, we should be constantly looking and working to bring both reason and faith into convergence.

Of course, ultimate responsibility for guiding and correcting the Church rests with those divinely called to lead it. But all Latter-day Saints have the inescapable duty of thinking and the divine obligation to learn and to do as well as they can. In its modest way, those associated with The Interpreter Foundation seek to help in this process of building a stronger, more knowledgeable, and ever more thoughtful faith among the Latter-day Saints — emphatically including ourselves.

I close with a quotation from Joseph Smith that recognizes both the need for reason as instrument (as usual, in a missionary context) and for deep study and thought in trying to more adequately understand the gospel:

The things of God are of deep import, and time and experience and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O Man, if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse; he must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart, none but fools will trifle with the souls of men.⁸

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8 Dean C. Jessee and John W. Welch, "Revelations in Context: Joseph Smith's Letter from Liberty Jail, March 20, 1839," *BYU Studies* 39/3 (2000): 137 (spelling and punctuation standardized).

