

## Paradox and Discipleship

by Terryl L. Givens

G. K. Chesterton wrote, famously, that “the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed forever in size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms forever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its center, it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travelers.” I am not as much a mystic as Chesterton. I do not believe, as he wrote in the same passage, that “as long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity.” Nevertheless, I think his remarks on Christianity provide a useful starting point for some reflections about the paradox at the heart of Joseph Smith’s thought. So my intention today is to suggest some new ways one might want to think about Mormon faith, doctrine, and culture.

The honeybee has an important place in Mormon culture. Part of Utah’s state seal, the beehive has become so identified with Mormonism to be, in Daniel Ludlow’s words, a “communal coat of arms.” Ironically, perhaps, the honeybee serves as the most powerful emblem of the scope and ramifications of the most radical paradigm shift of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the Darwinian revolution. The honeybee, Darwin points out in his *Origin of Species*, has a glaring defect as a creature. Its poison is effective in killing prey, enabling it to defend itself and its nest. But as you know, the bee’s sting comes at the cost of its own life. Darwin speculates that this is because the bee’s stinger was originally “a boring and serrated instrument,” probably used for extracting food from fibrous sources. It was therefore, in his words, “not perfected for its present purpose” of defense. The question, of course, is why not, by this time? Why did the evolutionary process cease, why did natural selection not accomplish its end, of making the bee as perfect as

possible? Certainly a bee that can kill *without* sacrificing its life is an improvement over one that cannot. A simple smoothing of the bee's serrated edge would do the trick quite nicely and efficiently. Why was the bee's progress toward species perfection aborted so precipitously and—in the case of myriad individuals and even hives—calamitously?

This is Darwin's explanation: "Natural selection tends only to make each organic being as perfect as, or slightly more perfect than, the other inhabitants of the same country with which it comes into competition. And we see that this is the standard of perfection attained under nature." And then he adds this declaration: "Natural selection will not produce absolute perfection." What he means is this: the law of natural selection, what Spencer will call the principle of survival of the fittest, ensures that any competition for limited resources will favor those who are in any way advantaged over their competitors. It will weed out those who are inferior or even mediocre, and allow to prevail those who have greater strength, agility, speed, or survival skills. The long term effect of this principle is to breed beings that are, in Darwin's terms, "more perfect than their peers. But the law of natural selection also has a striking limitation, and this is what he means, by saying it can never produce absolute perfection. And this limitation is perfectly illustrated by the common honeybee. In the struggle for survival, the bee's development, even with a flawed stinger, was sufficient to securely establish its position in the natural world. Once it achieved species equilibrium, and lacking conflict and opposition to further challenge, stimulate, and refine its development, its progress was essentially halted.

To some extent, any religious belief that raises its head unabashedly in a secular society is bound to encounter resistance and hostility. The conflicts between naturalistic paradigms and supernaturalism, between the intellectual heritage of Enlightenment and liberal humanism on the one hand, and Tertullian reveling in absurdity and improbability and modern fundamentalist anti-intellectualism on the other; between the brute authoritarianism of institutionalized religion, and the heady freedoms of radical individualism—these and kindred collisions have driven a

reasonable, old-fashioned life of faith underground and many a latter-day Saint student and scholar into exile. But there are reasons to think the conflicts in Mormonism may be particularly acute. First, is the simple anecdotal evidence that graduate programs take a heavy toll on Mormon intellectuals; delving into Mormon history, professionally or otherwise, takes a further toll. Then there is the problem of Mormon antipathy to theologizing. Unlike Catholic and Protestant traditions that have spent centuries systematizing their belief systems, sorting out wrinkles, resolving contradictions, and moving toward a harmonious whole, Mormon leaders long considered theology a dirty word, resisted dogma, and even debated whether publishing Joseph's revelations was a bad precedent. The Pratts made tentative steps in the direction of a grand synthesis, but Roberts' further work was stymied and subsequent leaders have not shown particular interest in synthesis or reconciliation or clarification of historical and theological discontinuities. Finally, I want to argue, many of these cultural and personal consequences might be construed as a tragedy of misapprehension. What if Mormons have mistaken tension and discordance for richness and dynamism, insolubility for complexity, and intractable contradiction for mere paradox? Because paradox, as I believe, is a contradiction that is only apparent. Paradox is the sign of a healthy universe, voracious enough to insist on having its cake and eating it too. Paradox is a sign of richness and plenitude. It is Adam and Eve, reaching for both godly aspiration and childlike submission. It is priesthood that is power with no compulsion. It is an infinitely powerful God who is sovereign of the universe and as vulnerable to pain as the widow with a wayward son. It is a triumphant Christ whose victory was in his meekness.

Those not intellectually adventuresome enough to embrace the paradox, find easy refuge falling to one side or the other of the tightrope. Capitulating to blind faith is no faith. And posturing as the enlightened apostate who grew out of his innocence is neither enlightened nor innocent. Eliminating alternatives is certainly easier than finding a way, as Joseph urged, to "stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations

of the darkest abyss.” I am reminded of a country church I passed on the road to Boston a few months back. On the marquee outside the church the pastor had put these words:

“Soft pews; No hell.” How comforting to body and mind alike!

A recent biographer of the great philosopher Spinoza wrote, “He rejected the orthodoxy of his day not because he believed less, but because he believed more.”<sup>1</sup> That, in a nutshell, is my challenge to you today. Be as voracious as Mercy’s father, in the monumental work of Virginia Sorenson, *A Little Lower than the Angels*. Incredulous at her father’s capacity for belief, Mercy had asked enviously as a child, ““But you believe it, Father, you really do?” ‘I believe all I can, Mercy girl, all I can. Everywhere I go I’m looking for more good things to believe. Even if it’s the be-all and the end-all here, then we’d better keep busy believing good things. Hadn’t we?”<sup>2</sup>

So let me take the next minutes to celebrate paradox. Then I will conclude with some remarks about that paradox of most relevance and urgency to ourselves. Frederick Barnard points to Herder’s observation that a people “may have the most sublime virtues in some respect and blemishes in others . . . and reveal the most astonishing contradictions and incongruities.” Therefore, Barnard writes, “a cultural whole is not necessarily a way of referring to a state of blissful harmony; it may just as conceivably refer to a field of tension.”<sup>3</sup>

A field of tension seems a particularly apt way to characterize Mormon thought. It may be that all systems of belief rooted in the notion of a God who dies have, as Chesterton suggests, “a collision and a contradiction” at their heart.<sup>4</sup> Yet Mormonism, a system in which Joseph Smith collapsed sacred distance to bring a whole series of opposites into radical juxtaposition, seems especially rife with paradox—or tensions that only appear to be logical contradictions.

## **1. Freedom and authority**

In *People of Paradox*, I review four paradoxes that I believe have been powerful catalysts to Mormon identity and Mormon cultural production. The first paradox is the polarity of authoritarianism and individualism. It is in the context of those two competing values that

Mormon artists and intellectuals have had to negotiate their place in our culture. The consequence of these two traditions of emphasis on freedom and on authority is an ever-present tension in Mormon culture between submission to an ecclesiastical authoritarianism without parallel in modern Christianity and an emphasis on and veneration for the principle of individual moral agency so pronounced that it leads even careful observers into major misperceptions (Mormons are frequently accused of Pelagianism, for example). Without moral independence, says the LDS scripture, “there is no existence.” “Why are you offering sacrifice?” asks the angel. “I know not, save the Lord commanded me,” answers the righteous Adam. For intellectuals and artists, the tension is especially stark. Intellectual inquiry and artistic exploration should thrive in a culture like the Mormon one that opposes as evil any attempt “to deprive us of the slightest respect for free agency.”<sup>5</sup> At the same time, LDS artists and intellectuals find themselves constrained by the church’s insistence that all inspiration is not equal, and discover that the same prophetic prerogatives that impeded Cowdery’s exercise of autonomy may cramp the style of maverick intellectuals and artists today.

The resulting collision of views and valuations is inevitable. No consensus is ever likely to emerge in the Mormon community about the proper reconciliation of authority and independence, faithfulness and freedom. This cultural divide between so-called Iron Rodders and Liahona Mormons is not always so neat and precise, but more importantly, the divide Richard Poll has described is one that, at some level, operates *within* thoughtful Mormons as much as *among* them. That is why both institutional conflict and personal anguish will continue to characterize artists and intellectuals who struggle to find their comfortable place in a culture where proponents of opposing views each cite scripture and prophetic precedent for support.

## **2. Exile and election**

The Mormon emphasis on election is traceable to the first recorded spiritual experience of the young Joseph Smith. Long before he ever heard the word Mormon, or had an inkling of

what his life or ministry would stand *for*, he learned what he was to be set *against*. Having knelt in a wooded grove on his family's farm, and inquired of God what church he should join to find salvation, he found he was not to be a fellow traveler with any Christian then alive: "I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt" (JS-History 1:19). Like many religious revolutionaries, Joseph early saw his relationship to the world in thoroughly adversarial terms. "I was destined to prove a disturber and an annoyer of his kingdom; else why should the powers of darkness combine against me? Why the opposition and persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy? . (JS-Hist 1:22). Less than two years before his death, he would boast that "deep water is what I am wont to swim in. It all has become a second nature to me; and I feel, like Paul, to glory in tribulation" (D&C 127:2). Jonathan Edwards similarly gloried, "I am born to be a man of strife,"<sup>6</sup> and Luther's self-conception was famously an embattled one.

What was different about Joseph's posture was how effectively he imbued an entire people with this same sense of hostile separation from the world. Individually and institutionally, Mormons continue to work through the paradox of an existence that is both Eden and Exile, that embraces difference even as it yearns for integration. . The cost of chosen status appears recurrently in the Mormon psyche as both nostalgia and alienation; their art and literature reveal a recurrent unease with such difference. Isolation is often felt as a burden of exclusion and is frequently transformed into a quest for connections and universals. Mormons insist on the need for a gospel restoration, but then feel the sting of being excluded from the fold of Christendom they have just dismissed as irredeemably apostate.

The ancient Israelites, millennia earlier, were faced with a similar challenge. They too were imbued with a belief that they were "an holy people unto the Lord thy God . . . chosen . . . to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6).

Yet exclusivity and self-sufficiency are hard to maintain through a history of bondage, occupation, and the *Realpolitik* of international affairs. Israel found a powerful solution and potent type for resolving the tension as they prepared to depart Egypt. At God's urging, the fleeing Hebrews availed themselves of their captors' "jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment," and thus accrued the heathen materials that they would mold and fashion into the accoutrements, wealth, and resources of their civilization-in-exile (Ex. 3:22). Centuries later, artists and intellectuals of Europe would justify their emulation of pagan models by reference to this archetypal "spoiling of the Egyptians."

In the dispensation heralded by Joseph Smith, the Saints were, like the Hebrews before them, commanded to "stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world" (D&C 78:14). At the same time, as Brigham declared, "we believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it."<sup>7</sup> So like their exiled predecessors, without the benefits of social stability, abundant resources, or a prosperous prehistory, Mormons were surrounded by the cultural riches of a host culture that offered both temptation and promise. Once again, the challenge would be to exploit the accoutrements of that host culture without suffering contamination or loss of mission and identity in the process. The difficulty in "spoiling the Egyptians" has ever been the same: to turn the plundered riches into temple adornments rather than golden calves.

### **3. The Sacred and the banal**

The third paradox refers to one of the most culturally—and theologically—potent innovations of the Mormon world-view, and one that appears more as a collapse of polarities than as a tension between them: the disintegration of sacred distance. With God an exalted man, man a God in embryo, the family a prototype for heavenly sociality, and Zion a city with dimensions and blueprints, Joseph rewrote conventional dualisms as thoroughgoing monism. The resulting paradox is manifest in the recurrent invasion of the banal into the realm of the holy, and the

infusion of the sacred into the realm of the quotidian. Brigham Young saw this paradox in highly favorable terms. “When I saw Joseph Smith,” he wrote, “he took heaven, figuratively speaking, and brought it down to earth; and he took the earth, brought it up, and opened up, in plainness and simplicity, the things of God; and that is the beauty of his mission.” The New York Herald’s James Gordon Bennett expressed the situation a little differently: [The Mormons] are busy all the time establishing factories to make saints and crockery ware, also prophets and white paint.”

The principal danger here is that the sacred as a category threatens to disappear altogether (and with it, perhaps, worshipful reverence). That is because in this metaphysical monism, transcendence is virtually annihilated as a possibility. As the poet Samuel Coleridge put the case, “The very ground of all Miracle is the heterogeneity of Spirit and Matter.”<sup>8</sup> But even this ontological distinction is vanquished by Joseph’s unrelenting metaphysical monism: “there is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter” (D&C 131:7-8).

If God is shorn of ineffability and transcendence, or is construed in human terms, how does one find the reverential awe that moves to true worshipfulness? If Jesus is our “big brother,” how can he be our Lord and God? Reverence before the Almighty demands new ways of conceiving in such a reconfigured heaven and earth. But the dilemmas for the artist are especially vexing: in a universe devoid of transcendence and sacred distance (at least as conventionally constructed), how can wonder flourish?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning made this poetic observation:

Earth's crammed with heaven,

And every common bush afire with God:

But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.

Our own experience in cultural Mormonism would seem to attest that only burning bushes can tolerate such proximity to unmasked glory without becoming consumed on the one hand or too familiar on the other.

#### **4. Certainty and searching**

The prophet Joseph emphasized in his religious thinking the possibility of epistemological certainty even as he elaborated a theology of audacious scope and a program of eternal learning. Smith made intellectual pursuit a quest of holiness, founding a School of Prophets, establishing a fledgling university, and devoting himself to the study of ancient languages and lore even as he claimed to bypass the learned systems of men with his powers of seership and translation. So it is that Mormons today inherit a tradition rooted relatively recently in concrete artifacts like Gold Plates verified by eleven witnesses, in accounts of resurrected beings laying physical hands on founding Prophets, and in Joseph's testimony of the audible words and visible appearing of Deity itself. And Mormons inhabit a rhetorical world where members give not assertions of fervent belief, but public testimony that they have spiritual knowledge of those events as historical realities. At the same time, such credentials do not attest to personal salvation or blessedness, but only betoken the commencement of an eternal quest for saving knowledge and the burden of an endlessly sought perfection. The mix of intellectual certitude and intellectual insatiability Joseph exuded has left a mixed heritage for aspiring LDS artists and intellectuals to reckon with. While his relentless eclecticism, syncretism, and system building could provoke and inspire, great works of the mind and heart have seldom emerged in the context of the spiritual complacency and sense of plenitude that his system-building could provoke.

That which Mormons know, they are sure they know, and personally and institutionally it is beyond compromise or negotiation. But that which they don't know will occupy them in the schoolrooms of the life beyond, says Joseph, for "a great while after passing through the veil." One problem is, in a church almost entirely lacking creeds or formal theology, the two realms—the settled and the orthodox, or the unfixed and unfathomed—are not clearly demarcated.

This tension is to my mind the most urgent one facing Mormon religion. Because it is the one with the highest spiritual stakes, and productive of some of the most profound spiritual and emotional and social and cultural angst. Of all the paradoxes, this is the one I find to be most lopsided, most weighted in favor of certainty and least appreciative of its counterpart: seeking, searching faith. I fear Mormons often make too little room for those who say in the anguish of their heart, not "I know," but "I believe, help thou mine unbelief." The LDS scriptures claim that "to some is given by the power of the spirit to *know* Jesus is the Christ," but also add the counterweight, "and to some is given to *believe* on their words."

"Art is born of humiliation," said the poet Auden, and it may be in that very space between security born of possessing precious certainties, and abject smallness before the magnitude of an almost unquenchable ignorance, and groping in the darkness, that Mormonism finds a tension productive of a genuinely religious art and intellectual expression.

## **5. Originality and assimilation**

But I want to add to these four paradoxes I have surveyed a fifth, that it might be salutary to examine. And this I would refer to as a hallmark of the modus operandi of Joseph Smith—the twin imperatives of originality and assimilation, or revelation of what is new and syncretism based on what is already present. I see this duality beautifully enacted in the way Joseph commences his exposition of church belief, the Articles of Faith. He begins by affirming an entirely conventional Christian deity: We believe in God the Eternal Father, in his Son, Jesus

Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” How reassuring. How consoling. How bridge-building. How utterly orthodox. Nothing original there. Its transparently familiar doctrine. Then he immediately follows this up with Article of Faith 2, an utter repudiation of the doctrine of original sin. Unlike virtually every Christian denomination extant at the time of his writing, Joseph propounds a theory of man as inherently innocent, at odds with centuries of orthodoxy, and predicated only upon revelations vouchsafed to him as an ordained prophet, authorized oracle of God. Joseph the syncretist; Joseph the prophet.

In seeing our very day, the prophet Moroni seemed to fear that followers of Christ would be too quick to condemn, or criticize, or ignore, those inspired words and teachings that come from outside the Ensign or church manuals. If Joseph Smith had had that attitude, children would be right now memorizing the Five and one half Articles of Faith in Primary.

Moroni’s admonishment is an injunction to discretion in what voices disciples of Christ listen to. But notice that Moroni is as concerned that disciples refuse the good and beautiful, as that they imbibe the corrupt. “Every thing, [*every* thing], which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God,” he wrote. “Wherefore, take heed, that ye do not judge that which ... is good and of God to be of the devil.” And then he adds, that “if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ” (Moro. 7:13-14, 19).

Let me illustrate this point from my own experience. I recently completed a major study of the idea of pre-existence in Western thought. You are familiar with this idea as one of the doctrines of the restoration. In May of 1833, Joseph Smith pronounced a revelation that covered a smattering of subjects: the promise of the Second Comforter, the testimony of John, the definition of truth, Christ’s presence from the beginning, with the Father. And then, with no warning or elaboration, this bombshell: “Ye were also in the beginning with the Father.” Only a few

additional words of clarification: “Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.” Then, before Joseph or the reader of the revelation can digest the impact of one of Joseph’s most momentous revealed truths, on to a reprimand of Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, directions about translating the Bible, and so forth. No elaboration of the doctrine of pre-existence, no exploration or discussion of its relevance to a host of perplexing theological dilemmas. Just a casual observation, left to float in intellectual isolation.

The LDS faith may be the only Christian denomination teaching this doctrine today. But it turns out that literally dozens, perhaps hundreds, of poets, mystics, philosophers, theologians and pastors have taught this same principle across the centuries. And together, this symphony of inspired men and women have provided a diverse—and profoundly inspired—series of insights and lessons that can enrich and expand our understanding of and appreciation for, this sublime teaching. “The business of the Elders of this Church,” said Brigham Young, is “to gather up all the truths in the world pertaining to life and salvation, . . . , wherever [they] may be found in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, and bring it to Zion.”<sup>9</sup>

Mormons want to think that Joseph started with a clean slate, repudiating the entire Christian past and starting out afresh, only teaching that which came to him direct from the heavens. But he emphatically resisted any such conception. His was a generous mind, unafraid to embrace truth wherever he found it, and bring it home to Zion. It takes real humility of spirit to be taught. But notice the example of Joseph in this regard. He showed the world he could translate gold plates written in Reformed Egyptian, then hired a Jewish schoolmaster to teach him Hebrew. He took practices of the Masons, and openly adapted them to the Temple ceremony, putting them back into what he considered their proper and inspired context. He planned a library and museum for Nauvoo, that he wanted to fill with all the choicest fruits of western culture. A Nauvoo newspaper described his plans:

“The Seventies’ Library . . . has been commenced on a footing and scale, broad enough to embrace the arts and sciences, every where: so that the Seventies’ while traveling over the face of

the globe, as the Lord's 'Regular Soldiers,' can gather all the curious things, both natural and artificial, with all the knowledge, inventions, and wonderful specimens of genius that have been gracing the world for almost six thousand years.<sup>10</sup>

Smith assembled into his religious mosaic several "specimens of genius," inspired fragments from a church in the wilderness. His teachings on preexistence, for example, had abundant precedent. Generations of theologians, philosophers, mystics, and inspired seekers, have found in pre-existence the key to explain "the better angels of our nature," including the human yearning for transcendence and the sublime. Pre-existence has made sense of why we know what we should not know, whether in the form of a Greek slave's grasp of mathematics, the moral sense common to humanity, or the human ability to recognize universals. Well beyond the borders of the Restored Church, pre-existence has been invoked to explain human bonds that seem to have their own mysterious prehistory, salved the wounded sensibility of a host of thinkers who could not otherwise account for the unevenly distributed pain and suffering that are humanity's common lot, and has been posited by philosophers and theologians alike to salvage the principle of human freedom and accountability.

It seems to me that Mormons are under an injunction to appreciate what is powerful and authoritative and unique about Joseph Smith's revelations. And at the same time to work toward capacious minds and generous hearts, following in the admonition of Moroni, to love and celebrate truth and goodness and beauty wherever it is to be found. And bring them home to Zion.

So one more tension is in the mix. The tension and disequilibrium between exceptionalism and generous universalism, the paradox that Joseph Smith was called upon to bring lost ordinances and authority back to earth from heaven, even as he was inspired to find and assemble scattered gems of truth from a thousand earthly gardens. This sometimes confusing

burden that Saints feel called upon to bear, to teach with conviction, even as they are enjoined to learn with humility, like the tensions between searching and certainty, or independence and discipleship, is to be celebrated, not lamented. It is a sign that they are, as they should be, unwilling to relinquish either worthy ideal. The agonizing struggle to pursue both, bears testimony to a love of both. God's heart is infinitely capacious. The human mind must stretch accordingly. That will of necessity be a little painful.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Stewart, The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World (New York: Norton, 2006), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Sorensen, A Little Lower Than the Angels (New York: Knopf, 1942 [repr. Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997]), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Barnard, "Culture and Civilization in Modern Times," in Dictionary of the History of Ideas, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribner's, 1973), 1:618.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (New York: John Lane, 1908), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Henry D. Moyle in Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (October 1947): 46.

<sup>6</sup> George M. Marsden, Jonathan Edwards: A Life (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 349.

<sup>7</sup> Journal of Discourses, 26 vols., reported by G. D. Watt et al. (Liverpool: F.D and S. W. Richards, et al., 1851-1886; reprint, Salt Lake City: n.p., 1974), 13:335.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel T. Coleridge, "Notebooks," Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 555.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Nibley, Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, edited by Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks [Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Co., Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1994], 316 – 317.

<sup>10</sup> "Seventies' Library," Times and Seasons 5.24 (1 January 1844): 763.