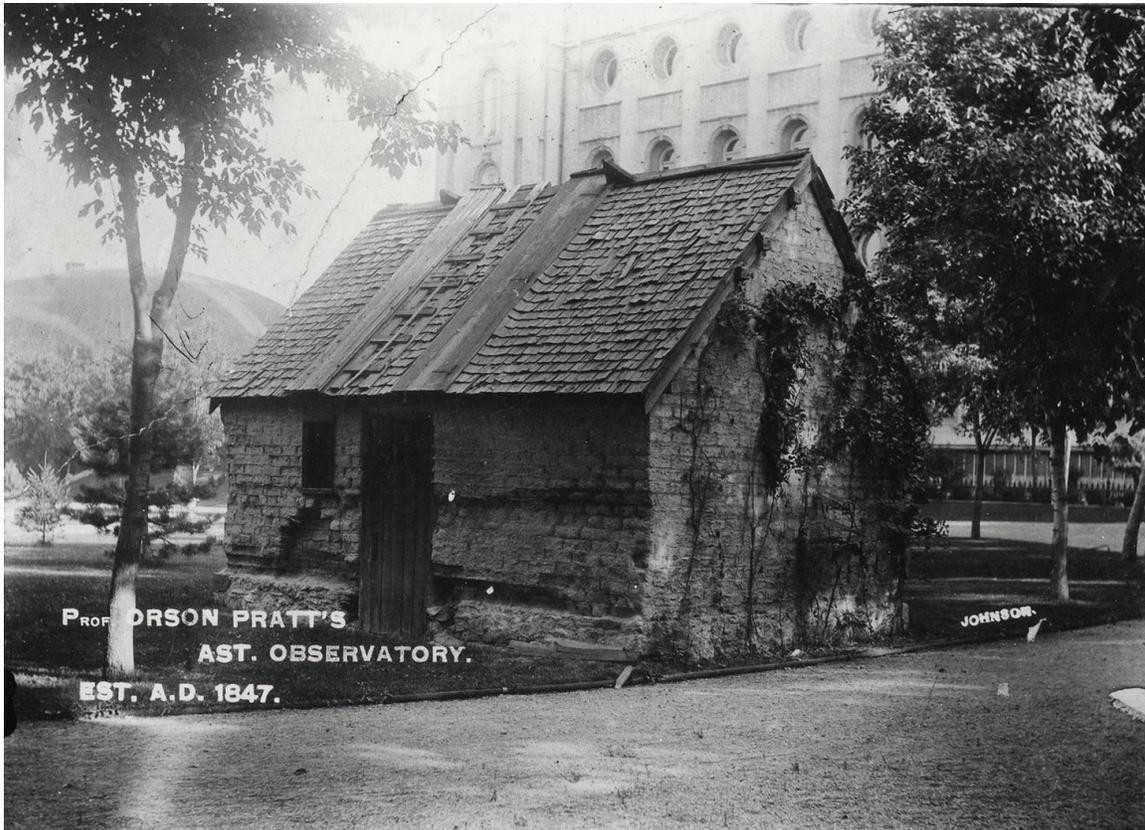


# By Study and Also by Faith

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In 1832, Joseph Smith famously admonished his flock to seek learning by study and also by faith (D&C 88:118). A generation later, in 1869, in the immediate shadow of the rising walls of the Salt Lake Temple, the brilliant Mormon polyglot Orson Pratt built an adobe observatory. A partially faded photograph captures one of Mormonism's most sublime images: in a desolate desert refuge, in the midst of poverty and struggle, hundreds of miles from the great centers of learning and culture, a magnificent granite temple, testament to a resilient faith in God, shelters a mud hut with a telescope, emblem of an irrepressible hunger to expand human knowledge the old fashioned way. The temple and the observatory, faith and study, study and faith. Mormons get—

for the most part—the study side of that equation. But what can it mean to seek learning by faith?

While imprisoned in the tower of London, Sir Walter Raleigh wrote a magisterial history of the world, an impressive work of scholarship for one so confined and limited in resources. Over a century later it was still praised by the philosopher John Locke as a worthy achievement--at least volume I was. A few pages into writing volume II, Raleigh heard an altercation in the tower yard. He went to his window in time to see a man strike down another, killing him. He set out to inquire about the circumstances and cause of the dispute, but in spite of persistent efforts, could not arrive at a clear picture. He consigned his unfinished sequel to the flames, reasoning that he had no hope of capturing the truth of unwitnessed events long since passed, if he could not ascertain the facts of a contemporary episode in his immediate vicinity.<sup>1</sup>

Centuries earlier, one of the most esteemed and prolific theologians in Christendom, Thomas Aquinas, produced two volumes of the *Summa Theologica*, considered the unparalleled masterwork of Scholastic thought. At the time of working on the third volume, he was celebrating mass in a Naples church, when he underwent a mystical experience of the divine. He, too, aborted his magnum opus, and refused to return to work, telling his friend and secretary Reginald, “All that I have written seems like straw to me compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.”<sup>2</sup>

These two episodes strike me as instructive, both in terms of how they are similar and how they are not. Both truth-seekers were halted in their commendable and learned projects by a sudden

feeling of inadequacy, brought upon them by a dramatic illumination that contrasted their own paltry resources with the truth they were trying to describe. But the reasons for their despair were actually opposite to one another. Raleigh gave in to epistemological despair. He felt the truth was beyond him, inaccessible, known to God but lost to man.

Aquinas, on the other hand, suffered a kind of epistemological overload. He had seen too much. One thinks here of the poet Emily Dickinson: The truth must dazzle gradually, or every eye be blind, she wrote. Overwhelmed by the light, Aquinas despaired of ever being able to articulate what he now knew. And I think here of C. S. Lewis's words, that the problem with religious truth is not that it is too vague to put into language. It is too precise. Vague, fuzzy impressions are not the essence of religious intuition. Razor sharp crystalline insight is. Language is the problem. What might be most instructive for us, however, is to notice what the two experiences share. Raleigh was unable to know the whole truth, and Aquinas to describe the whole truth. Thwarted in their efforts at totalizing knowledge on the one hand, and a totalizing presentation on the other, they turned instead to silence.

So how might we map our place, and our challenges, relative to these two men and their experiences? Might they represent two extremes, whose middle ground is found by a happier synthesis of reason and faith? Let me illustrate that possibility by turning to the poet John Keats.

In 1818, as Keats nursed his beloved brother Tom through the final months of a hopeless struggle against tuberculosis, he wrote a sonnet about his own fears that he, too, would die before his pen could glean the wonderful riches of what he called his "teeming brain." By the next year,

the disease had indeed caught hold of him too, and he burst forth in a creative flood of poetry, producing a string of odes that are still the staple of an English major's diet: Ode on Melancholy, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode to a Nightingale, and others. As winter turned to spring, the torrent of words spilled over the borders of his poetry and into his letters, where he contemplated the grandeur of the human race and the wellsprings of his own inspiration. To his brother George, he wrote, "there is an electric fire in human nature tending to purify - so that among these human creatures there is continually some birth of new heroism. The pity is that we must wonder at it: as we should at finding a pearl in rubbish." He opined that Jesus may have represented a heart and a system completely pure—before his words were "written and revised by Men interested in the pious frauds of Religion." Like so many of his age, Keats was disheartened by institutionalized systems of religion that almost universally emphasized human depravity, inherent guilt, while themselves doing more to justify than to alleviate human suffering. But something would not let him give in to despair. As he wrote hopefully, "Yet through all this I see [Christ's] splendour. Even here though I myself am pursuing the same instinctive course as the veriest human animal you can think of - I am however young writing at random - **straining at particles of light** in the midst of a great darkness."

He continued that while unsure of his own conclusions, he was confident that a "superior being" could not but be pleased with the struggle put forth to make sense of it all. In his analogy, "Though a quarrel in the Streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine;" So at the least, he pled—whether to God or to his brother is unclear, "Give me this credit - Do you not think I *strive* - to know myself? Give me this credit."<sup>3</sup>

I choose John Keats as a model of the greatest kind of intellectual striving, because he occupies a ground—and is content to occupy a ground—midway between the despairing uncertainty of a Raleigh and the blinding fullness of an Aquinas. Rather than smugly embrace either the atheism of his contemporary Percy Shelley or the fanatic devotion of his contemporary René Chateaubriand, and rather than retreat into comfortable indifference in the face of the unknowable, he relishes the struggle to find meaning. Even if my energies bear no fruit, he considers, I will strive to know.

His very struggle is an act of faith. And that is what I mean to unpack today. A version of intellectual endeavor that is couched within the framework of faith, not a life of intellectual striving that co-exists with faith, as if they were two separate realms or domains, each appropriate within a given context. I don't buy that binary approach, though I know many who do. There are those who would say, intellectual questions require the hard toil of intellectual effort; religious questions require the spiritual toil of prayer and faith. There are those who say, in the academic world I proceed as a scholar. In matters of faith, I proceed as a disciple; as if it were a simple matter to separate them out and insulate the one from the other.

I want to challenge you to consider such bifurcations a form of shallow thinking and even moral feint-heartedness. Shallow thinking, because you cannot really escape your religious commitments. And I mean this in the sense Thomas Carlyle gave to religion. He wrote, "It is well said, in every sense, that a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him.... By religion I do not mean here the church-creed which he professes, the articles of faith which he will sign and, in words or otherwise, assert.... This is not what I call religion. this profession and assertion; . . . But the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough *without*

asserting it even to himself, much less to others); that thing a man does practically lay to his heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines the rest. That is his *religion*.”<sup>4</sup>

Your religion, in this sense, is not a set of beliefs you can bracket; it is the sum total of your demonstrated moral commitments and enacted values. And if you seek a life of integrity, and by integrity I mean wholeness and authenticity, then your religion will guide, direct, and inspire the questions you spend your life pursuing.

Now there are prevalent in some quarters voices that would urge such bracketing, such holding in abeyance, a search for objectivity and neutrality in the quest for truth. I am suggesting you should be cautious about buying into the discredited Enlightenment notion that we can attain a position of transcendent innocence and objectivity, and that the best way to do that is to run from our own ideological—or you may call them religious—presuppositions. If any philosopher had a formative influence on my own work, it was probably Hans Georg Gadamer. Two of his ideas have never left me: “prejudice” and “the genuine question”. While still an undergraduate, I read these words in his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. It’s a long quote, but worth listening to:

“It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, **in the literal sense of the word**, [and I am not endorsing any other kind here!] constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are the basis of our openness to the

world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us. This formulation certainly does not mean that we are enclosed within a wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a pass, saying, ‘Nothing new will be said here.’ Instead we welcome just that guest who promises something new to our curiosity. But how do we know that the guest whom we admit is one who has something new to say to us? Is not our expectation and our readiness to hear the new also necessarily determined by the old that has already taken possession of us?<sup>5</sup>

In other words, prejudices, in the sense of guiding presuppositions held tentatively, are what give us entry into authentic conversation. They are the sharp edge of the knife that allow us to insinuate ourselves into a dialogue with both the living and the dead. They endow our participation with both a point of departure, and a set of stakes that give our conversation urgency. Most importantly, and this is the point I want to emphasize, these prejudices guide our questions. Knowing this, is an antidote to the illusion of some pristine realm of pure, disinterested and morally free intellectual inquiry. Again quoting Gadamer:

“What is established by statistics [substitute any of the social sciences here if you prefer]... seems to be a language of facts, but which questions these facts answer and which facts would begin to speak if other questions were asked are hermeneutical questions. ... No assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question.... But ...any experience of life can confirm the fact that there is such a thing as methodological sterility, that is, the application of a method to something not really worth knowing, to something that has not been made an object of investigation on the basis of a genuine question.”

So what is a genuine question? Gadamer defines it as a question in which our own “prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk.”<sup>6</sup> Risk, I think, is the key to uniting the moral and the intellectual, the spiritual and the academic. Let me illustrate with the case of a clergyman who risked everything by his question. Edward Beecher was described as the brightest and most promising of all the Beecher family—a “metaphysical titan.” Considering the accomplishments of Lyman, Henry Ward, Harriet Beecher and Isabella, that’s an amazing claim. But you probably haven’t heard of him. This is why. Early in his career, his sister Catherine grew disaffected from Calvinism over the question of the damnation of unbelievers—which included her deceased fiancé. In trying to bring her back to faith, Edward found himself unable to reconcile God’s justice with the saga of human depravity and suffering that constitutes our history. He devoted himself to study and prayer, seeking a resolution. His brother described his search this way: “None but those most intimate with the author, most acquainted with his habits of prayer, and deep humiliation before God, & entire consecration to Christ can form any idea of [his] travail of Soul. Many hours he lay prostrate on his face before God agonizing in prayer for the holy spirit. One felt in entering his study at such times as Moses felt when the voice said, ‘Put off thy shoes from thy foot for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.’”<sup>7</sup>

Paying such a price, it is no surprise Beecher found his answer. His brother described it as a “virtual revelation;” after “groping in some vast cathedral, in the gloom of midnight, . . . suddenly before the vast arched window of the nave a glorious sun had suddenly burst forth.” The resultant vision was a paradigm-shattering epiphany about human pre-mortal existence that Beecher wanted to share at once with his congregation and the world. His father, the famous Lyman Beecher, and his family, including Henry Ward Beecher, urged him not to ruin his career

by going public with such an unorthodox doctrine. Beecher kept the revelation to himself—for a quarter of a century. He came to fervently believe, however, that this doctrine, and this doctrine alone, could rescue a Christianity suffering under the blight of apostasy. So he threw caution to the wind and issued a four hundred page manifesto, the boldest and most detailed exposition of the doctrine of pre-existence in religious history. It ignited a fierce controversy in the religious journals of the day, but regrettably was soon overshadowed by the more pressing developments of the American Civil War.

The story ends many years later on a somber note. When I tracked down the story of Edward Beecher, I located the manuscript story of his life written by his devoted brother, Charles. It had been donated to a small Illinois college, and there was this note on top, written by one of his descendants. It read, “I am about to send on to you at last the manuscript Life of Edward Beecher by his brother Charles. . . . It is none too rich in human interest, perhaps, being concerned overwhelmingly with Edward’s “spiritual” (theological) development and his belief in the pre-existence of the soul, an unfortunate excursion into the realms of heresy which apparently wrecked his career.”<sup>8</sup> Beecher asked a genuine question. He exposed himself, his family, his fortunes, to risk.

But of course, genuine questions must occur in all areas of intellectual endeavor, not merely the religious. And they all must entail some risk—in the sense that the question is open ended. We cannot know where it will lead us, and we must be prepared to follow, whatever the cost. That is the nature of true inquiry, and true discipleship alike.

So let me move by way of conclusion demonstrate that such questions—whatever your field of study, whatever your discipline, can be seen as a faith-filled gesture, if you are striving to live in harmony with a religious commitment.

Certain modernist critiques of Christianity hold that theology and soteriology (salvation theory) especially are distractions from the immediacy of ethical obligations, and that they relegate the problem of evil to suspicious etiologies and abstractions like hell and fallenness and sin. I am thinking, for instance, of Romantic criticisms of vicarious atonement as a fraud against accountability, and of Friedrich Nietzsche's critiques of historic Christianity with its otherworldly preoccupation. Hell and heaven are concepts dangerously abstract and remote from the present-day contingencies of this life, and the moral imperative to be fully responsive to the ethical demands of our immediate environment seem hopelessly compromised by a fixation on eschatology and an ethic of post-mortal salvation.

Joseph Smith's version of religion resists these dangers in at least two fundamental ways. First, because Smith rejected the blue sky heaven of the theologians. The heaven that was revealed to Joseph Smith in his vision he called the Prophecy of Enoch was essentially an extenuation of the Zion community to be forged on earth. God's righteousness will "sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out" those that will have Him to be their God. Then, the Lord says to Enoch, "thou and all thy city [shall] meet them there, and we will receive them into our bosom, and they shall see us; and we will fall upon their necks, and they shall fall upon our necks, and we will kiss each other; And there shall be mine abode, and it shall be Zion." (Moses 7:64) God and his people, the living and the departed, heaven and earth, embrace. The immense distance between the spiritual and the mundane collapses, and we find holiness in the ordinary. Pure religion, in other words, is not found in how we contemplate the cosmos, but how we build community.

Second, and more to the point, Smith collapsed other dualisms as well. Like Heaven, the God of Smith's theology is not the God of philosophers. He does not exist outside time. He is not some cosmic ventriloquist, or a magic jack-in-the box, assuming human form once or twice a thousand years to speak, then reverting back to ineffable substance, now popping back into a human universe to interact with His creations. We may inhabit realms as different as those of fish and fowl; we may swim while He soars, and breathe a different air. But when God speaks from Heaven, or His angels minister, a wing breaks the water and heaven and the sea touch. We share the same universe, the same existence that continues through time.

The result is a sublime synthesis of the sacred and the quotidian. What this means, is that, in Brigham Young's words, "We are not at all under the necessity of falling into the mistake that [others] fall into. They think, when they are handling or dealing in the things of this world, that those things have nothing to do with their religion. Our religion takes within its wide embrace not only things of heaven, but also things of earth. It circumscribes all art, science, and literature pertaining to heaven, earth, and hell."<sup>9</sup>

In other words, there is no learning that is not, ultimately, of eternal significance. Elsewhere, Brigham Young taught that "When the elements melt with fervent heat, the Lord Almighty will send forth his angels, who are well instructed in chemistry, and they will separate the elements and make new combinations thereof."<sup>10</sup> That's a rather startling picture, but the point is sublime: the mysteries of the universe, and the mysteries of godliness are the same. As Orson Pratt would elaborate this view a few years later. "The study of science is the study of something eternal. If we study astronomy, we study the works of God. If we study chemistry, geology, optics, or any other branch of science, every new truth we come to the understanding of is eternal; it is a part of the great system of universal truth. It is truth that

exists throughout universal nature; and God is the dispenser of all truth—scientific, religious, and political.”<sup>11</sup>

So what does it mean, in light of all I have said, to seek learning by study and by faith? I have tried to suggest several possibilities. First, I suggested we might consider our religious commitments in the light of Gadamer’s remarks about prejudice—as a starting point for asking questions of most meaning and moment to us. All learning is directed by questions, but as he suggested, we might consider “which facts would begin to speak if other questions were asked.” Our questions, more than our answers, are an index to our deepest religious and moral commitments; Second, I suggested that all faithful scholarship—in the sense of faith-laden striving—entails genuine risk, genuine openness. Questions and doubts are the friend of truth, not its enemy. Because as the scientist Henry Eyring said, God will never ask you to believe anything that isn’t true. Third, I have tried to remind you that Joseph Smith promulgated a cosmology that was radical in its collapse of traditional dichotomies. By re-imposing on us the hard work of making this world into heaven, and making present relationships eternal ones, he deprived us of the easy out of relegating religion to one corner of our lives, and this-worldly preoccupations to another. Integrating the sacred and the banal, the heavenly and the earthly, requires in turn an integrated life that cannot separate out spiritual and intellectual commitments. Finally, I have tried to suggest that in a universe so conceived, every act of learning, every reaching out for discovery, every earnest question, becomes a faith-laden gesture; because every such act anticipates an eternally significant outcome.

Finally, one parting thought about faith-filled or faithful learning. The Cambridge Platonist John Smith believed, “That which enables us to know and understand aright in the things of God, must be a living principle of Holiness within us.”<sup>12</sup> He was right. But the things of God may turn out to be a more capacious subject than even he recognized.

The haunting image of the temple and the observatory hovers in the background of Mormon culture, suggesting one of our tradition's many paradoxes: that the certainties represented by sturdy temples has never overwhelmed the love of learning that fired the minds and spirits of that tradition's founders. May we be truth to both divinely implanted impulses—the yearning for God, and the hunger for knowledge—and know they are the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Nigel Jones, *Tower: An Epic History of the Tower of London* (New York: Macmillan, 2012), 252ff.

<sup>2</sup> James A. Weisheple, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His life, Thoughts and Works* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 321.

<sup>3</sup> From John Keats to George and Georgiana Keats (14 Feb.-3 May 1819), *The Letters of John Keats* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1895), 304.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004) , 299.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Beecher, "Life of Edward Beecher," 38-41. Unpublished manuscript in the Illinois College library, in Jacksonville. A microfilm is at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Beecher, "Life." Beecher's story, and the content of the book he wrote, are recounted in Givens, *When Souls had Wings: Premortal Life in Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</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),, 7:271.

<sup>10</sup> *Journal of Discourses*, 15:127.

<sup>11</sup> *Journal of Discourses*, 7:157.

<sup>12</sup> John Smith, *A Prefatory Discourse Concerning the True Way or Method of Attaining Divine Knowledge* in C. A. Patrides, *The Cambridge Platonists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 130.