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AN HONORABLE SURRENDER:

THE EXPERIENCE OF CONVERSION

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Conversion to a new vision and way of life is a somewhat rare and certainly an amazing human experience. In this essay Carlos Whiting, Executive Director of The Foundation of America and a consultant to The President's Council on Recreation, tells of his sevenyear struggle to resist becoming a Mormon.

Not infrequently a Mormon convert thinks back on those events and feelings which preceded his decision to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He may wish to recall these things not so much for any personal benefit, but to determine the processes of conversion so that he can help friends and acquaintances obtain the light of the Gospel which he already enjoys. Cynics might conclude that this desire to win fellow converts is largely a catering to a psychological need. That is, a convert's original decision to join the Church may be justified when he can demonstrate to himself and to others that his new religion is deemed valid and soul-satisfying to them as well. In acknowledging an element of truth in this, one need not (and, indeed, cannot in all honesty) summarily dismiss further consideration of the need for understanding one's own conversion.

My own steps toward conversion may be far from typical and are certainly different from many. For example, while many individuals were quick to see the light and since their baptism have continued to grow strong in the Church without a backward glance, I investigated the Church for seven years. Following baptism I had no lapse of faith, but neither was my growth an expression of simple faith only. Not only did I imagine from the beginning that I had to have all the answers before I could accept baptism, I have since joining the Church continued to study, probe, and even to question. For some of those born into the Church — and who somehow equate such intellectual processes with weakness of faith and even with “rationalizing” — this inquiry may appear needless at best and possibly dangerous. I offer these experiences to others, however, for any benefit that may be derived from them. For me, the compulsion to set them down for the record is now its own justification.

With respect to my Middlewestern background, I came from a milieu which for convenience may be called today “Billy Graham Protestantism.” Through much reading and conversation, some of it in a university atmosphere, I moved to a more liberal position. While not dismissing the validity of mysticism and prayer, I was increasingly attracted to a more scientific approach to man’s origin and destiny. This was consciously balanced, however, by a determined respect for much valued tradition.

Having looked at the slough of atheism from a distance, explored the dunes of agnosticism, and rested on the plains of humanism, I satisfied myself by my late twenties that I would have to find my own Christian synthesis. In an intellectual exercise with some Chinese graduate students, and having studied the religions of the Near and Far East, I concluded that the “true” religion must be constructive and positive in its effect on the growth of human personality and could best be “pictured” in Jesus. I then made my commitment. As I put it at the time, I gave my allegiance to the person of Jesus.

Over many years I learned much from that most exciting of texts, the Book of the Earth, whose pages lie open for all to see in places like Grand Canyon and Yellowstone. My appreciation of nature and my professional work in conservation gave me some understanding of man’s animal heritage. The chemical and visceral responses of man’s body, I realized, could easily be mistaken — if one was not alert and wise — for spiritual stimuli.

I had been fortunate to have known many fine individuals in various religious sects and I had noted that, without exception, each was certain of the truth of his own beliefs by the strong and com-

pulling emotion which welled from within. I was deeply impressed with the importance of not confusing such a feeling with a manifestation of the Spirit. Further, I was firmly convinced of the relativity of all truth — absolutes being beyond man's animal mind and limited comprehension.

It was, then, in this frame of mind and with this background that I first came in contact with Mormons, at the age of twenty-eight.

Working in Washington, D.C., with professionals of largely Western origin, I encountered numerous jack-Mormons and some of the more faithful variety. Among the latter was Dr. Clarence Cottam, who, for some reason, never discussed his religion with me but lived it with a vigor and integrity that was most impressive. The "occasional" Mormons made references to polygamy and certain other topics of perennial interest, but my curiosity was scarcely whetted. One threw a copy of the *Improvement Era* into his wastebasket and I retrieved this and read it with interest.

Curiously, it was at this time (when I was thirty) that two clean-cut and personable young men — L.D.S. missionaries — visited my wife. She arranged for them to return to talk with me. My interest was solely — or so I was convinced — in learning more about the sociology of a peculiar people.

The first lesson or two offered a novel theology, particularly concerning a God with a body who was essentially a glorified man. This God, our Heavenly Father in a literal sense, chose to deal with mankind through his firstborn son Jesus Christ, who revealed himself through prophets — particularly, in our age, through the prophet Joseph Smith. For me, this perfect example of text-book anthropomorphism did not strain credulity as much as the story of Joseph and the Golden Plates. Nevertheless, I was willing and actually quite eager to read the Book of Mormon. I even accepted the challenge to read it with prayer and made the "mistake" of asking God, if the book were true, to reveal it through his Holy Spirit and not to let me go until I had a certain knowledge of it.

Parenthetically, I must say here to those not accustomed to this kind of thinking or procedure that it is a very dangerous thing to do. I let myself in for seven miserable years before finally joining the Church, and I came to know the personality and methods of Satan with a certainty which defies description. While my troubles — and the conspiracies I encountered — appeared at the time unrelated to my search for religious truth, they were injurious to health and equanimity and seemed designed by evil forces to destroy me. Looking back, it seems possible that I might have escaped some of this by an earlier acceptance of the Mormon faith.

The process of conversion had begun, but something had happened to the missionaries, and we were never to see them again. After some months, I was about to write to Salt Lake City and tell the powers there that I still had a few questions to ask, when we were fortunate to have call on us a brilliant and convincing young man, Ronald G. Hyde. Elder Hyde dedicated a year of twice-weekly study sessions to us and several subsequent years of less intensive but equally prayerful and dedicated effort. In addition, for several years, every new missionary in the area was brought before us for testing and training.

In retrospect, it is a great blessing that we were not approached by missionaries several years later during the present missionary plan of casting a net, retrieving those prizes immediately available, and returning the unlikely looking fish to the sea.

Over the next few years I read everything in print available to me and prayed nightly for hours at a stretch. The skies were brazen and there was no hint of an answer. I was much too sophisticated to call for an angel or a vision, although there were times when either would have been welcome — in spite of a vague fear that I might receive one or both and then not be certain it was bona fide. My great concern was that I could be able to discriminate between a genuine desire to believe and any real evidence that the Mormon doctrine was true.

There were, of course, several conflicts which developed as I began to meet more Mormons, attend services, and give serious thought to Mormonism. The immediate things which struck me were the “wholesomeness” of the people and their sincerity and dedication. In addition, I liked the fact that the Mormon Church attracted and held men and young people. This, to me, was not novel or unique — as I am sure it must be to many investigators — because any church that Billy Graham would feel at home in could demonstrate these same fruits — as well as the fruits of a life of prayer, Bible study, testimony, tithe paying, and discipline on a par with the Word of Wisdom. This conviction that I had encountered but another group of earnest Christians who did not know or appreciate the fact that there were other Christians in the world stuck with me for years. In opposition to this conviction, however, there persisted the possibility in my mind that the doctrine was in fact unique.

If I had considered it a purely intellectual foray, I am sure that I would have been content with my early reconnaissance. The compelling fact is, however, that I had committed myself in prayer (through the encouragement of Ronald Hyde) to a spiritual — and not just an intellectual — investigation of the truths of the doctrine.

Lamentable as it may be to many who are trained to more orderly thought processes, religion (and Mormonism in particular) can be neither savored nor surveyed adequately through rational means. With the inclination I had, and with the time and energy then available to me, I approached the study with unusual determination.

One of the first observations I made in conversations with missionaries is that there are important semantic and other barriers to early rapport. One example is the word "church." To me, this word has always meant that "body of believers" who have accepted Jesus Christ as a personal saviour. It was foreign to me to think of the church referred to by Jesus as an organization (although I recognized, of course, that there were organized sects which claimed identity with the New Testament church). Another semantic difficulty was embodied in the word "authority." For reasons peculiar to my Protestant upbringing, I could not relate to my idea of the church any *need* for individuals with authority to speak or act in the name of God — either priest or prophet. My slowness in thinking in the same terms as the missionaries must surely have seemed, at least at times, as hardness of heart.

The disciplines of the Church are several and to many people, I observed, were arduous. Certainly, to many the idea of "giving up" tobacco, caffeine, and alcohol is difficult. To me, there was no problem and what little use I had made of these products was easily abandoned. Tithing, while a little harder to accomplish, was easily accepted in theory. The disciplines of attending meetings and of being watched over by the brethren were more severe. This brotherly concern, by the way, ultimately became a manifestation of love (and love among the brethren, while not part of my conversion process or part of this story, was to become the most convincing testimony of my own faith). I did not see at the time that diligence in attending priesthood and sacrament meetings and a prayerful consideration of others is vital to the faith. One significant stumbling block was certainly in this area.

With respect to points of doctrine with which I was struggling, the fact struck home early that Mormons denied the priesthood to Negroes. To a liberal with Negro friends, this was nearly convincing evidence that the Church lacked inspiration rather than possessing it. The painful wrench it took to postpone an understanding of the "Negro question" added many months or years to the time that I would eventually accommodate myself to the idea. That I did choose to postpone it and to move on to other considerations must be credited to some element of faith and not the intellect. Let me merely state here, however, that I am convinced that other aspects

of the Mormon doctrine are so compelling and convincing that this act of faith is not only acceptable but necessary.

Polygamy is first in the mind of non-Mormons and needs to be dealt with quickly and effectively. The idea that the taking of several wives was not an indulgence of the flesh is one which needs patient development. Since sexual temptations and sins are generally agreed to be in conflict with spirituality, I needed to be convinced that there were ameliorating circumstances helping to justify polygamy before I could seriously entertain the possibility that Mormonism had spiritual values worthy of consideration. I found this justification, in part, in my belief that the unsettled conditions for single women in the industrial revolution beginning in the East and already well underway in England made their conversion to Mormonism easier; with the attraction of more women to the cooperatively-inclined Mormon communities the surplus of women (which existed to a degree in all societies of the time) raised a question: "With the Mormon emphasis on marriage and childbearing (and in salvation through and with the husband) how were these good women to be saved?" Polygamy under the logic of these circumstances became inevitable.

Another issue of importance to me as an investigator was determining the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. If considered only as a work of fiction, the Book of Mormon has elements of the most mature genius. In its characterization and likeliness of incident, it has a ring of truth. In its exposition of doctrine, it ties in to a most complicated theology, which seemingly would be beyond the capability of young Joseph. Apart from its own statement that it is a digest of histories and philosophies of many kings and prophets there was for me no easily acceptable explanation of the book, and I believe that no fair-minded student of the Book of Mormon can escape the thought he may be — and very likely is — reading scripture.

Outside of acknowledging Joseph as a prophet, the best answer I could come up with at the time was that Joseph was both a genius and a mystic — a mystic in the sense that he communicated with personalities elsewhere in time and space through extrasensory powers. The Psi factor (as well as Joseph's genius) would very likely be a partial explanation in any case, and the investigator finds himself back at the beginning. Suggesting that Joseph suffered hallucinations and that he had some facility for mass hypnotism greatly weakens the story and does not square with continuing evidences of Joseph's spiritual powers. The theory is too hard to accept. One must be determined *not* to believe to entertain such a theory for

long, and it was for me easier to accept the possibility of spiritual gifts.

The perversity of some Mormons in trying to tie in relics of Indian culture of the era 1000 A.D. to the time of Cortez and Pizzaro with the Book of Mormon period was most annoying to me. However, the possibility of a pre-Indian, "white" civilization grew in my mind as I studied Thor Hyerdahl's "American Indians in the Pacific," which develops the theory behind the Kon Tiki expedition. His color photos of blond and red-haired mummies in the Americas prompted careful reading of his other evidences of a culture which preceded that of the Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas.

The idea of pre-existence suggests many answers to questions "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose in life?" The evangelical Protestant has no difficulty in accepting the pre-existence of Jesus (although Jesus' identity with God the Father, in the Protestant concept of the Trinity, is the explanation for his pre-existence). For me, it was not difficult to conceive and then accept the idea of a pre-existence. It is a marvelous thought that we are literal children of God the Father, literal brothers of Jesus Christ, and that we have chosen to come to earth as part of a plan to obtain material bodies and to prove ourselves worthy of returning to God's presence. The doctrine of eternal progression and the idea that we may be Gods is one of great power and attraction to me, and I found myself believing that even if the doctrine were not true we should live as if it were true. Nothing but good could come from such motivation.

That the idea of Mormonism *should* be true — that it is attractive and compelling and ought to be true — is a thought that possessed me and became determining. The more I became familiar with the doctrine and the more I saw Mormonism in practice, the greater was my desire to believe. I wanted to believe.

The earnestness of my desire to believe was balanced by my determination to find objective evidences of the truth of Mormonism. Yet, I concluded that in spite of many interesting and persuasive evidences it may not be possible to find these proofs.

I became certain, however, that everything I wanted to believe was to be found in Mormonism. If I could have applied myself in many years' study to finding a Christian synthesis, I could have devised no better. It was remarkable to me the way the Bible, Mormon scriptures, and Joseph Smith's teachings tied together in theological all-inclusiveness.

Conversion came to me suddenly. There was no voice and no vision. I merely surrendered, as the honest and honorable thing to do. It was a Sunday morning and we were at breakfast. In a few

minutes my family and I would leave for Sunday School at a nearby Protestant church. There was a notable unwillingness to go (I was an officer and had many responsibilities in the church, and it was my duty to attend to them). I looked around the table at my wife and young children.

"Should we go to Mormon Sunday School?" I surprised us all by asking.

"Yes, let's!" they clamored.

I smiled wryly at my wife. "I'm converted at the breakfast table," I said.

Every man, and more particularly my immediate associates who are with me daily, know how I regret the ignorance of this people — how it floods my heart to see so many Elders of Israel who wish everybody to come to their standard and be measured by their measure. Every man must be just so long, to fit their iron bedstead, or be cut off to the right length: if too short, he must be stretched, to fill the requirement.

If they see an erring brother or sister, whose course does not comport with their particular ideas of things, they conclude at once that he or she cannot be a Saint, and withdraw their fellowship, concluding that, if they are in the path of truth, others must have precisely their weight and dimension.

This ignorance I see, in this particular, among this great people is lamentable. Let us not narrow ourselves up; for the world, with all its variety of useful information . . . is before us; and eternity, with all its sparkling intelligence, lofty aspirations, and unspeakable glories, is before us, and ready to aid us in the scale of advancement and every useful improvement.

Brigham Young
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