



BOOK OF  
MORMON

BOOK  
OF  
MORMON

SOCRATES

RUSSELL

FROM THE PULPIT

# SOME THOUGHTS ON A

# RATIONAL APPROACH TO MORMONISM

CARLOS WHITING

As an exercise in empathy, it would be well for us Mormons to project ourselves into the thoughts and feelings of those who may be quite different from us. For one thing, our missionary program is not at all directed toward a rational approach to Mormonism, and few of us can even begin to appreciate the inner workings of a rationalist.

Some sixteen or seventeen years ago, when I first inquired into the Mormon faith and its practice, I took a non-emotional approach. This tack was calculated as a defense against these new ideas. In effect, I threw up a buffer against the attractive personalities and spirit manifested by the young missionaries. I thought it necessary to analyze rather thoughtfully the content of their message and not be swayed by emotional bias.

I am sure that anyone who fancies himself a rationalist—that is, an intellectual—would have to take a similar approach. In addition, I presume that anyone who has had some experience with another faith where earnestness is demonstrated in

prayer, testimonies, Bible study and the like, and emotion plays a key part in the faith, might also prefer a rational approach to Mormonism in his or her initial investigation.

There is not necessarily any conflict between rationalism and emotionalism; ideally, one merely recognizes that some evidences of faith are manifested through the intellect and others are felt through the Spirit.

No fair-minded person would belittle or criticize strong feeling and an upwelling of emotion. Even those physiologists and psychologists who understand the chemical and visceral basis of emotion would not try to analyze in such terms their feelings for their wives or children, the pleasures of a spring day or a beautiful sunset or the awe of seeing the Grand Canyon.

Many of the great rationalists of history have been deeply emotional people who, for the sake of finding the truth, actually struggled to be rational. That is, they disciplined their minds to function apart from the upwelling of emotion which might otherwise dictate a different answer, because they felt that such an emotional answer might be wrong.

I don't think a rational approach to Mormonism is entirely satisfactory or even possible, as I hope to demonstrate before I am through, but I am convinced that we must give some thought to it. We must do this particularly since we live in a society which (because of its science and technology) pays so much respect to intellectualism. Today, I believe, very little attention is given by Mormons to explain their faith to others on an intellectual plane.

There is some question within the Church as to the validity of intellectualism and as to whether it is possible to be both intellectual and have a strong testimony. I have known many individuals born in the Church who question the faith and testimony of converts who have been trained to learn things through standard disciplines of exploration and discovery (that is, by asking questions in the broadest sense). This surely must be lamented. As long as we have a God who declares that His glory is intelligence, and as long as we have a Church which stresses higher education, we are apt to have Mormon intellectuals. Such individuals must be made to feel welcome and accepted.

In such an "exercise in empathy," which I am calling for in this discussion, I wish to sketch a picture of three well-known rationalists.

The first is Socrates. He is the man who is considered the father of rationalism in Western civilization. I am reminded of the little boy in school who was asked in an examination to write on Socrates. The paper was remarkably brief, but it was pointed. He said:

Socrates was a good man.  
He went around showing people how to think.  
They killed him.

Socrates was homely and a pest. He was a pest because his basic approach was one of asking questions, not necessarily because he doubted, but because he knew that the thinking person learns more than the one who accepts blindly. Socrates was also humble. He was humble because he knew enough to know that he didn't know very much, which was another reason for asking questions. Because Socrates taught people to think, because he taught them to ask questions, he was charged by the old fogies of his day with corrupting the young.

Socrates was sentenced to death, which was really no more than a form of public censure (because he could easily have escaped the death sentence by admitting that he was wrong and promising not to question orthodox religion). But since Socrates didn't believe he was wrong, he accepted the cup of hemlock, and for his courage we are eternally grateful. No one remembers his accusers, and it seems unlikely that they will be found in the Celestial Kingdom with a God whose glory is intelligence.

One of the most celebrated modern rationalists is Bertrand Russell, who died several years ago at the age of ninety-six. I have always enjoyed reading Russell as a philosopher (but, as I always feel compelled to explain, this is not because I agree with his ideas about the elite and free love, but because in reading him I am forced to think). In his autobiography Russell says that in his youth he was greatly swayed by emotion and that he felt great love for people, but he had to discipline himself rigorously to rational thinking, which he thought of great importance to himself and to his ambitions in mathematics.

To Bertrand Russell there was no way to learn truth except through rational processes and he wanted to know the truth. Poor Bertrand Russell, principal apostle of rationalism in our day. I am sure he knew nothing about Mormonism, and if he did it seems unlikely that he could escape the bonds of rational thinking to test its spiritual truth.

All this has been, in part, in preparation for a discussion of an article by Corliss Lamont in *Humanist* magazine (Jan.-Feb., 1967) entitled "The Crisis Called Death." If read with sympathy and empathy, this statement of disbelief in immortality can scarcely fail to squeeze out a tear. It provides us with an uncommon understanding of an intellectual who knows nothing about Mormonism and probably couldn't (at this late date) accept it, because it would require a spiritual experiment which takes great courage.

Lamont, relating his humanistic philosophy, makes a dogmatic statement on immortality. Curiously, it does little offense to Mormonism. He states:

Humanism, in line with its rejection of belief in any form of the supernatural, considers illusory the idea of personal immortality, or the conscious survival of the self beyond death. . . . The basic reason for regarding a hereafter as out of the question is that since a human being is a living unity of body and personality, including the mind, it is impossible for the personality to continue when the body and the brain have ceased to function.

The sciences of biology, medicine, and psychology have accumulated an enormous amount of evidence pointing to the oneness and inseparability of personality and the physical organism. And it is inconceivable that the characteristic mental activities of thought, memory, and imagination could go on without the sustaining structure of the brain and cerebral cortex.

He then goes on to admit that traditional Christianity supports the humanist position on the unity of the body and personality by insisting that man can gain immortality only through the literal resurrection of the physical body. The trouble for humanists, he says, is that they cannot possibly accept the resurrection doctrine.

In his discussion Lamont attempts to "face with equanimity" the necessity of death. His rationalization soon becomes emotional however:

To philosophize about man's immortality, as I have been doing, or to take seriously religious promises of afterlife, may soften slightly the impact of death, but in my opinion nothing can really counteract its bitter sting.

Then, with eloquence, he looks at the nearness of what he sees as his own extinction and exclaims:

I myself am almost 65 and have the familiar experience of looking back on my life and finding that it has all gone with appalling swiftness. Days, years, decades have slipped by so quickly that now it seems I hardly knew what was happening. Have I been day-dreaming all this time?

Today, more than ever, I feel the haunting sense of transiency. If only time would for a while come to a stop! If only each day would last 100 hours and each year 1000 days! I sympathize with everyone who ever longed for immortality and I wish that the enchanting dream of eternal life could indeed come true. So it is that as a humanist I deeply regret that death is the end. Frankly, I would like to go on living indefinitely. . . . And I would be most happy if anybody could prove to me that there actually is personal survival after death.

Here is a rationalist who has bared his soul. He is aware of the traditional Christian answer, which requires an acceptance of an idea by faith and by grace. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, however, stands alone in offering a rational theology—in the reason for man's existence and in his ultimate destiny—which supplies the very answers Lamont is seeking.

As far as I am concerned, only Mormonism is compatible with rationalism and science. It provides answers with reasonable logic for every question. And because of this I believe our Mormon faith deserves better exposition than it has been getting.

Lamont worries about the dissolution of the mind and soul when the body and brain are destroyed. This is very reasonable, and a simple faith that somehow personality will be preserved in a vaguely-defined spirit world (where we have little objective evidence for its existence) is not sufficient for many trained, analytical minds.

Science knows a little about how information is incorporated chemically and molecularly in our brain cells. As far as I know, only Mormonism provides for a spiritual body which occupies our material bodies—arm for arm, organ for organ—with a corresponding engraving of memory on the spirit mind with the engraving of memory on the molecules of our material body. On the basis of the pattern thus being created right now, a new body can someday be reconstituted. Mormonism teaches that every principle of mind and character we attain today will become part of our new (or resurrected) bodies.

Science fiction writers, so often in the vanguard of scientific knowledge, have already predicted that someday through science we can achieve a kind of immortality. However fanciful, it deserves consideration. A giant computer, they say, will gather every shred of information about a person, it will "read out" of his or her mind the retained information and molecular codes, and then when a perfect "robot" body is built (an android, in science fiction), that computer will feed into it and construct the molecular codes on which genetic and memory information have been retained and the new body will come to life with all the characteristics of the old person. Now, if science fiction and science can foresee this possibility, not merely on the basis of fantasy but by extrapolation of known facts, why can't we accept the fact that God has planned this and will do it?

As rational as I have tried to be personally, I have had spiritual experiences which are remarkable and which cannot be easily related. Let me briefly relate

something that happened to me twenty-six years ago. I was in the hospital and had been given up for dead. Perhaps I did "die." I sat up on my hospital bed, rising up out of my body, as it were. I looked around at the medical people, who did not see me, I passed through the oxygen tent, turned around again, recognizing my own body on the bed, and then (rather reluctantly) began to walk away on a path of light, watching the scene behind me disappear.

I didn't want to die, I wanted to do many things, I wanted a wife and family, I didn't feel ready to go. Then a voice stopped me, told me to return, promising me that I would have the things I was missing, and declaring to me a purpose for which I was being returned. I did return, through the same stages, and I lay down in my body again, and immediately awakened, pushed away the oxygen tent, startled the medics, and began at once to get well.

I relate this to show that I know something first-hand about this spirit body and how it works.

To Corliss Lamont my story might not be convincing. However, for Mormons, who may not be inclined to empathize or understand rationalists, it may be instructive. It may indicate that humanists and rationalists can be "reached" . . . if we choose to reach them, and if we try to understand people who perceive the world rationally.

It scarcely seems necessary to retell my own story: that I joined the Church by the rationalist route, fighting off a great desire to believe, resisting an emotional answer to a spiritual problem. I freely admit that it would have been better had I sought a spiritual conviction.

My experience with conversion to the Church taught me that rationalism is not enough. There is a "secret" which must be learned: unless a person commits himself in prayer to seek the truth, no matter what the trials, and asks his Heavenly Father to reveal the truth to him, there is no possibility of his finding the answer. The story of my conversion is better told in an essay in *Dialogue* (Spring, 1967) and therefore does not need restating here. My point is that a person who is trained in rational processes and who is cautious about the reality of visions, mysticism and emotionalism can accept Mormonism.

For most people with a background in another faith—and for everyone who has been trained in science or through his own exploration of knowledge—truth is relative. In the absence of authority (for the Mormon this may be revelation through prophets, primarily), a person can never be certain of truth and is constantly weighing and re-evaluating the facts (if he wishes to be rational).

Let me affirm my own belief in the theology and history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I have compelling evidence that Joseph Smith was a prophet, as is his successor today. I believe in the revelations which God gave his prophets for our edification and guidance, and I accept and sustain them in their leadership. But more than anything else, I have experienced things, and I have thought things through, and through personal discovery and experiment I have developed a faith which is unwavering. This, more than anything else, permits me to learn things by asking questions.



Leo Pondo