

Spiritual Empiricism

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What is the most important ingredient of religious conviction? This question, whether consciously posed or not, is a fundamental one for anyone who has tried to cultivate religious faith. We admire men and women of faith who demonstrate a serene confidence that God lives and life has meaning, who face misfortune with equanimity and manifest the reality of their faith by a willingness to work and sacrifice for the good of others. Witnessing the example of such people must sooner or later cause us to wonder about the foundation upon which the strongest and most stable testimonies are built. Latter-day Saints are also inclined to wonder, at one time or another, how their testimonies differ from those of the millions of devout Christians and non-Christians outside the Church. Is it a matter of quality or degree? Is it simply a matter of what one believes, or is it the *way* he believes—the reasons why he believes? These are not easy questions, and I do not presume to answer them completely. But on the basis of my own religious experience as a member of the Church, along with the ideas of others that I have found relevant to my experience, I wish to describe a principle that may go a long way in helping to answer these questions.

John Henry Evans, in his biography of Joseph Smith, says that man cannot learn religious truth through scholarship alone—it comes through experience. I suppose we all know this, but it is easy to forget, particularly for those of us involved in education either as students or teachers. Evans asserts that one of the Prophet Joseph's important contributions was bringing the experimental method to religion. Scholars, with all their learning, have not been able to make spiritual truths clear and meaningful. Joseph Smith taught that religious truth can be objectively verified. A man need only go to the Lord having faith in Him and His willingness to

communicate with man, and he can receive a testimony of any particular truth. This is essentially an empirical process, not so very dissimilar from the empirical methods of science. The differences are not to be found in the essential nature of the processes, but in the complexity and subtlety of the perceiving and interpreting instruments. Something comparable to logic and empirical demonstration operates within the soul or spirit of man despite the fact we little understand the process. In other words, there is an empiricism of the spirit, a way whereby man can *experience* (this is what the Greek word *empeirikos* meant) a relationship with God. This empiricism, which might be called "spiritual empiricism," differs from the experimental methods of the physical and social sciences primarily in the role played by the bodily senses, that role being merely subsidiary in the former but primary in the latter.

What I have termed spiritual empiricism is a distinguishing characteristic of the Latter-day Saint faith, which has a marked common-sense, practical strain to it, deriving partly from the Church being organized on the American frontier by men with simple New England backgrounds. But this principle has been a part of the gospel in all ages. It is clearly implied in Christ's admonition, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17). Job demanded reasons and arguments and proofs from his friends and from God, but was reconciled in his faith not because he received them—quite the contrary. The Lord, rather than answering his questions, overwhelmed him with additional ones even more perplexing. His final confession of faith resulted not from knowledge based on discursive logic, but from a direct, inner, personal encounter with the Lord. The book of *Ecclesiastes* teaches a similar lesson. According to man's reasoning and observation, and the Preacher was adept at both, human life is vain and devoid of meaning; yet underlying the probing cynicism of this book is a simple faith in God, directly felt rather than reasoned, which makes all of man's reasoning and observation ultimately beside the point.

Both *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* point out the inexorable law of our being: we are intellectually impotent and morally responsible. It is spiritual empiricism that leads us out of this dilemma. As Karl Jung remarked, "It is not ethical principles, however lofty, or creeds, however orthodox, that lay the foundation for the freedom and autonomy of the individual, but simply and solely the empirical awareness, the incontrovertible experience of an intensely personal, reciprocal relationship between man and an extramundane authority which acts as a counterpoise to the 'world' and its 'reason.'" Such an awareness is not to be acquired by the usual kinds of arguments and demonstrations, for, as James Russell Lowell pointed out, "No two men have ever argued together without at least agreeing in this, that something more than proof is required to produce conviction, and that a logic which is capable of grinding the stubbornest facts to powder (as every man's *own* logic always is) is powerless against so delicate a structure as the brain. Do what we will, we cannot contrive to bring together the yawning edges of proof and belief, to weld them into one . . . Demonstration may lead us to the very gate of heaven, but there she makes a civil bow, and leaves us to make our way back again to Faith, who has the key." And where is Faith to be found? Lowell says, "Faith was never found in the bottom of a crucible, nor peace arrived at by analysis or synthesis." It is not to be found in ordinary scientific empiricism, but in a more subtle and personal empiricism of the spirit.

It is often the case that members of the Church with the deepest conviction, the

profoundest faith, find it most difficult to present striking or original reasons or demonstrations for why they believe as they do. If they provide evidence at all, it is usually the simplest doctrines of the Church and not intricate logical arguments or subtle insights into the mysteries of man's relationship with God. Perhaps G. K. Chesterton provided a key for understanding this situation when he said, "It is very hard for a man to defend anything of which he is entirely convinced. It is comparatively easy when he is only partially convinced because he has found this or that proof of the thing, and he can expound it. But a man is not really convinced of a philosophic theory when he finds that something proves it. He is only really convinced when he finds that everything proves it. And the more converging reasons he finds pointing to this conviction, the more bewildered he is if asked suddenly to sum them up."

Let no one understand my line of reasoning so far as an expression of simple anti-intellectualism. As a teacher and scholar I have a deep respect for rational thinking and an abiding love for intellectual argument, but in the area of one's religious life they must be put in proper perspective. The misuse of them in spiritual matters can be a disservice to discursive logic as well as to religious truth.

Contention in church classes often results from two errors: too much confidence in rational argument, on one hand, and too much fear and suspicion of it on the other. Both are failures of understanding spiritual empiricism. More humility is needed on both sides. It is painful to think how many times I have seen the familiar battle lines drawn. On one side is the person enamored by rational argument who has discovered the destructive joys of critical thinking; he has consummate skill in pointing out hypocrisy and logical inconsistency, but feels little responsibility for the very important practical task of rebuilding after error has been demolished. He is often bright, but has not yet attained the genuine wisdom that recognizes human frailty, acknowledges the limitations of human reason, and attempts to cope with these conditions. This is the kind of person Pope might have had in mind when he said "a little learning is a dangerous thing." For critical thinking that is merely negative is only a half-way house, to be appreciated as marking half the distance to our destination, but not to be mistaken for it. On the other side is the person who values the security which the Gospel provides but refuses to earn it by study and thought. It is enough for him to accept passively the adage that the Gospel comprehends all truth. This excuses him from the effort of laboring for that truth himself. He feels it is in the safe keeping of the General Authorities and he need not concern himself with a strict accounting of it. But without such personal effort and struggling he can never be genuinely secure in his faith. This is why he feels so alarmed and personally threatened at any hint of doctrinal non-conformity. Usually he does not know the doctrine well enough to discern between reasonable difference of opinion and heresy and is therefore made uncomfortable by any hint of disagreement.

We must never become too glib about truth. It is not so easy to come by through rational thinking as some suppose; neither is it so simple and complete in the Restored Gospel as some suppose. The Russian philosopher-theologian Nicholas Berdyaev asserted that "Truth is not given in a ready-made and finished form, not even the Truth of revelation. No revelation whatever ought to lay claim to finality and completeness, it goes on to the end of the world." If this smacks of "the doctrines and precepts of men," then hear it from a prophet—Brigham Young: "... I do not even believe that there is a single revelation, among the ones God has

given to the Church, that is perfect in its fullness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low . . . inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfection. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities . . . The laws that the Lord has given are not fully perfect, because the people could not receive them in their perfect fullness; but they can receive a little here and a little there . . .” This statement is worth pondering because it reflects a balance that is sometimes lost sight of in the Church: a recognition of the limits of human reason conjoined with a recognition that religious truth is profound and extends beyond the limits of simplistic formulations.

I mentioned that the plight of man is to be intellectually impotent and morally responsible. We need to face this and realize that our intellects will never be entirely satisfied. Thomas Arnold was right in noting that “The unbeliever makes the greatest moral sacrifice to obtain partial satisfaction to his intellect: a believer insures the greatest moral perfection, with partial satisfaction to his intellect also; entire satisfaction to the intellect is, and can be, attained by neither.” The implication of this idea is that some questions will always remain unanswered. The rationalist is wrong to consider this a fatal weakness in the believer’s position; and the believer is wrong in either refusing to acknowledge the lack of such answers or ingeniously filling in the gaps with conjectures. Brigham Young, in his common-sense way, got to the bottom of the matter when he said, “Our doctrine is right—there is no deception in it . . . Still, when we meddle with that which we know nothing about, we are apt to fall into error and differ; but we have so much which we do know, and think about and talk about, that we have no time to speculate about that which we do not know. We know that God lives.” Note this last sentence which is a summary of all that we know—at once so little and so much. Through an empirical awareness we know that God lives, and the reasoning and argument and speculation come afterward and are of secondary importance. The mysteries diminish in importance in proportion to the increase of our empirical awareness of our reciprocal relationship with God. Thomas Hobbes said, “For it is with the mysteries of our religion as with wholesome pills for the sick, which, swallowed whole, have the virtue to cure, but, chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect.” I find it not the least bit intellectually dishonest to “swallow whole” some doctrines not entirely understood, because, on the one hand, one must not overrate his intellect, and on the other, in affairs of religion spiritual empiricism must take precedence over scientific empiricism.

I remember as a college student, being in the first heady stages of encountering exciting new ideas and feeling the thrill of analytical thinking, attending a fireside at which Dr. Henry Eyring was the speaker. I expected this prominent scientist to initiate me into the mysteries of the relationship between science and religion. After torturing my brain with fascinating yet bewildering questions, I anticipated getting some answers at last. But in this expectation I was disappointed. Dr. Eyring presented a firm but simple testimony, based on the simplest kinds of personal experience from his daily life. Not even in the question and answer period was he enticed into the kind of metaphysical speculation I was looking for. It was not until some years later that I fully understood and appreciated Dr. Eyring’s message. He had come to learn an important truth: the simple personal assurance that God has unobtrusively answered our prayers and guided us in the most commonplace of our affairs counts more in building faith than the most brilliant and ingenious rational

argument. Coleridge understood this principle when, exasperated with the constant cry for rational demonstration of religious truth, he said, "*Evidences of Christianity!* I am weary of the word. Make a man feel the *want* of it; rouse him, if you can, to the self-knowledge of his need of it; and you may safely trust it to its own Evidence." Both the scientist and the poet-philosopher knew that faith, at bottom, is a personal, empirical awareness to the effect that there is a purposive agent behind the phenomena of the world corresponding to the immediate sense of purpose in the individual conscience. And this awareness holds priority over rationalism—even the rationalism which supports and articulates it.

Perhaps we would be more reconciled to the fact that religious truth will never give complete satisfaction to the actively inquiring intellect if we keep in mind that this lack of satisfaction is not only necessary but beneficial. God does not withhold certain knowledge from us without good reason. Carlyle said of the existence of God: "It could not be intellectually more evident without becoming morally less effective; without counteracting its own end by sacrificing the *life* of faith to the cold mechanism of a worthless because compulsory assent." The contemporary religious philosopher, John Hick, makes the same point, adding an emphasis on the value of personal experience—the kind of empirical awareness I have been trying to delineate:

For if God were to disclose himself to us in the coercive manner in which our physical environment obtrudes itself we should be dwarfed to nothingness by the infinite power thus irresistibly breaking open the privacy of our souls. Further, we should be spiritually blinded by God's perfect holiness and paralyzed by his infinite energy; for "the human kind cannot bear very much reality." Such a direct, unmediated confrontation breaking in upon us and shattering the frail autonomy of our finite nature would leave no ground for a free human response of trust, self-commitment, and obedience. There could be no call for a man to venture upon a dawning consciousness of God's reality, and thus receive this consciousness as an authentic part of his own personal experience precisely because it has not been injected into him or clamped upon him by magisterial exercise of divine omnipotence.

I suspect that one of the things that makes us a peculiar people is the principle of spiritual empiricism, even though this principle is not perfectly understood by all members of the Church. It is not a principle unique to us, for it operates in the life of any person of genuine faith. Perhaps it is connected with the light of Christ which we believe is inborn in all men. But in our Church it is given special emphasis and applicability. It underlies the prophet Alma's discourse on faith (Alma 32) and the promise in Moroni 10 and is the essence of our missionary approach. It is manifested each month in our testimony meetings. It is the fundamental source of our growth and vitality as a church: more people "experiment" themselves into faith than are reasoned into it; their testimonies come more from experiencing how the Gospel changes their lives on a very practical level than from intellectually witnessing how neatly the doctrines fit together.

Nothing of what I have said should be taken as depreciation of the role of the intellect in learning religious truth. God gave us our remarkable intellects to be exercised in the area of religion as well as in the areas of science, philosophy, politics, the arts, etc. But with every gift comes the responsibility for its proper use, and the key for applying intellect properly to spiritual questions is humility. A humility that will hold intellect in check long enough for the process of spiritual empiricism to register its subtle but absolutely essential data is probably the most important ingredient of vital and enduring religious conviction.

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~~I have / ...~~
AGAIN I AM THE CHILD HUNCHED INTO A TENSE BALL
IN BED ON CHRISTMAS MORNING,
BREATHLESS WITH TRAMPOLINING

