

## *Some Sentimental Thoughts on Leaving the Fold*

KENT L. WALGREN

A FEW SATURDAYS AGO, I stood in the duplication center at the University of Utah, photocopying a book-length manuscript with the cover title: "A Manuscript, by B. H. Roberts." Halfway through the project, a dark-haired student, in his mid-twenties, engaged me in conversation. I could see that only a considerable curiosity had overcome his instinctive reluctance to approach a stranger.

"Excuse me for being nosy, but I couldn't help but notice that you were copying something by B. H. Roberts. Would you mind telling me what it is?"

"It's an unpublished typescript of a work he wrote in the last years of his life entitled 'Difficulties with the Book of Mormon'," I answered.

"What is it about?"

I wasn't sure how to answer. I didn't want to be offensive, but I did enjoy religious discussions. "It's a study in which Roberts examines problems with the historicity of the Book of Mormon and concludes that a case can be made that it is the concoction of a boy living in western New York in the early nineteenth century."

The student tried to keep his face from cracking, but I could see he was nettled. Having been through dozens of unpleasant conversations in the preceding few years with believing Mormons, I made a few weak attempts to end the discussion which he resisted. After probing ineffectually to peg me, he finally offered that he was a Mormon. I knew that the remark was his way of inquiring into my status with the Church. I hesitated.

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"I'm a lapsed Mormon," I finally proffered. "What are you doing up here?"

"I've been working on a Sunday School lesson I have to give tomorrow. I found a fantastic article by Richard Poll . . ."

". . . 'What the Church Means to People Like Me.' " I interrupted.

"Yeah. How'd you know?" he asked.

Immediately a rush of confusing emotions filled me and I thought back five years to my own experience as the elders' quorum instructor in a University of Utah ward. In the priesthood class that morning, at my prompting, one elder, dressed in a black suit, tie and white shirt (the iron rodder) and another, tieless with a loud plaid sports coat (the liahona) played their parts and shared their beliefs and commitments to the Church. I remembered what a revelation and what a comfort Dr. Poll's article had been to me when I read it; it had been enough that there was someone else in the Church, apparently still functioning, who understood my questions. Dr. Poll had made me believe there was room in the Church for me. Then my attention shifted to a conference talk by Harold B. Lee in which he referred specifically to the article and condemned the liahonas;<sup>1</sup> and I felt an upheaval of pain.

I don't recall when I began asking questions about my religion. While going through the temple the first time before leaving for Italy on a mission, I remember wondering where and when the temple ceremony had been written down and how Joseph had received it; the question has stubbornly remained to this day. My faith then was probably a combination of pride, curiosity, and a sense of duty to God: my ego demanded that I be able to answer any question about the Church; I was curious after the manner of a mischievous child; and I had a profound sense of concern for my immortal soul. Despite the prohibition against "delving into the mysteries" I never hesitated to ponder any questions. I knew the Church was true and that since it circumscribed all truth, it was only a matter of looking hard enough and the answer would be there.

Although my mission was a satisfying experience, it also occasioned my first spiritual struggle. I saw hypocritical zone leaders blow into town, take in a movie, chastise the local elders for laziness and blow out again. I wrestled with the requirement that I obey my leaders with the same intensity that Jacob wrestled with his angel. I finally decided that one must obey even uninspired leaders; that if I were misled, the sin would be upon their heads. I found peace in the clichè that "the church organization is perfect but the leaders are human." But my stone respect for the Church leadership had developed a hairline crack.

My second struggle began in the first semester of law school at the University of Utah. The constitutional law professor, with infinite socratic skill, was grilling a classmate. I do not remember the particulars now, but the dialogue had something to do with the Constitution being a rigid or a flexible document. It was apparent to me that the student being questioned was a Mormon who believed the Constitution was divinely inspired, thus seemingly obviating the need that the document be amenable to fluid interpreta-

tion. As the professor fired question after question, my sorry classmate responded with the exact answers that I would have given. It became painfully obvious that the answers the student gave were logically unsound, but he held tenaciously to his cherished beliefs. As I left that class I felt battered even though I had not uttered a word during the entire hour. I realized that although BYU had filled me with answers, it never had taught me to think.

About this time I became acquainted with *Dialogue* and Dr. Poll's article. I was fortunate to have a (comparatively) liberal bishop who assured us that in order to function within the church we had to believe only three things: (1) the First Vision; (2) the Book of Mormon; and (3) that the current president of the Church was a prophet. Whether belief in the living prophet also implied absolute obedience to him, I am uncertain, but the reduction of the Mormon system to only three requirements gave me a sense of freedom.

The third stage of my journey occurred during the second year of law school. Six couples from the University Ward began to meet periodically for a study group. The first session would be an in depth study of the first vision. Someone brought Dean Jessee's article from *BYU Studies* about the early accounts of the first vision.<sup>2</sup> That there were numerous versions of the First Vision which seemed to contradict each other in important details penetrated deeply. I was beginning to feel insecure with my Bishop's first dogma.

In time it became inevitable that I read Fawn Brodie. During my undergraduate years at BYU the mere existence of *No Ma'am That's Not History* (though I had never given it more than a glance in the bookstore) had been conclusive proof that any questions she might have raised were ably answered by Hugh Nibley. So I read Brodie. And then I read Nibley. And the poverty of the refutation was more damaging than the exposé. After reading Brodie I felt the Book of Mormon, the remaining solid pillar of my testimony, begin to crumble, and I was frightened into fasting and prayer as never before. Although my testimony was disintegrating, I continued to attend church, partly to keep my marriage intact. The Church, after all, did much good; and it still might be true. But church meetings now became as painful as the dentist's chair. Contradictions that had once been assuaged by neat rationalizing or courteous evasions now glared: How could God be no respecter of persons and deny blacks the priesthood? How could the Book of Mormon prohibitions against secret rites and societies be squared with the temple ceremony? Was there really a difference between Christ's hypocrite praying on the street corners and prayer before 25,000 fans at a BYU basketball game?

In a magazine one day I came across horrifying color photographs of two children in Niger swollen near death from starvation. I dry-mounted the pictures and sent them with a letter to the First Presidency in which I asked how the Church could justify a half-ton, 10,000 crystal, 3,930 watt, chandelier in the new Washington Temple while thousands of children were starving to death daily; and if I could have permission to pay my tithing to hunger relief organizations and present receipts for the contributions to the bishop for purposes of obtaining a temple recommend. The First Presidency, after denying my request, answered as follows:

Were everyone in the world members of the Church, the tragic problems referred to . . . could of course be handled according to accepted welfare procedures.<sup>3</sup>

One winter night, while lying in bed before going to sleep, I told my wife Mischel that I did not believe in the church anymore. I had not planned it; I had never before even admitted it to myself, and I told her even though I knew that it would be shattering. In retrospect, I see that I had grasped at anything to keep from facing head-on the question of whether the Church might really be false. That ultimate question is always left unasked in Mormonism. Freedom of thought is circumscribed, often within a rather large circle, but the contemplation of the possibility of the downright falsity of Mormonism is a question always outside the circle. As Mischel lay crying that winter evening I felt a burden lifted from me as at no other time in my life. I was finally at peace again. I could now frankly admit my doubts and reservations without worrying about weakening testimonies or damaging potential converts. That evening the balance scales tipped. Needle after needle, day by day, had accumulated until there were finally enough of them to outweigh the solid lead of twenty-seven years of love and conditioning. I have asked many fallen Mormons since that time if they remember a precise moment of epiphany and most have answered yes. For Mischel it occurred two years later, her agony of fasting and prayer having been met with heavenly silence. But not before our marriage was becoming unravelled. After all, why should she waste time with me in this life when I wouldn't be around in the next? I love Mischel more deeply for having cared enough to decide for herself.

My affair with *Dialogue* had turned out to be a resting point along the way, not a final destination. I now, justly or unjustly, came to perceive the Englands, Polls, Hansens, Bushmans and Kellers as a coterie of intellectual chickens who'd found a place to roost. I imagined the compromises that *Dialogue* had had to make in order to survive. I thought that perhaps *Dialogue* should have kept its integrity and gone the way of *Courage*. But time has tarnished my idealism, and I am glad *Dialogue* is still around—even with its limitations. It may have cleared ground that some would not otherwise have been able to pass.

There remained the final ordeal: parents. Both Mischel's and my father had been in a stake presidency. Presurmising the anguish our confessions would cause, we resisted until it finally became a matter of our psychic survival. Five years ago we mailed to our parents lengthy letters in which we set forth the reasons we could no longer retain our commitments to the Church. There were no ugly scenes; there have been no bitter arguments; but our relationships with our parents have never been the same.

Having parted ways with Mormonism, Christianity and theism seemed naturally to follow. Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not A Christian*, and *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* by Albert Schweitzer transformed the divinity of Jesus into myth. Walter Kaufmann, Bertrand Russell and Albert Camus destroyed God. A few years before, I had known even the name of the planet next to God's residence; now I knew nothing. The process of building a

personal moral and ethical system from the ground up has been, and continues to be, both exciting and painful. An initial enmity toward Mormonism caused me to discredit automatically any notion propounded by the Church. I have since found that many of the teachings of the Church are worth following, though for different reasons. I have had to learn to continually resist the security of absolutes: to think in shades of gray rather than in blacks and whites.

I have also discovered that I will always be a Mormon, whether or not the Church excommunicates me. Months ago a friend in another state wrote and asked why it is that some who leave the Church are able to integrate into the world and others are never really able to extricate themselves from the Mormon milieu. The answer must lie, in part, in the intensity of devotion before the fall from faith. Many are so deeply hurt by the social stigma of apostasy that they compulsively spend their remaining days inquiring into the Church's past in an effort to assure themselves and those who once respected them that they are not really crazy or evil. Perhaps it would be less medieval to borrow from the Jews and refer to these apostates and cultural Mormons as "progressive" Mormons; i.e., Mormons who cannot accept the dogma but who are as much a part of the Mormon culture as any fundamentalist or orthodox Mormon. The Church has little to fear from progressive Mormons. They are by nature generally individualists who are as inclined to reject an organization of liberals as they were to reject the church institution itself. Not so the fundamentalists. They seem to bear many of the traits of the Hofferian "true believer:" the need to identify with a mass movement; deprecation of the present; certitude in doctrine and fanaticism. If there is a threat to orthodox Mormonism it is the fundamentalist, not the progressive.

The freedom that I experienced in the last few years has been exhilarating. I discovered the amiability of coffee, beer and wine. I made new acquaintances whose diversity is as refreshing as the conformity within orthodoxy was stifling. But the parting has also brought sadness. Will Durant expressed it in describing his change from Catholicism to atheism:

I am still thinking of the suffering the change will bring. Not merely to disappointed parents, who will rear some of their sons to be priests only to find them becoming apostates and atheists. I am thinking of the apostates and atheists themselves. They will always have within them some seed of the faith they have left; they will feel a strange emptiness of soul when they look into the skies that once held a loving God, or into graves that once meant resurrections. I think some of them will go back to the old faith after a while, unable to bear the world without fiction. But even those who do not go back will secretly yearn for the poetry and comfort of the old beliefs. If we had never had the idea of a Father in heaven, and a happy life after death, we might bear this world cheerfully enough. Perhaps our children, or their children, will learn to be happy without lying to themselves about death. But we won't. We'll find it harder to die, I think; a little harder to leave life when we can never hope to taste its sweetness or see its colors again. The age of the great change will also be for many of us the age of the great sadness.<sup>4</sup>

Mormonism, Jesus and God, once real for me, have become fictions; yet, as I have approached the coal-blackness of my new reality, I have concluded bitterly that the human mind can handle only limited doses of reality; that some self-deception is necessary in order to survive. Understanding the game, I am uncertain how to deal with the self-deception; but I can no longer condemn my Mormon friends for their fiction.

As I focused again on my new acquaintance, the pain I initially felt melted into pity.

"How'd you know the name of the article?" he asked.

"It meant something special to me at one time in my life."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. I was feeling cornered until I ran across it. Now I feel there really is room in the Church for me," he said with relief.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Harold B. Lee, Address delivered at general conference Sunday afternoon, April 4, 1971. Printed with the title "The Iron Rod," in *The Ensign*, June, 1971, p. 5. See especially page 7: "There are many who profess to be religious and speak of themselves as Christians, and, according to one such 'as accepting the scriptures only as sources of inspiration and moral truth,' and then ask in their smugness: 'Do the revelations of God give us a handrail to the kingdom of God, as the Lord's messenger told Lehi, or merely a compass?'" Poll's article, originally published in *Dialogue* 2 (Winter 1969): 107, has recently been reprinted in *Sunstone* 6 (July-August 1980).

<sup>2</sup>Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies*, 9 (Spring, 1969), p. 275.

<sup>3</sup>Letter dated February 21, 1975, signed by Spencer W. Kimball and Marion G. Romney.

<sup>4</sup>Will Durant, *Transition* (Garden City, New York, Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1927), pp. 159-60.