

# A Personal Odyssey: My Encounter with Mormon History

*By Lawrence Foster*

FOR NEARLY A DECADE, the greater part of my waking hours has been spent in the study of Mormon history. In writing a dissertation at the University of Chicago and then a book dealing in part with the origin of Mormon polygamy, I worked intensively in archives from coast to coast. My goal was the clearly impossible one of reading everything of importance in print by or about the Latter-day Saints prior to 1860. From one perspective such actions were nothing out of the ordinary. Many Mormon scholars have shown even greater dedication in attempting to reconstruct the roots of their faith. Yet my case is different. I am not a Mormon. Many Mormon friends have been puzzled that anyone could have devoted so many years to studying the Latter-day Saints without becoming one. Conversely, non-Mormons have repeatedly asked me, only half-jokingly, how anyone could have studied Mormon history so thoroughly without becoming anti-Mormon.

This essay attempts to articulate what attracted me to the study of Mormon history and why my studies have led me to become neither Mormon nor anti-Mormon.<sup>1</sup> My simultaneous attraction to Mormonism and my distance from it are the product of a carefully formulated approach to the study of religion. By making a full and candid statement of my motives, insofar as I am aware of them, I hope that it may be possible to suggest not only something significant about the Mormon past, but also what Mormonism and Mormon history may yet become. I further hope to raise issues and suggest an approach that may be fruitfully applied to the study of any religious movement.

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My unorthodox approach to Mormon history is the product of an equally unorthodox but committed religious background which has significantly shaped all aspects of my scholarship. As a child, I lived in the Philippines. My father was the first nonproselytizing Methodist missionary in that country. Instead of "saving souls" (or more precisely, trying to convert Roman Catholics to Methodism), he did essentially pre-Peace Corps, pre-Green Revolution work. This included agricultural extension activity in outlying *barrios* and teaching vocational agriculture in high school and sociology in a local college. Living conditions in the rural *barrio* where we lived for two years were primitive by American standards. We initially had neither running water nor reliable electricity, for example. Not only were my parents Americans struggling to understand a strange culture while rearing two young children, but much of their work was with Philippine Methodists, many of whom held conservative views which my parents did not share but with which they did not feel free to differ publicly.

More significant than my cross-cultural exposure in the Philippines was the influence of my mother, who had a profound impact on my religious attitudes and development. Her experiences growing up for the first sixteen years of her life as the daughter of Methodist educational missionaries in Korea highlight the classic tension underlying the missionary enterprise. Her mother, a warm but imposing dowager who went to Korea as a single Presbyterian missionary, was a missionary fundamentalist whose chief goal was saving souls. In later years when she would come to visit, we were strictly instructed never to discuss religion with her. Her religious views were so inflexible and literalistic that any attempt to raise or respond to religious issues could only provoke fruitless tensions.

At the opposite pole was my grandfather, a reflective and thoughtful man who taught history in Korea for nearly forty years. He was a missionary intellectual, a person whose deepest concern is to understand and appreciate a different culture. Mother vividly remembers that during their vacation trips to the lovely Diamond Mountains in what is now North Korea, the family would stay in Buddhist guest houses and Grandfather would have long serious discussions with the monks. He was visibly impressed by their spirituality and sought to comprehend their faith purely for its own sake, not for any ulterior motives.

These polarities in my mother's background were a source of great anguish to her, anguish which she transmitted to me. Eventually, after great personal struggle she worked her way to a position closer to Grandfather's Christian humanitarianism. Yet the tension remains. For instance, Mother will state unequivocally that the institutional church is wholly expendable if that be necessary to realize God's deeper goals on earth. On the other hand, my parents tithe their income, a practice rare for Methodists. I received both a thorough grounding in Mother's literary and religious approach to the Bible and full biblical refutations for the arguments of fundamentalist Christianity. As a teenager, I participated regularly in church services, choir, and youth

groups, yet my propensity for raising uncomfortable questions continually embroiled me in controversy. For example, I was such a disruptive influence for my conservative eighth-grade teacher that by mutual agreement I opted out of the class and spent my time in the church library reading *The Interpreter's Bible* on the Book of Job.

From my experiences growing up in another culture and associating with parents who had a strong but unorthodox religious commitment, I reached two unshakable conclusions. The first was that religion can and often does play a powerful role in human life. Whether for good or ill, religion is a force which cannot be ignored. Some scholars might casually dismiss the influence of religion, but I had felt its power and been shaken by it. I became fascinated, as was William James, by the religion that exists not as a dull habit but as an acute fever — religion that is alive. I read widely in my own and in other religious traditions and meditational writings. During and after college, I developed a hobby of visiting a variety of religious and cult groups, ranging from Guru Maharaji, the Hari Krishnas, and the Moonies to Billy Graham and revivalistic faith healers. My goal was to understand the varied ways in which religion, which had been such an important force in my life, had also influenced the lives of other men and women.

A second conclusion which gradually developed out of my interest in the varieties of religious experience was that no religion has a monopoly on absolute truth. Through personal experience and wide reading, I came to know many wonderful men and women whose beliefs were widely at variance with my own. I could have become cynical at such divergences or have adopted an exclusivist viewpoint as the best way to shore up my faith. Instead I concluded that all religions — even the best — are but partial perspectives on a higher truth that is ultimately beyond full human comprehension or institutional realization. We are all like blind men, each convinced that he knows what the elephant really is, yet each perceiving its awesome immensity only in part. It became increasingly clear to me that no specific beliefs and practices are necessarily important in themselves; what really matters is the meaning that they hold for the worshipper. Surely this awesome and wondrous universe could be approached from many different perspectives, any one of which might serve as a vehicle for richer insight and deeper understanding.

This realization did not cause me to give up my faith, but led me instead to want to explore it more deeply. Even if there were many possible approaches to truth, I, like other individuals, had grown up within a particular tradition for which I had a special emotional affinity. Though I might intellectually reject a literalistic interpretation of the Christmas story, for example, I would always feel deeply the joy of the Christmas spirit, with its message that God can work through even the most lowly and unpromising circumstances. Why should I try to convert to another faith if, as I came to believe, the deepest spiritual values could also be found in my own? And conversely, why should I try to convert others to my faith if those deeper spiritual values could also be found in their faiths? I increasingly felt my deepest affinity not with lukewarm or

naive believers in my own tradition but with those people of whatever faith who seemed to have an appreciation of deeper spiritual values — what I came to see as true religious consciousness. From these perceptions developed my distinctive sense of mission. My goal was not so much to convert across faith lines but to encourage others to appreciate and better understand the universal values within their own heritage — to become *better* Methodists, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, Mormons, or whatever.

When I first stumbled into Mormon history in the late 1960s, I was only dimly aware of Mormonism or how I would eventually study the movement. Like many other non-Mormons, I started with little more than a few basic stereotypes about the Latter-day Saints and a willingness to learn the extent of my ignorance. My impressions then were threefold: Mormonism was an “authoritarian” religion; its members had once practiced polygamy; and the religion discriminated against blacks. In late 1969 I toyed briefly with the idea of writing my history B.A. thesis at Antioch College on the origin of Mormon polygamy. Ironically, it was Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History* that discouraged me from pursuing the topic then. While the dust jacket of her book touted it as the “definitive” biography of Joseph Smith, a close reading of the first few pages convinced me that Brodie felt Smith was incomprehensible. Putting two and two together, I concluded that if the definitive biography of Joseph Smith said he was incomprehensible, there was little chance that a beginner like myself could unravel anything as complex as Smith’s motives or the origin of polygamy in the six months then available. I would have to gain a broader perspective first.

My real concern, in any case, was not Mormonism per se but whether the turbulence and experimentation of the late 1960s might have any parallels with the pre-Civil War period. As an undergraduate at Antioch, an experimental liberal arts college in Ohio which combined alternating quarters of on-campus study with off-campus work, I was exposed to the peak of the late 1960s social protest and counter-cultural movements. Many people seemed to be at loose ends, searching for a sense of community but often not finding it. In an effort to come to grips with this disruption, I wrote an undergraduate thesis comparing and contrasting the marriage and family ideas of two other antebellum restorationist movements — the Shakers, who set up celibate communities, and the Oneida Perfectionists, who established a form of group marriage. I concluded that although both groups had rejected the nuclear family and monogamous marriage, their rejection was based on a concern for enlarging the “family” to include the whole group, linked together in tighter bonds of unity.

Until 1971 my curiosity about Mormonism was temporarily in abeyance. Then, at a conference in Chicago, a paper on Mormon family ideals was presented by Mel Hammarberg, a non-Mormon scholar. He stressed that polygamy had been viewed as a means of enlarging family and kinship connections. During the question period, I pointed out that the Shakers and Oneida Perfectionists had also sought to enlarge the nuclear family. Why, I asked, were so

many people at the same time and place concerned with enlarging the family? He said he didn't know. I decided to find out. My dissertation at the University of Chicago eventually became a comparative analysis of the marriage and family restructuring of these three groups, as seen in their social and intellectual context. To that end, in 1973 I spent six months researching and writing a fifty-page seminar paper for Martin Marty which attempted to develop a new and more convincing analysis of the origin of Mormon polygamy.

The work was an eye opener. I had previously viewed the Mormons as hardworking, cleancut, loyal, thrifty, brave, clean, reverent — and utterly boring. No group ever talked more about free will (“free agency” in Mormon parlance), while seeming to exercise free will less in important matters. I had always remembered one vivid cartoon. It showed a large, overbearing woman talking with her neighbor while her small, shy husband dutifully sat on the couch, his hands meekly folded. The woman was saying: “Hubert has a will of iron; he just seldom gets a chance to use it.” This for me was the epitome of Mormonism.

Popular Mormon writings had merely reinforced the unbelievable stereotype. Mormons throughout history, if one believed the accounts, had always been paragons of virtue, totally dedicated to the faith. They had never had any doubts or problems except how they could better spread the “gospel” among non-Mormons, who, for wholly inexplicable reasons, were adamantly opposed to accepting the “truth.” Even without actual knowledge of events, I realized that this official, pollyannaish version couldn't possibly be the full story. Surely there must have been more to Mormon history than the naive accounts indicated, especially considering the remarkable success of Mormonism.

Fortunately, my 1973 work with primary Mormon records and with what has sometimes been called “the new Mormon history” helped me to overcome these stereotypes. For the first time I began to gain a real appreciation of the Mormon past and what Mormonism might become. When I started my research on the origin of Mormon polygamy, I fortuitously decided to read systematically through the back issues of *DIALOGUE* to try to gain an understanding of the historical and religious concerns of Mormonism. The result was a minor revelation. Latter-day Saints were not a bunch of goody-goody zombies but were real people who were struggling with many of the same questions that, in a different religious tradition, had also baffled and challenged me. Perhaps by studying the Mormons I could gain insight, not only into their past but into mine as well.

Several months after completing the paper on polygamy, I had the good fortune of attending the first meeting of the John Whitmer Historical Association, the RLDS historical group, in Nauvoo, Illinois. There I also met Latter-day Saint historians from the newly professionalized LDS Church Historical Department and gave them a copy of my paper for their criticism. To my delight, they said that it rang true to them. I was encouraged to come to Salt Lake City the following summer to research my hypotheses in the Church Archives. The four months I spent there in the summer of 1974 were one of

the most exciting and rewarding periods of my life. I had feared that it would be impossible to gain access to the Church Archives. Instead, all relevant materials were made available to me and many individuals shared their ideas and helped in any way they could. I made many dear and lasting friends that summer, Mormon and non-Mormon alike.

That Salt Lake City research provided the core of what eventually became my dissertation and then my book, *Religion and Sexuality*, published in 1981 by Oxford University Press. In the book, I sought to combine both the analytical perspectives of an outsider and the sensitive appreciation of an insider. My goal was to place the origin of Mormon polygamy into a comparative perspective with other social and intellectual experiments of the antebellum years, particularly the Shakers and Oneida Perfectionists. I tried to explain not only *what* these groups did, but *why*, and how successful they were in terms of their own objectives. By seeking sympathetically yet critically to understand these extraordinary experiments in religious and social revitalization, I was attempting to come to terms with a broader set of questions that affect all men and women during times of crisis and transition.

I am encouraged that to date high praise for the study has come from LDS, non-Mormon, RLDS, and anti-Mormon scholars alike, all of whom apparently feel that the book supports their own point of view. This was precisely the reaction I had hoped to get. My goal was to reconstruct, as nearly as possible, what actually happened and then to present that evidence in such a way that individuals from widely divergent and seemingly incompatible backgrounds would find the presentation believable and be able to experience again the full range of reactions that occurred when the original phenomena took place. Beyond that, my deeper objective was to show even the most rampant skeptic how and why religion (in this case, Mormonism) could and did play an important role in human history.

Over the past decade, I have formulated a unified approach toward the major issues of early Mormonism, including the First Vision, the origin of the Book of Mormon, and the Latter-day Saint concept of true religious authority. My perspective corresponds neither to that of most Mormons nor of most anti-Mormons. Setting out my full approach toward these complex issues would be impossible here. Instead, I shall deal briefly with one topic which constitutes the crux of my personal difference with conventional Mormonism — the Latter-day Saint concept of true religious authority.

Let me preface this discussion by raising the question of the propriety of dealing historically with the Mormon religious experience at all. One of the fears voiced most frequently by Mormon conservatives is that serious historical writings may “secularize” Mormonism. This view is a red herring, in my opinion. For believing Mormons to write either an exclusively “religious” or an exclusively “secular” version of their history is to make a false dichotomy since Mormonism, more than most contemporary religions, has refused to accept a religious-secular dichotomy at all. Mormon theology unequivocally

states that the spiritual dimension is comprised of a form of matter. Thus, presumably, it must also be subject to some form of natural law, even if we do not yet understand it. Joseph Smith asserted: "All spirit is matter, but is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes." He also said "that spirit is a substance; that it is material, but that it is more pure, elastic and refined matter than the body; that it existed before the body, can exist in the body, and will exist separate from the body when the body will be mouldering in the dust."<sup>2</sup>

Growing out of this assertion is the Mormon belief that when properly sealed under Church authority, earthly relationships will literally continue and develop further in the afterlife and for all eternity. Death is viewed only as a transition to a higher realm of reality which still involves a type of physical order, even though we normally cannot comprehend that order because of our earthly limitations. (The analogy presented in Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* may be useful here.) Because this life and the afterlife are believed to be indissolubly linked, it follows that all religious and secular activities on earth should be inseparable. The extraordinary Mormon effort to establish their Zion in the American West during the nineteenth century reflected this drive to integrate all reality into a unitary whole. In short, Mormonism is at the same time the most overtly materialistic of the major offshoots of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the most emphatically committed to the reality of the spiritual world. In what is only a seeming paradox, Mormons might be said to believe in a form of "spiritual materialism."

This explicitly materialistic orientation has some important logical consequences for Mormons as they study their own history. While naive Saints will undoubtedly continue to attribute every past event to divine fiat, just as young children believe literally in Santa Claus, more mature Saints also have the important option of investigating even the seemingly miraculous and inexplicable elements of their history to try to understand their naturalistic dynamics, insofar as that is possible. Such investigation need not reduce the sense of awe, mystery, and power in Mormonism. To use a related analogy, is it really more religiously inspiring to believe that storks bring babies or to try to understand a deeper level the extraordinary richness of the emotional and physical elements that contribute to the birth of new life? Anyone who has read widely among the great writers in the natural sciences such as Loren Eiseley and Carl Sagan is surely aware that deeper understanding heightens rather than reduces our sensitivity to the ultimate wonder that is life. Similarly, human history, when understood in its full richness, is an ever-unfolding miracle. Knowledge, not ignorance, is ultimately more effective in promoting a rich and vital faith. In this spirit, I, though a non-Mormon, am attempting in what follows not to engage in destructive criticism of the Mormon faith, but rather to help that faith see itself more clearly and move toward the development of its full potential as a world religion.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I*, ed. Brigham H. Roberts, 6 vols., 2nd ed, rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1948), 5: 393, 4: 575. Punctuation has been modified for clarity.

To begin to express my reservations about the Mormon concept of true religious authority, let me briefly sketch the approach toward authority used by the group with which I now feel most spiritually akin — the Religious Society of Friends, better-known as Quakers. Although neither I nor my parents are formally affiliated with the Quakers, our attraction to the group and what it stands for is long and deep. By discussing some of the key features of the Quaker approach toward authority and then comparing that approach with the one used by Mormons, I hope to highlight distinctive elements in both groups. All too often, Latter-day Saints assume that no other religious group could possibly be as attractive to its followers as theirs is to them. One of the few ways to begin to overcome such insularity is to provide concrete evidence of attractive alternative cases. The Quakers are an ideal group to make this point, since they are so small and do not actively proselytize today. They thus pose no direct institutional challenge to the Latter-day Saints, and hopefully they may be looked at more objectively than could potential competitors. At the same time, the Quakers also raise important issues for Mormons. I have found in the Quaker community and approach many positive elements that I also see in the Latter-day Saint movement, yet without the curious limitation in religious exploration that increasingly appears to be present in conventional Mormonism today. My hope is that the following reflections may prove useful to Latter-day Saints as they seek to understand and come to terms with distinctive aspects of their own faith as well.

Who are the Quakers and what is their approach to religious authority? Known today by many people as little more than the image on the Quaker Oats box, the Quakers historically were the most radical of the Protestant offshoots of the English Civil War period of the mid-1600s which have survived to the present. Going even further than the warring Anglicans and Puritans in breaking with the beliefs and practices of Roman Catholicism, the Quakers adopted the position that the ultimate source of true religious authority was what they variously referred to as the Inner Light, the Christ Spirit, or the Spirit of Truth within each human being. Unlike the Puritans, who saw human nature as basically evil, the Quakers were convinced that human nature, at its core, was basically good. Sensitivity to the inner light which could be found in all human beings was the only ultimate basis and justification for religious and moral authority.

Two controversial conclusions followed from this Quaker belief in the inner light as the ultimate basis for all truth. The first was that no external religious authorities, ceremonies, or forms had any ultimate validity in themselves; the inner spirit was what really mattered. Quakers thus did away with even baptism and the Lord's Supper as formal ceremonies. They eliminated any paid ministry, believing in the literal priesthood of all believers. Singing in church and formal sermons were also eliminated. In their place was substituted the silent meeting, a form of group meditation and worship. Believers would sit together in silent openness to the leadings of the Lord. When an individual felt an inspiration from God or a deep insight, he or she would break the si-



lence to share it with the group. Always acting as a check on individual idiosyncrasy was the combined striving of the group for a true consensus with each other and with the Lord on all major issues.

A second result of the Quaker stress on the inner light as the basis for all truth was their social radicalism. Quakers refused to accept arbitrary social distinctions between people. Because all individuals were viewed as possessing a spark of the Divine, Quakers insisted on treating all individuals equally and using the same forms of address for all human beings, even the king. Seeing the spirit of God even in their enemies, they opposed all war and violence, preferring if necessary to suffer imprisonment or even death rather than harm others. They dressed simply and without ostentation in a highly class-conscious age. Believing that one should tell the truth at all times, they refused to swear oaths to tell the truth only at specific times. And they infuriated their patriarchal contemporaries by giving equality to women within their organization. Women, like men, could speak in meeting, take leadership roles, and even go on missionary trips to spread the Quaker message. Intrepid Quaker women travelled to America to convert the Indians, to Rome to convert the Pope, and to Turkey to convert the Sultan.

The result of such radically unorthodox beliefs and practices was predictable — bitter persecution. During the worst period in England, thousands of Quakers were imprisoned under the foulest imaginable conditions and hundreds died following brutal treatment that even the twentieth century has hardly surpassed. Eventually, under the leadership of William Penn, a refuge was established in Pennsylvania. There the Quakers, unlike many earlier religious refugees to the New World, secured religious freedom not only for themselves but also for others whose views differed from their own. Pennsylvania became a rich, cosmopolitan center of diverse religious and ethnic groups — an inspiration for the eventual American commitment to genuine religious freedom and pluralism.

The Quakers have remained a relatively small group since colonial times, largely because of their unwillingness to compromise their basic principles in search of members. There are only some 30,000 Friends of the silent meeting variety in the United States today, and fewer than 200,000 Quakers of any persuasion throughout the world. Yet the Quakers have always been influential far beyond their numbers. Vividly remembering the persecution and injustices they suffered, Quakers have repeatedly stood as champions of social justice, prison reform, women's rights, the fight against hunger and poverty, and the search for world peace. I have experienced in the Society of Friends a rare combination of deep spiritual commitment with burning concern for social justice which appears less common in larger religious organizations. I do not doubt that this spirit, which I believe to be closely akin to that which underlay the early Christian movement, may be found in other groups as well; I only observe that in my experience this spirit has been expressed most clearly by the Society of Friends.

Latter-day Saints will note striking similarities and even more striking differences between Quakers and Mormons. Like Mormons, Quakers believe in and have suffered because of their belief in continuing revelation. Yet whereas Joseph Smith displayed this belief in literal form by dictating the Book of Mormon, issuing revelations in a "Thus saith the Lord" style, and claiming to be God's special prophet, Quakers have adopted a more inward, personal stance toward inspiration, free either from the need for external physical proofs of faith or any hierarchical mediation by external authority. George Fox, the chief founder of Quakerism, declared that he had experienced by direct revelation from God truths which he subsequently also discovered in scripture. Quakers, both then and now, have professed similar experiences and openings toward new light. Checks are provided on permissible inspiration not by a single official spokesman believed to have authority from God to speak as sole prophet, seer, and revelator, but through the mediation of the entire meeting acting as a gathered body.

Both Quakerism and Mormonism are alike in being lay organizations with no paid clergy or professional theological caste. Quakers go further than Mormons, however, in practicing the priesthood of all believers, since women are received in all respects as equal to men before the Lord. Also similar yet different is the way consensus is achieved. In Mormonism, as I understand it, when major decisions are declared by the hierarchy, Mormons acting as a body may in a conference affirm or "sustain" a consensus, unanimously supporting a policy even though, as individuals, they may not fully agree with it. Rather than accepting such a consensus imposed from above, Quakers seek within the meeting to develop a consensus representing all participating members. In theory, so long as even a single individual is conscientiously unable to take a stand, the group as a whole must seek to modify its position sufficiently that a new position closer to the truth can be freely and openly accepted by all. This is more demanding than simply accepting an edict from above, but in the long run I feel that it leads to a deeper and more internalized commitment.

Many other similarities and differences might be noted between the Quaker and Mormon approaches, but let me turn now to the difficulties that I have with the Mormon claim to hold sole possession of true religious authority. In my opinion, Joseph Smith was going in the right direction, but didn't go far enough. He could clearly see the inadequacies of the religious systems of his day, but he failed to understand that those inadequacies are inherent in any human attempt to explain ultimate reality. As a result, Joseph Smith made the mistake of trying to set up a new religious system which would be free of all the flaws of the old imperfect systems. In my opinion, he inevitably failed, for no earthly institution or set of beliefs, even the best, can adequately represent the full wonder and complexity of life. If you doubt this, try to explain what the color red really is to a man blind from birth. To some degree, all humans are inherently blind. We are inevitably forced to try to describe the greater in terms of lesser categories which cannot fully comprehend reality.

Following the death of Joseph Smith, as so frequently happens after the loss of a movement's founder, Mormonism gradually moved away from its prophet's powerful, albeit incomplete, vision. Brigham Young and other leaders, though deeply and sincerely committed to Joseph and to their understanding of what he had taught, simplified the message so that more immature Saints could grasp it. This process has gone even further during the decades since World War II, as the Church has attracted an incredible number of new converts. Many of them have little appreciation for Mormonism's historic distinctiveness, but are simply looking for authoritative answers to questions which, by their very nature, have no authoritative answers. The message has been watered down until for many it is like eating a poor pabulum — a pabulum characterized by the belief that simply by following Church leadership unquestioningly one will have achieved true faith. At times Mormonism appears to be a public relations shell without substance. Like the biblical Pharisees whom Jesus so sharply criticized, Mormons increasingly define themselves in terms of external behavior — not smoking, not drinking, and paying tithing — rather than seeking to understand the inner spirit which alone gives such actions meaning.

Perhaps the ultimate irony is that Joseph Smith, who introduced the temple ceremonies so important to Mormonism, would today be unable to participate in those ceremonies himself because of his own behavior. For Smith was no teetotaler; on numerous occasions throughout his life, he drank beer and wine. Indeed, he once planned to set up a bar in his Mansion House in Nauvoo. Only Emma's indignant refusal to countenance the action forced him to back down.<sup>3</sup> Yet today, how many Saints are piously judgmental of anyone who deviates even an iota from official Church policy. So often Mormons do all the right things for all the wrong reasons. They strain out gnats and swallow camels.

Today I see in Mormonism a growing fear, a loss of true confidence in the Mormon message, and an unwillingness or inability to accept the richness and complexity of the Latter-day Saint faith. Many Mormons, even at the highest levels of the Church, have recently begun to argue that there is simply "no middle ground" — one is either 100 percent Mormon or 100 percent anti-Mormon. While such statements are palpably and demonstrably false, they are nevertheless dangerous, especially for naive Saints who lack deeper spiritual experience. It may be true, as the saying goes, that "there are no atheists in foxholes," but I would ask: Who would choose to *live* in a foxhole all his life? What kind of life would that be? Commitment and challenge are vital to any faith, but let us not carry commitment to such pathological extremes that we retreat permanently into foxholes and accuse anyone who doesn't share our curious preference of being an enemy. Such an approach makes not only for bad religion, but for bad history as well.

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<sup>3</sup> The bar episode of September 1843 is described in Joseph Smith III's memoirs, and is conveniently summarized in Robert Bruce Flanders' *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 246.

There is much more than I could write on this topic, but let me close with two final examples. The first is an outrageous parable from the colorful investigative journalist of the early twentieth century, Lincoln Steffens. The second, in my opinion, is the most moving statement Joseph Smith ever made and possibly one of the most moving statements made by any religious leader.

Lincoln Steffens told his good friend Ray Stannard Baker the following imaginary story:

“Satan and I,” said Steffens, ‘were walking down Fifth Avenue [in New York] together when we saw a man stop suddenly and pick a piece of Truth out of the air — right out of the air — a piece of Living Truth.’

“Did you see that?” I asked Satan.

“Yes,” said Satan.

“Doesn’t it worry you? Don’t you know that it is enough to destroy you?”

“Yes, but I am not worried, I’ll tell you why. It is a beautiful living thing now, but the man will first name it, then he will organize it, and by that time it will be dead. If he would let it live, and live it, it would destroy me. I’m not worried.”<sup>4</sup>

Joseph Smith picked a piece of Truth out of the sky, a piece of Living Truth. It was powerful, immensely powerful. Sometimes even he couldn’t understand what he had in his hand. It was fearful even to him. His followers wanted Truth simplified. Some of them eventually helped kill him because they couldn’t comprehend his Truth — and because some of his very human weaknesses got in the way of his prophetic role. In a sermon several months before his death, Joseph expressed profound frustration at his inability to be understood, to get his deepest message across to even his closest followers. He declared, in words containing the utmost pathos: “You never knew my heart; no man knows my history; I cannot tell it. I shall never undertake it; if I had not experienced what I have I should not have known it myself.”<sup>5</sup>

The Truth that Joseph Smith saw is still powerful, though largely hidden even from faithful Latter-day Saints. Historians, at their best, have the opportunity of trying to recapture that Truth, at least in part. Such historical writing, far from threatening true religious understanding, provides one of the very few ways that it may, to a degree, be achieved. Good history and good religion go together, in Mormonism as in all faiths. Crushed and crushed again, Truth will rise ever with renewed strength and power. This, at least, is my faith.

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<sup>4</sup> Ray Stannard Baker, *American Chronicle: The Autobiography of Ray Stannard Baker* [David Grayson] (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 5 (November 1844): 93.