

The Intellectual in the Service of the Faith?

Some Propositions to Consider

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There are different ways to look at the world; and faith and reason provide contrasting, sometimes complementary perspectives. Faithful people who equate their spirituality with Church loyalty often find themselves at odds with those who seek — and find — the spirit through unfettered inquiry. Churches like other large institutions, however, often place a special premium on uniformity of thought and behavior. Yet there are always some who instinctively resist the notion that loyalty can be equated with, or measured by, orthodoxy. Religions seldom afford such people a comfortable home.

But intellectuals have been vital to the development of churches and religions including Mormonism. They sometimes ask disquieting questions or bear unhappy news, but they generally play an important role in linking the real and the ideal. At their best, they force us to reconcile the gap between what we wish were true and what is indeed true, destroying cherished myths about the special righteousness or helpfulness of the faithful. They can also urge us to a new and finer expression of the underlying values of the religious community. Intellectualism is a temper or mind, not a level of education, even though intellectuals typically prize the stimulation of education for themselves and others.

Important as these contributions to faith and Church may be, the messages of loyal but free intellectuals are seldom wholly welcome — at least at the time — and their integrity is often impuned. Mormon intellectuals, therefore, face a common dilemma, though its commonness does not salve its sting.

We have problems, of course. Intellectuals are wrong about as often as the rest of the population. On the other hand, because their loyalty is more to religious principles than to religious leaders, they at least raise the questions that beg for attention.

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Have such issues as these any particular saliency now? We believe so. On the one hand, historians and writers continue to be of special concern to some Church leaders. Restrictions have been placed on the use of important historical materials. Some who write for independent journals and magazines continue to be pressured, and a few have been intimidated. In light of these general conditions, peer pressure at the ward level has been on the rise. There are many reasons for this, including increased attention given the Church by the national and international press and mounting attacks by religious propagandists, including ex-Mormons. Unfortunately, members and leaders both confuse the constructive criticism of those within with the malevolent attacks of a few without, and feel that unwavering obedience is the most acceptable temper of mind for Latter-day Saints.

My aims for this panel are twofold. First, to make a case for the importance of the intellectuals to the continuing vitality of Mormon faith and culture. Second, to encourage loyal or once-loyal intellectuals to consider again both their faith and their obligations to it. I, for one, despair at the current despair.

Leonard J. Arrington, writing in *DIALOGUE* in 1965, identified three functions of intellectuals within society and within the LDS Church. He reflected first on the innate curiosity of intellectuals and their desire to understand people, nature, and the universe. Arrington also suggested that intellectuals provide fresh ideas for institutions and society. Further, he contended that intellectuals typically play a role in defining standards and principles within a culture. Arrington traced the contributions of Latter-day Saint intellectuals throughout our history, ending with a clarion call for "participating intellectuals" within Mormonism — meaning members who maintain their independence of mind and nurture their curiosity while continuing to serve and give unstintingly of their energy, time and ideas.¹

Davis Bitton, also writing in *DIALOGUE*, traced the relationship between intellectual life and the life of the Church since the early part of the nineteenth century.² He found Joseph Smith and other early leaders friendly to the science of their day and robust in their interests and ideas. But the riptide of science in the middle to the nineteenth century, much of it seemingly alien to religious traditions, caused LDS leaders to eschew the intelligentsia of the day and to turn their energies to fight sin with the Protestants and the U.S. government on their own. Emerging from the incarceration and embarrassment associated with polygamy, twentieth-century Mormon leaders have sought respectability with a passion, sometimes placing more value on image than truth. This predisposition, when it shows up, is repugnant to thoughtful members and, in the long run, damaging to the kingdom.

What then of the question, "Can the intellectual serve the Church?" At one level, the answer is an unequivocal Yes: members of this panel, if we are at all representative of the thoughtful community of Latter-day Saints, include a

¹ Leonard J. Arrington, "The Intellectual Tradition of the Latter-day Saints," *DIALOGUE* 4 (Spring 1969): 13–26.

² Davis Bitton, "Anti-Intellectualism in Mormon History," *DIALOGUE* 1 (Autumn 1966): 111–34.

bishop, a former member of the Young Women's General Board, a nineteen-year veteran of high council duties, and a counselor in a bishopric. If, indeed, intellectuals have a peculiar penchant to honor the *values* that animate an institution, then perhaps we and many others are inexorably drawn to serve the organization that seeks to bring those ideas to life. We cannot love mercy, justice, and liberty without seeking personally to advance these ideas in the lives of those around us. For many of us, the LDS Church at its best embodies these values — and provides a means for individual members to act on them.

On the other hand, "participating intellectuals," are not always comfortable serving in the way they are expected to serve. Asking a General Authority why a woman cannot serve in a ward Sunday School presidency may be offensive to him, but such a question may in fact be a service to the faith and to more than half of its members. Likewise, a sincere query concerning BYU's athletic budget may be seen as unbecoming distrust of Church leaders; yet if taken seriously, it might lead to a healthy reexamination of educational values and priorities.

I would like to conclude the formal part of my remarks by suggesting several strategies that intellectuals may pursue to reconcile their dilemmas. First, some seem attracted to the idea that the Church should issue a statement or appoint an official to defend intellectuals. In my view, intellectuals should not seek nor do they deserve a stamp of approval from anyone. Such a desire is itself a paradox. If we wish to think freely and responsibly about our world and our church, we must do it without the expectation of reward or the fear of criticism. It may be human to desire recognition for the occasional fruits of one's thoughts, but it is both unreasonable and inappropriate to seek official approval or recognition for the *processes* of thought themselves.

I should also like to reflect briefly on what I call the "irony of ambition." The Church, like all other organizations, however unfortunate this may be, tends to call, hire, or promote people according to their perceived orthodoxy. Inevitably, therefore, one should not expect to express or discuss maverick ideas and sincere misgivings while also hoping to be called up the ecclesiastical ladder. You can't expect to have it both ways, although you might by chance, as is the case with some of us here on the panel. You take your chances, that's all.

Let us take pleasure in the various ways that curious and questioning members may be able to serve — and proceed with some humility to give unique gifts, gifts of fresh ideas, gifts of new perspectives — even those gifts for which the need may not yet be evident.