

The Pursuit of Understanding

Thomas G. Alexander

A useful beginning for my comments may be found in a quotation from Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. Hofstadter wrote:

Ideally, the pursuit of truth is said to be at the heart of the intellectual's business, but this credits his business too much and not quite enough. As with the pursuit of happiness, the pursuit of truth is itself gratifying whereas the consummation often turns out to be elusive. . . . Whatever the intellectual is too certain of, . . . he begins to find unsatisfactory. The meaning of his intellectual life lies not in the possession of truth, but in the quest for new uncertainties. Harold Rosenberg summed up this side of the life of the mind supremely well when he said that the intellectual is one who turns answers into questions. (1966, 30)

Like Hofstadter, I am somewhat uncomfortable with defining the work of the intellectual as the search for truth. Rather, it seems to me the intellectual is involved in a quest for understanding.

What do we mean by understanding? When something is understood, I take it to mean that it is invested with meaning for the inquirer. We understand something when it has a meaning within the frame of reference from which we are capable of viewing it. Since people carry different sets of cultural, intellectual, and emotional baggage with them, each person will perhaps understand a particular set of circumstances or facts in a slightly different way. Nevertheless, adopting a metaphor from the world of computers, we understand something when we are able to process it so it has meaning for us.

The problems created by these two aspects — first, the search for understanding and second, the diversity of cultural backgrounds — have some important implications for the intellectual in the service of the faith.

In the first place, it is important when dealing with the ideas of others that we try as much as possible to restate them in a form that the author would readily recognize and agree with. For living persons it is possible to do this by referring our reconstruction to the author. For the dead, this is difficult, particularly if the person has been dead for some time and if culture has changed over time. In those cases, it will often be necessary to try to reconstruct the ideas, and then to reinterpret them into a frame of reference which can be understood by the audience we are addressing today.

Secondly, as intellectuals we have an obligation to try to explain our interpretation in a way that the audience we are addressing can understand. This means that every idea will not be explained in the same way to every audience. It means also that we may offend members of one audience when we explain something to those of another audience, because they do not understand it. Most important, it means that we must take into account facts or interpretations bearing on the topic of which the audience we are addressing is aware.

THOMAS G. ALEXANDER, professor of history and the director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University, is bishop of BYU 133rd Ward.

We cannot ignore or try to hide something just because it may prove embarrassing, or because we have difficulty in explaining it.

Third, since each person has at least the potential of carrying a different set of cultural baggage, it is generally an oversimplification at best, or *ad hominem* at worst, to lump all intellectuals together and to critique them as though they invariably shared particular sets of ideas. This may not create a problem if intellectuals recognize themselves as belonging to a particular school or group. It is, however, highly offensive — indeed un-Christian — when we place them in a category with which they are not sympathetic. An example is categorizing a faithful member of the Church as a positivist or a heretic when no one who believes in a God who can reveal his will to human beings or who testifies of the divinity of the gospel can possibly be either.

In the time remaining, let me turn to a couple of examples which will indicate the role of the intellectual in the service of the faith and illustrate some problems an intellectual faces in the quest for understanding something and interpreting it for various audiences.

While I served a mission in Germany, we had the opportunity of teaching and baptizing a man who was a professor of mathematics at the University of Bonn. When he had joined the Church he had been touched by the gospel, both as an intellectual and as a spiritual experience. He was influenced particularly by James E. Talmage's works. In Talmage, he found one intellectual speaking to another.

Ten years after my mission, I returned to Germany; and on one occasion, I took my family and spent an afternoon visiting him. I found that, in the intervening time, his family had joined the Church, and he had served in the mission presidency and in other capacities.

Unfortunately, by the time I spoke with him, he was virtually inactive. He said that questions had arisen for which he did not seem to get adequate answers. As a result, he was investigating Rudolph Steiner's theosophy. Unlike those of us here on the Wasatch Front, he had no other intellectuals to exchange ideas with. He asked me about *DIALOGUE*, and I told him that I knew many of the people who were writing for it. Indeed, I had written for it myself. He said that he found it only marginally helpful in answering some questions, because the English in *DIALOGUE* was too difficult for him to read and understand. I talked with him about some of his questions, but I was clearly unable to do in one afternoon something which would have required many conversations over a long period of time to accomplish.

I left feeling sad. The Church was meant for all people, not just middle-class Americans, or even for German laborers and businessmen. Yet it had lost touch with this brother who had so much to give and needed so much from the Church. I subscribed to *DIALOGUE* for him, recognizing that it would probably not help much and that until he found other intellectuals with whom he could talk about the Church, he would likely remain inactive.

Now, a second example. Several years ago, we published a collection of essays entitled *The Mormon People* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1980). In her review of the book, a non-Mormon, for whom I have a great deal of respect,