

## Science: A Part of or Apart from Mormonism?

*Richard Pearson Smith*

*Every art and science known and studied by the children of men is comprised within the Gospel.*

President Brigham Young, 1868  
(JD 12:257)

*Beware of false science.*

*Priests Study Course, 1973*  
(Series B, p. 79)

**F**or three decades I have mourned the absence of a benevolent spirit which helped me and my generation of Mormons find our way. I watch incessantly for its resurrection, only to see more nails driven into the coffin from time to time.

When will I again see General Authorities, Church publications, teachers, and parents giving assurance to all that science blends beautifully with Mormonism? Yes, Virginia, that's the way it was in the thirties when I was a child in northern Utah, and on into the early fifties. That sort of support for science is unknown to today's young Mormons; instead they hear that much of what the schools teach is wrong and they had better not believe it. I'm thankful that my faith wasn't subjected to that test and that I had help with my concerns about whether a scientist could be a Latter-day Saint. Are not today's students and scientists in greater jeopardy of failing to develop strong faith in the Church?

I have watched and pondered science's banishment with astonishment and frustration. It has seemed to run counter to basic Mormon teachings and to the Church's general forward movement.

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With pride I have watched my church come forth "out of obscurity and out of darkness." In my day it has changed from an obscure group in the western states, widely regarded as a cult, to a large and respected international church. And it has moved from darkness into light in many ways, divesting itself of anachronisms and embracing new things found to be "of good report or praiseworthy."

In my ward in New Jersey, several black members, including a seventy, a priest, and a teacher are among our stalwarts. Throughout the Church, women are regularly called on to pray and speak in sacrament meetings. Talks at all levels are now brief and well-prepared instead of lengthy and extemporaneous. People spend less time in meetings and more time at home, where excellent manuals help them enjoy and cement family bonds. Gone are most of the fund-raising activities and the donations of labor for construction. Social services are available to people who have severe personal problems. Public relations expertise and other modern tools help spread the gospel. BYU operates on a higher plane, even teaching and researching philosophy, a subject once taboo. Professional historians write honest Mormon history, aided by their own societies and journals, even though the golden days of apparently official approval now seem to be over.

Nowhere is progress more evident than in the use of technology, the fruit of science. Satellite television takes general conferences to a thousand stake centers. A million rolls of microfilm stored in Granite Mountain vaults preserve and centralize much of the world's genealogical information. Computers minimize work for membership and financial clerks while providing better reports for bishops. Prodigious genealogical databases under construction will someday be researchable from computer terminals everywhere. And what other church creates and distributes sophisticated software for personal computers?

Then there's science.

I have always loved science (by which I mean, mostly, the natural sciences). Perhaps that is because powerful (though not deliberate) forces at home were pushing me toward it from my earliest years. Perhaps those forces were strong partly because of the positive statements about science which some of the General Authorities were making.

Many Mormons today would ignore the science of psychology and say that I must have acquired my taste for science in the preexistence, but it seems to me it happened right in the Bear River Valley. Everyone liked science when I lived there. Long before then, President Brigham Young had established a positive Mormon attitude toward it by preaching that it comes from God and that we should learn all we can about it.

The Reformation, the early global explorations, and the establishment of the United States helped prepare the way for the restoration of the gospel. Over the same period, developments in science and technology came faster and faster until the pace was furious by 1830. President Young saw the Church benefit greatly from the new technology, especially the steam locomotive and the telegraph. He sensed the hand of the Lord in that and made a number of

comments to that effect in his sermons: "Where did the knowledge come from which has enabled man to accomplish such great achievements in science and mechanism within the last few years? We know that knowledge is from God" (JD 12:257-58). He would have loved to have studied science in depth: "How gladly would we understand every principle pertaining to science and art, and become thoroughly acquainted with every intricate operation of nature, and with all the chemical changes that are constantly going on around us! How delightful this would be, and what a boundless field of truth and power is open for us to explore!" (JD 9:167)

Praise for science and technology — and to the Lord for revealing them — continued. In their special Centennial address on 6 April 1930, President Heber J. Grant and his counselors reviewed at length "the increase of scientific knowledge, invention, [and] industrial development" which had come about through "light, radiating from the presence of God, illuminating the minds of men, increasing intelligence and knowledge, which is the glory of God, and by the application of which the past one hundred years have been made the Miracle Century of the ages" (CHC 6:562-63).

At that time I was four years old. My mother had the finest flower garden around, and she told me the names of the many species and something about each one. She taught me about insects and birds, and let me see the collections of pressed wild flowers and of minerals which she had made in school.

My father, Clarence E. Smith, was principal of Bear River High. His education in psychology and history meant nothing to me in those childhood years; but his passion for more tangible things, which he had acquired from his father, a blacksmith who had emigrated from Denmark, came across very well. He showed me the special tools in the wood and metal shops and how they were used, the amazing devices in the large physics equipment closets, and the chemistry laboratory with its many bottles of substances having interesting colors, textures, and odors. My interest in computers had its roots in watching him program the fascinating bell-controlling IBM clock by inserting metal tabs in slots in a revolving drum.

My serious involvement with science dates from one evening when I was seven, as the family returned home after an outing in Logan Canyon. An entire day of close association with both parents was uncommon; not only did Father run a sizeable high school in a rather personal way, but he presided over Bear River Stake with its fourteen (later eighteen!) far-flung wards. Looking up through the windshield, I noticed the stars for the first time in my life, and asked what they were. Father explained the basic facts, which I thought the most interesting information I had ever learned. Right away I was given two nice astronomy books which were about on my level. I pored over them every day, the way we are supposed to study the scriptures. (Years later I heard Father expound on the importance of teaching a child about a matter at the very time he or she shows curiosity about it.)

It wasn't long before I had college astronomy books, a subscription to *Sky* magazine, a small telescope, and a notebook in which I recorded my observa-

tions. Concurrently my fascination with chemistry grew; and by the time I was ten or twelve, I was doing experiments in the basement and at the high school. (People weren't as safety-conscious in those days as they should have been.) And Father introduced me to the high-school biology teacher; soon, a friend and I were collecting insects. Father went to the wood shop and built a display case.

By the time I entered the University of Utah, high school classes in biology, chemistry, physics, and math had increased my love for those subjects to the point where I approached their study on a higher level with awe and reverence, sensations akin to the strong spiritual feelings some people report having in the temple. The textbooks had far more information in them than I had seen before, all of it interesting, and I could find the names of some of the professors in books and see that they had made important discoveries. Work at the frontiers of knowledge was going on in the laboratories. It thrilled me through and through. I could not have even thought of majoring in a field outside the natural sciences. I chose chemistry.

I knew a fair amount about science and had an unassailable faith in its basic concepts and methods by the time I entered the university; I think that is usual for a science major, based on my observations of other students. If anyone had urged me to test what I was learning against the scriptures, or had told me that one should not seek to understand the origin of the universe or of life on the earth, or had tried to convince me that no creature died on this planet until six thousand years ago, I would have thought that a reason to question the Church, not science. Fortunately, no one was saying such things; instead, two apostles who were respected scientists were preaching the unity of science and true religion. They were the very apostles whose personalities I liked the most.

Four scientists have served as apostles: astronomer, mathematician, and philosopher Orson Pratt (Whittaker 1982; Paul 1982), geologist James E. Talmage (Rowley 1984), chemist John A. Widtsoe, and physicist Joseph F. Merrill. Pratt acquired a fine education on his own; the other three earned doctoral degrees and made solid contributions to science. The terms of the four in the Quorum of the Twelve covered practically the entire period 1835–1952.

I knew of Elders Pratt and Talmage by reputation and by their writings (Talmage died when I was quite young), but Elders Widtsoe and Merrill were around until about the time I completed my formal education. Mother proudly spoke of how she had been taught geology and mineralogy by Talmage, and physics by Merrill, at the University of Utah in 1900–01. It was nice, too, that Elder Richard R. Lyman (after whom I had been named, though we were not related) was a Ph.D. engineer, and therefore almost a scientist. As a child I was privileged to meet these Brethren myself, as they stayed overnight at our home and had Sunday meals with us when their turns came to visit our stake conferences. I wish I had been mature enough to discuss science and religion with them!

The very presence of well-educated and accomplished scientists among the apostles made it easier for me to take the Church seriously. In addition, their