

Out of the Crucible: The Testimony of a Liberal

Richard J. Cummings

AS I LOOK BACK OVER THE YEARS at my own perspective on the Mormon experience, I find that the most compelling doctrines of Mormonism can all be subsumed under the heading of “eternalism,” that felicitous formulation by B. H. Roberts which describes a theological direction most fully expressed in Joseph Smith’s King Follett Discourse. It was there that the Prophet asserted that “the intelligence of spirits had no beginning neither will it have an end. . . . Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no creation about it” (1969, 6:311). The basic precept — that the conscious, willing, feeling center of our being is an uncreated, eternal and autonomous entity — is to be found nowhere else in the philosophies, ideologies, or religions of the world. One is forced to conclude that Joseph Smith either invented it out of whole cloth, or that it was revealed to him from a higher source. I find the second explanation to be the more credible.

The other key doctrines of Mormonism that I have found most engaging — and most distinctive — are closely related to the belief in our eternal identity, and they include: (1) the belief in our status as a potential deity — “As God now is, man may become” in Lorenzo Snow’s familiar paraphrase, and (2) the principle of eternal marriage. As Sterling McMurrin has astutely pointed out, the Mormon belief system is the antithesis of traditional Judeo-Christian theologies, and it “needs and deserves a new appreciation of the strength of those very heresies in the concepts of man and God that must inevitably make of it an offense to the traditional faith” (1965, 112). Mormonism upholds an anthropocentric view that, from a traditional vantage point, is heretical in the extreme, but which for me has always had the ring of truth. Two key statements epitomize this heretical, human-centered religion: first, that it is the

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glory of God and therefore his veritable *raison d'être* “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39), and, secondly, that “men are that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). You have to stop and think for a moment how sharply this contrasts with the traditional notion that the greatest aspiration of human beings is to glorify God, even though God has no need to be glorified.

Before clarifying the bearing of these central doctrines upon the pillars of my faith, I would like to retrace the intellectual and spiritual dilemmas as well as emotional crises which have influenced the form of my innermost convictions.

The first crisis was my father's unexpected death when I was nearly thirteen. It occurred when my family was living in southern California, shortly after my mother and baby brother had left for a visit to Salt Lake City. My father prepared breakfast for my nine-year-old brother and me and sent us to school. We returned home in the afternoon expecting to find him there — he was a self-employed photographer. We played for awhile around the house and became increasingly concerned as dinnertime came and went with no word from him. I finally prepared a makeshift meal, and soon it was well after bedtime. Still no sign of Dad. My younger brother went to bed, but I became more and more agitated and spent the night in a round of half-uttered prayers, desperate but unavailing forays into the Book of Mormon for guidance and for spiritual consolation, and occasionally, fitful lapses into nightmarish slumber. The next morning, a neighbor took us to the local police station to make a missing person report, and we went to school. About 11:00 A.M., school officials informed me that my father had been located. He had climbed into a tree to take a color photograph, then slipped and fell, broke his back in three places, and lay there paralyzed until someone found him the next morning.

He lived another week in intensive care in the hospital, and I had some valuable visits with him during that time. He was a devout Latter-day Saint who did his own thinking, and I strongly identified with him. I was utterly traumatized by that event. I have never completely recovered from that loss. As a result, during much of my adolescent and young adult life, I sought — and found — substitute fathers, always in a Mormon context, and always in the person of someone whose standing in the Church and whose grasp of its doctrines commanded my respect.

The first of these surrogate fathers was my Uncle Frank — B. F. Cummings III — who was my father's oldest brother. He was for many years the head of the Department of Foreign Languages at BYU where he also taught ethics and religion. He turned out to be both a father figure and a role model — more so than either of us expected at the time — and his well thought-out and deeply held convictions about the Church and Mormon theology profoundly influenced my own.

After my father's death, we returned to Salt Lake City where I entered the University of Utah under an early admissions program three and one-half years later at sixteen. I was enrolled in the pre-med program at the time, majoring in biology. I was required to take courses from a brilliant but contro-

versial professor, Stephen Durrant, whose specialty was vertebrate zoology but whose passion was the theory of evolution. He seriously undermined my untested faith by demonstrating that evolution was not just a theory but a law and that it utterly precluded any form of supernatural creation. One of my closest friends was the grandson of Elder John A. Widtsoe, who soon became another important father figure for me. In a few brief but sympathetic discussions, Elder Widtsoe succeeded in dispelling all my doubts and fears by pointing out that the claims of religion and science are not either/or issues, but that the two can ultimately be reconciled. I learned from him a profound truth — that there is a safe middle ground, and I still firmly believe this to be the case despite the vigorous assertions of a few iron rodders to the contrary.

The next crisis came in the summer of 1947 when I was twenty and within four months of leaving on my mission, when I chanced upon Fawn Brodie's recently published bombshell, *No Man Knows My History*. Her unrelenting emphasis on the all-too-human side of Joseph Smith's character led me to my next major spiritual dilemma: was Joseph Smith a true prophet of God, or simply a clever and ingratiating charlatan? If the latter, I could hardly justify my decision to accept a mission call. I wrestled mightily with that one, concluding finally that Mrs. Brodie had not really succeeded in dismissing Joseph Smith despite her thesis that his supernatural claims were unfounded. Indeed she was so fascinated with his undeniable charisma that she was forced in the end to exalt him into a kind of super-hero — an individual whose personal qualities bordered on the miraculous (1946, 404). As it turned out, I adopted a pragmatic view, convincing myself that my practical experience of Mormonism had been personally very valuable and that I owed it to the French to at least tell them of the gospel so that they could make an informed decision about its worth.

The competitive zeal of missionary life provided a marvelous corrective to the doubts and misgivings that Darwin and Brodie had stirred up. The cultural and linguistic dimensions of the experience completely reoriented my career objectives from medicine to the academic world. This shift was also strongly influenced by yet another father figure — my mission president James L. Barker, who for many years had been head of the Department of Languages at the University of Utah and whose leadership was both intellectual and spiritual.

The next crisis occurred in 1968 when my Uncle Frank submitted the manuscript of a book on the ethical implications of Mormon theology — his life work, in a sense — to Deseret Book Company, only to have it summarily rejected by the Church reading committee. It was pointed out that while the work did not contain false doctrine or inaccuracies, it was couched in original terms which "might offend the Brethren." He published the book at his own expense and died a few months later, greatly disheartened by the entire experience. I had long been impatient with the combined arrogance and mediocrity that had become the hallmark of much of the bureaucracy of the Church, but this callous treatment in the name of a higher authority at the hands of people I found intellectually and spiritually inferior to Uncle Frank was utterly dismay-

ing. What it did was to bring home to me once and for all how much the Church had come to be dominated by an overgrown and overweening middle management. It confirmed my growing distrust of the institutional aspects of Mormonism — the impersonal, structural apparatus that seemed more and more to eclipse the highly personal, spiritual insights and experiences that had given rise to the Church.

The last of the crises which contributed — however negatively — to the pillars of my faith, occurred in 1977 with the break-up of my first marriage and my accompanying bout with severe depression. With seven years of hindsight and a marvelously successful second marriage, it is now clear that the divorce was a necessary and valuable experience in personal growth and self-understanding — but it was a veritable wipe-out at the time. Its major impact on my faith was its contradiction of my basic belief in the validity of temple marriage. Despite my reservations about the institutional shortcomings of the Church, I was firmly convinced that a marriage solemnized in the temple had real staying power. Although this one lasted for twenty-three years, it clearly did not have the permanence I had ascribed to it. There were perfectly valid reasons why the marriage foundered — conflicts in values, incompatibilities, and the like. But in the process, another of my cherished beliefs had to be rethought.

That rethinking had to be delayed. I overreacted to the disillusionment and bitterness engendered by my divorce. I wrote off Mormonism as a bad investment and decided it would be best for the Church and me to go our separate ways. It did not take very long, however, for me to realize two things. First, I could not lightly dismiss a religion which had become so much a part of me. And, second, I had unwittingly lapsed back into the simplistic all-or-nothing kind of thinking that Elder Widtsoe had helped me to rise above. I was tacitly agreeing with the advocates of monolithic Mormonism who insist that one must accept the Church in its entirety or reject it out of hand. In this connection, I would like to acknowledge three remarkable Mormon women who, possibly without realizing it, enabled me to keep my Mormon roots alive by inviting me to continue to rethink my Mormon background and share the results with others. The first was Maureen Ursenbach Beecher who got me so involved in the newly founded Association for Mormon Letters that I somehow ended up as president of that organization, delivering the 1979 presidential address at BYU on “The Mormon Identity Crisis,” as a direct expression of my own crisis at the time. The other two women both attended that luncheon: Mary Bradford and Peggy Fletcher each approached me after the address to ask if they could have it for their respective periodicals. I gave it to Peggy who brought it out in the next issue of *Sunstone* but promised Mary that my next publishable effort would be hers. A paper on Mormon literalism which I read at the 1981 *Sunstone* Symposium appeared in a subsequent issue of *DIALOGUE*. The process led to another paper on Mormon fanaticism which I read at last year’s Symposium and which appeared in a recent issue of *DIALOGUE*.