

A Response to “The Dilemma of the Mormon Rationalist”

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AS ONE ALSO INTERESTED IN CONFLICTS BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON, I find Robert Anderson's essay a well-documented, well-reasoned, literate, and thoughtful presentation of a subject I suspect is relevant for many readers. I would like to share some observations, comments, and questions which might serve to further enhance our understanding of this important topic. My first suggestion is a minor one—that Anderson revise the title by adding an “s” after “dilemma.” For he has not presented a single dilemma, but many, each as vexing and troublesome as the next for those who believe that the term “Mormon rationalist” should not be considered an oxymoron, any more than the term “Mormon intellectual,” and who desire to delete neither the word “Mormon” nor “rationalist” from their own self-description.

In Anderson's extensively footnoted paper, which shows evidence of a wide study of the subject, we find a definition of “rationalist” which may provide a useful context for this discussion. Anderson says that a rationalist is one whose “thinking and behavior is not based on acceptance of scripture as absolute, and [is] willing to examine, re-examine, and modify or even abandon belief if the evidence warrants.” *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* definition is “one who believes the principle ... of accepting reason or intellect as the true source of knowledge, and as the only authority in determining one's opinions or course of action.” Webster adds that in theology it is the doctrine that rejects revelation and the supernatural and makes reason the sole source of knowledge (1,496).

Since Mormonism claims to have been founded through a series of revelations and maintains as its core belief the idea of continuing revelation, and the corollary notion that revealed knowledge is higher, more true, and more reliable than secular knowledge or reason, it seems impossible, at least by definition, that there can be such a person as a “Mormon rationalist.” By implication, it seems likely that such a person is

either not fully a Mormon, not entirely a rationalist, or perhaps both. Readers may want to form their own opinions as to which of these three possibilities best applies to the Mormon rationalist described throughout Anderson's essay. I will try to give my own answer to this question by the end of my reply, but for now would like to make some observations on specific details within the essay.

Like Anderson, I have long been intrigued by the life of Galileo. When the scientist was exonerated a few years ago, after 359 years of being condemned as a heretic, I had a mixed reaction to the news. I was happy that the Catholic church finally "saw the light" but was disappointed, though not surprised, to learn that the decision came only after eight years of agonizing debate by a committee appointed to study the matter. There was much at stake. Authoritarian religions, Mormonism and Catholicism especially, lose face when they admit to having made a mistake, and do so only very rarely, if at all. When they do, as in this instance, they seem to do it only after great internal hemorrhaging, tongue biting, and blushing. Religions are averse to giving any ground to the rationalist side, and I believe Mormons are more reluctant to make such concessions than even Catholics.

As for Galileo, his recanting, which was insincere, bought him the opportunity, while comfortably "imprisoned," to continue his "heretical" work. Perhaps people in Galileo's time thought he was a Catholic rationalist, because he acquiesced to the church while remaining a scientist. Yet I think that what his example points out is the near impossibility of being true to the core precepts of both philosophies.

Anderson speaks of the struggle between reason and fundamentalism and notes that conservative religions like Mormonism, for example, change slowly. Martin Marty, a keen observer of religious organizational patterns, agrees, concluding at a past Sunstone symposium that religions that thrive do so because "they make very few changes and they make them slowly." After its fast-moving, radical, revolutionary formative period, Mormonism has settled into a comfortable crawl in terms of theological innovation. The changes that do occur are mostly administrative—the result of trying to manage a fast-growing church. Even the change in the policy of denying the priesthood to African blacks is best seen as a practical and necessary response to LDS growth in Brazil where black men were needed to lead largely black congregations, rather than as a "revelation" reflecting a change of mind on God's part.

Anderson has shown how the rise of Mormonism was, in part, a reactionary response to early-nineteenth-century liberalism and modernism. While true, from Joseph Smith on, we have seen attempts to harmonize Mormonism with science. John Widtsoe's book *Joseph Smith as Scientist* is just one example. I believe these attempts have been generally

unsuccessful, yet they show us not only Mormonism's awareness of rationalism, but also its need to be scientifically acceptable to rationalists. This need has been greater in some, such as B. H. Roberts, and less in others, such as Joseph Fielding Smith. Mormons disdain worldliness but seek the adoration of the world. We seek approval, work hard to form and manage the world's perception of us, and feel hurt when others portray us in ways inconsistent with how we see ourselves. We do not accept many scientific, secular, and rationalist ideas but do not want to be viewed as anti-scientist or non-, irr-, or anti-rational. We say, as Jesus did, that we want to be "in but not of the world," but I think the evidence suggests we are otherwise.

The quote by rationalist David Hume on the impossibility of the testimony of witnesses to establish a miracle, unless deluded, is interesting in contrast to Joseph Smith's involvement of three and eight witnesses to establish the reality of the Book of Mormon. Smith seemed quite aware of the rationalist requirement for evidence, and tried to satisfy this need.

The essay's section on psychology and religious belief seems intended, in part, to show a non-supernatural, psychological basis for belief. I would add to Anderson's examples the powerful roles of birth order and child-parent relations, especially as influenced by parental conflict. Frank J. Sulloway's recent book, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), twenty-six years in the writing and analyzing 6,500 important men and women in history, concludes that first borns are strongly inclined to accept status quo systems of authority, including established religions (unless influenced by parental conflict, as I was), while later children are more creative and more receptive to new ideas, including new religions or non-religious philosophies.

In this discussion Anderson describes "vacuums of the psyche, emptiness, a sense of loss, and the directionlessness" that may accompany departure from religious life. Many seem to stay involved, not because they believe it is true, but because they need the emotional support of a community of friends. He tells of three types of people who leave the faith. Those who feel betrayed, become bitter, and turn to active anti-Mormonism are, I think, a rather small minority. I think Sir Richard Burton was right when he observed in the 1850s that those who left Mormonism tended to become agnostics because, having believed in and then lost belief in one authoritative, "true" church, they cannot believe in this kind of organization any longer and tend to become indifferent to religion rather than join another, similar church. Sterling McMurrin expressed the dilemma simply when he opined: "The question is not whether Mormonism is true, but whether religion is true."

Anderson's discussion of the problem of faith versus knowledge gets

to the crux of the Mormon rationalist's dilemma. I agree with his statement that faith is "ultimately irrational." Paul's definition says as much when he calls faith "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen" (Heb. 11:1). To me, the words "substance" and "evidence" are reduced to figures of speech by believers because the words "hope" and "things not seen" are for them the real operative words in the definition. As a rationalist, I am always amazed that so many people view faith as a virtue, rather than as a negative. I am not surprised, however, that it is the "first principle of the gospel" and, as Bruce McConkie says in *Mormon Doctrine*, "the first principle in revealed religion" (261). The key word to him, of course, is "revealed." The other side of faith, or another way of viewing it, is as a principle which allows people to believe things without knowing them, based on trust in men who claim to receive revealed knowledge from divinity. At its worst, it makes a virtue of ignorance and nearly a sin of believing in any kind of knowledge other than so-called revealed knowledge.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that Mormons use the words "knowledge" and "faith" interchangeably—as virtual synonyms. In testimony meetings members say they "know" certain things (often historical events) are true. Since they were not there in person to see God speak to Joseph Smith, or Moroni give him the plates, or Jesus arise after dying, people actually mean they believe these things to be true. Even the strongest belief or faith does not equal knowledge. In my heretical way of seeing things, I see testimony-bearing of what people "know" as actually a statement of what they *don't* know but strongly want to believe, so much so that their faith causes them to try to reach the verifiable knowledge and truth that in fact eludes them. In short, believers confuse faith and knowledge. Rationalists, including scientists, are not necessarily superior in this regard, because in their own ways they often do the same.

The story of Orson Pratt parallels that of Galileo in that Pratt proved to be more "true" (measured by later acceptance of his ideas) than his religious leader and theological antagonist, Brigham Young, but he also recanted when Young "shifted the debate to submission of authority." The same shift occurred during the purge of intellectuals and rash of excommunications in 1993-94. Lavina Fielding Anderson was cut off from the church she still loves and serves not because anything she wrote or said was untrue, but because she dared to speak truth that was unflattering. Michael Quinn, as Anderson noted, was excommunicated not under an accusation of apostasy, but for the insubordination of not attending his own spiritual "hanging."

One of the greatest dilemmas for rationalists is the church's evolving views on truth and its role in the gospel. Shortly after becoming apostles, both Dallin Oaks and Russell Nelson gave speeches advocating the selec-

tive, conditional use of only those truths which paint a positive picture of the church and its leaders. Elder Oaks said it is "wrong to criticize a general authority, even if the criticism is true."

Anderson asks if surrendering to Christ has to mean "the surrender of rational thinking to authorities who disagree among themselves." I regret to say that the orthodox Mormon answer is probably yes. Ezra Taft Benson made this clear in his "Fourteen Fundamentals of Following the Prophet," when he proclaimed that the word of the current prophet takes precedent (in a conflict) over those of past prophets. This allows the current leader to theologically out-rank Moses, Isaiah, Paul, Joseph Smith, and even Jesus Christ himself. Of late church presidents have not abused this principle. In fact, it has become almost equally disconcerting that leaders have distanced themselves from some central Mormon doctrines that rationalists could believe without sacrificing intellectual integrity. Elder Boyd Packer has replaced and changed the meaning of "free agency" with his "moral agency." More recently President Gordon B. Hinckley was asked by *Time* magazine if Mormons believe that humans can become gods. His answer was: "It's of course an ideal. It's a hope for a wishful thing." Such equivocation sounds more like faith than knowledge. When asked if the church teaches that God the Father was once a man, he responded, "I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it ... I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it" (*Time*, 4 Aug. 1997, 56). Some Mormons are dismayed by their leader's uncertainty about such a foundation stone of our theology, but I find President Hinckley's answers refreshingly honest and human. Similarly Anderson wonders if some day the "irrational teachings of the church will gradually become less literal and more symbolic or philosophic." I agree this would be desirable, though I doubt we will live to see it.

Regarding the many Joseph Smith problems, I concur that all of those mentioned are real and that there are many others, such as his "translating" the bogus Kinderhook plates, his fabricating and misrepresenting the Book of Abraham, his establishing an illegal bank, his lying about polygamy, and his unethical land deals, among others. I think that Dan Vogel's recent Mormon History Association presentation, "'Prophet Puzzle' Revisited," offers a fairly accurate view of the man, concluding that in many ways Smith could be termed a "pious fraud." The important thing is to give equal weight and credence to both words. Yes, Joseph was a fraud in many ways, but in just as many other ways he was pious and truly interested in creating a better religion as a means of enhancing human life.

This brings me to a few comments on Anderson's ideas on how a Mormon can remain a rationalist, or vice versa. He suggests that "while

surrendering his individual integrity," Orson Pratt may have kept this dualism intact by "rising above" the problems and "focusing instead on the virtues taught." I am not sure that this is a worthwhile or even possible trade-off—giving up "integrity" for "virtue." Are they not two ventricles in the same heart?

Anderson says that "The church can and is forcing rationalist members to back away and separate themselves." This remains true. The purging continues, though in a less noticed way. Just this year, for example, people we know have been excommunicated, fired, threatened, harassed, and intimidated for communicating—even through fiction and poetry—views considered (by some leaders) not fully orthodox or supportive.

The church tries to paint a good face on the continuing problem. "Inactives" are today called "less active," but a change in excommunication policy now allows leaders to excommunicate a member rather than honor a request to have one's name removed on principle, without excommunication. In defending a much broader criteria for excommunication, Elder James Faust quoted George Q. Cannon, who in 1869 said, in effect, "[A] man may not be necessarily in apostasy for what he thinks, but if he speaks or writes his views he is absolutely in apostasy." Catholics, by comparison, are considerably more tolerant of their intellectuals and even their verbal critics, and use excommunication sparingly in favor of more Christ-like inclusivity. Also Catholics have been open to some suggestions by their rationalists and intellectuals, as evidenced by the remarkable passage of Vatican II policies.

Anderson hopes that Mormon leaders will come to understand that their condemnation is more damaging to the reputation and moral influence of the church than the works of intellectuals that reach public awareness. I hope so too, but our leaders don't seem to get it yet. When asked about the excommunication of five intellectuals three years ago, President Hinckley said that given the baptism of hundreds of thousands of new members that year, the loss of five was insignificant. As in corporate America, executives see losses impersonally and only in relation to gains. If "the worth of souls" is no longer "great in the eyes of God," if we are reduced to playing a numbers game, if our leaders don't care about offending the world's rationalists on the calculated risk that they are unlikely to convert anyway, then thinking Mormons are as good as lost, unless they are willing to recant hypocritically as Galileo did, or sacrifice their integrity as Pratt did, or pick and choose from the Mormon smorgasbord, "believing what they can and ignoring the rest," as J. Golden Kimball quipped he did.

In the latter instance we remain nominal or cultural Mormons and may think we are "real" Mormons because we are being true to the best

and loftiest aspects of Mormonism. But if we think this, I believe we deceive ourselves. We are not Mormons in a real and complete sense. The leaders, not us, establish and control the definitions, and if we are objective about what being a present-day Mormon really entails, we might reconsider seriously our eagerness to have the term apply to us.

Orthodox members, of course, have the same qualms about rationalism and the chosen substitute for many borderline or former religionists—humanism. Mormon leaders are fully aware of the divisive fracturing and weakening of the RLDS church after it changed under the influence of its rationalist intellectuals. The Utah church is protecting itself against such a scenario playing out here. For the orthodox, faith has another dimension that transcends blind belief. Faith is also the seeking of emotional comfort through commitment to a spiritual community. Many rationalists need this comfort as well, which only intensifies the pain of the struggle to satisfy both the mental need to think logically and skeptically and the heartfelt human aching to belong, to be valued and receive succor from caring believers. Why do so many bright people maintain their faith, and at what effort and cost? Has faith for them become merely a compromise, a personal comfort, a way to justify their deep feelings and needs for a spiritual support system?

Wistfully, I return now to my first question. Can a fully-believing Mormon be a fully-reasoning rationalist, or vice versa? I think not. At least, not without extensive compromising of belief on the one hand or of intellectual integrity on the other. How can we fit a square peg in a round hole, without altering one or the other, or both? And, yet, how can a rationalist fill the great spiritual and emotional void that is left by the departure of faith?

These, it seems to me, are the true dilemmas and plights of the "Mormon rationalist."