

# Belonging (and Believing) as LDS Scholars of Religion

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More than half a century ago, sociologist Thomas O’Dea said the following about the university student who is a Latter-day Saint: “He has been taught by the Mormon faith to seek knowledge and to value it; yet it is precisely this course, so acceptable to and so honored by his religion, that is bound to bring religious crisis to him and profound danger to his religious belief. The college undergraduate curriculum becomes the first line of danger to Mormonism in its encounter with modern learning.”<sup>1</sup>

O’Dea’s comments were general to higher education and not specific to the academic study of religion. Still, it is more than likely that he would have predicted an even greater crisis in the lives and in the faith of LDS graduate students who are involved in the academic study of religion. In fact, studies have shown that scientists and students of areas that treat religion as their object of examination are less likely to be believers than are natural scientists and students of other subjects.<sup>2</sup>

The implication is that the very environments in which we learn and study are permeated with skepticism, which may lead to the erosion of faith. Thus, whether we speak in terms of a full-blown crisis of faith or simply of uncomfortable feelings like confusion, anxiety, and disappointment, the assumption seems both logical and widespread that all LDS graduate students of religion will experience to some degree the predicament O’Dea describes.<sup>3</sup>

Although questions of belief and of believing are certainly an important element of many a religious crisis, my purpose in this short essay is to focus on what I deem to be another significant component in the nature and dynamics of many of these trou-

bling emotions, namely, the need to belong. Psychology and personal experience have taught me that the more clearly an uncomfortable feeling is understood, the more likely we are to manage it and, possibly, resolve it. Yet intellectual circles which understand religious distress primarily in terms of cognitive dissonance or philosophical and theological uncertainties often fail to address the issue of belonging with sufficient attention.

While it is sometimes useful to distinguish between matters of belief and of belonging, in actuality they are related aspects of individuals' common religious experience. In fact, believing and belonging tend to correlate heavily in the same direction; what we believe and our sense of belonging to a community of believers usually fluctuate in a parallel manner.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, causality may apply in various degrees to their association so that, to express it in Cartesian terms, "I believe, therefore I belong," or, as cultural anthropology has taught us, "I belong, therefore I believe." In the Church we also emphasize this correlation: those of us who have been on missions will recall the frequency with which we were taught about the need to facilitate both spiritual and social conversions in investigators. In other words, we were being taught about the importance of the coexistence of believing and belonging.

Still, I am concerned that, in an effort to find stability and to seek resolution to problems of the intersection between religious faith and the academic study of religion, we may focus our energy and time exclusively on issues of belief. Indeed, there are circumstances in which these issues are central; but in other instances, they may be secondary. I will go even further and suggest that the human and spiritual drive to belong is often stronger than our need for cognitive clarity and understanding, as some studies on social conformity may imply.<sup>5</sup> Hence, although one may learn to accept ambiguity in matters of knowledge, belief, and perspective, prolonged perception of disapproval or rejection by significant groups or individuals will invariably cause emotional pain. I posit that some of the problematic feelings experienced as LDS graduate students of religion may center on issues of belonging, or, more widely, of personal identity. We may, in fact, ask ourselves to what extent the search for truth is the true objective of our studies and, on the other hand, to what degree the ultimate

goal of our endeavor lies in being welcomed and accepted by a particular academic reference group. Is the price paid for such an acceptance a corresponding feeling of rejection by our spiritual reference group, which is the Church?

For example, a few months ago I received an email from a good friend, who is also an LDS graduate student in comparative religions. He is a returned missionary and, to my knowledge, has always been a devoted member, faithful in his callings and strongly committed to the gospel and the Church:

I'm still experiencing my crisis of faith that I detailed for you before. Still hanging on in my calling and so on, but on the mental level I'm close to capitulating and have seriously considered giving up my calling and becoming less-active. It is getting increasingly difficult for me and my integrity with the black-and-white thinking and institutional sugarcoating that we talked about, and it's hard to effect any change in things. I gave a forewarning to my sister some weeks ago . . . and she took it ok. But then again perhaps I won't do anything about my status and my thoughts will change to the better, who knows.

Our earlier conversation had focused on his struggle to accept how the Church presents itself in telling its own history to its members and to the world. He feels that it is dishonest to romanticize our past and to obliterate those aspects of our history that are difficult and problematic. While what he calls "historical white-washing" certainly occurs at many levels among Church members, he is especially bothered by its manifestations in the Church's public relations.

Some time after I received this email, we spoke on the phone; and he confided a few more details that I hadn't expected about his concern. His specific problem may have given rise to comments focused on difficulties with certain beliefs. For example, he may have suggested he did not believe the Brethren to be inspired because of the apparent "dishonesty" in the Church's public relations or he may have expressed skepticism about our sacred history given his perception of the Church's general lack of transparency about its early historical period. However, these were not the questions or issues that troubled him the most. The most troubling aspect of his disagreement is related to his personal identity and sense of belonging to the Church. He now does not feel com-

fortable in speaking about the Church as one of its members. He will not go on teaching appointments with the missionaries, and he feels torn between his desire to be at work in bringing the Church “out of obscurity” (D&C 1:30) and the pressure to employ guidelines that he feels unable to accept. The dissonance between his preferred approach of full transparency and the Church’s official public relation guidelines is less problematic at the intellectual level than it is at the identity level—in other words, to his sense of belonging to Mormonism. Thus, he feels that he is in the Church, but not of the Church—that he is indeed a member, but one who is somehow out of harmony with the body of the faithful. I have sensed that an important part of his identity, at least since his mission, has centered on his ability to function as a representative of the Church in a context where the overwhelming majority of his associates are not Latter-day Saints. In feeling that he does not belong to the Church in the way that he used to, he experiences a sense of loss, disappointment, and confusion. He feels rejected by his faith community for his lack of orthodoxy and does not see any way to reverse this process.

Like my friend, we LDS graduate students of religion may also find ourselves questioning our sense of belonging to the Church even while sensing that connection as deep and heartfelt. Whether we are thinking of issues relating to the international institution, or to our micro-realities of wards and branches, or even to what it means for us to be Latter-day Saints engaged in religious studies, it may be difficult to find a new balance. Certainly, we are not unique if, in our wards, we may be frustrated at regularly hearing clichéd statements that do not seem to be genuine, or recitations of questions and answers in Sunday School that appear superficial, not well-reasoned, or even utterly false. The Brethren probably have similar experiences in their travels throughout the Church.

However, other difficulties may be unique to our group. Think, for example, of those feelings of uncertainty about what new academic “insights” are appropriate to share in a Church classroom because you’re not sure what is “faith promoting” and what may raise doubts. Also reflect about the uneasy feeling that members and leaders are beginning to perceive you with suspicion because of your studies and your novel opinions. Testimony

meeting may represent another moment of inner struggle as you feel that the format or the content of your affirmations differ somewhat from how other members of the congregation express themselves. How will they accept your testimony? And what if you are called to teach seminary, institute, or Sunday School? How are you going to deal with those scriptural and historical comments in the manual that you believe to be over-simplified, lacking in nuance, or unsupported? Will you be perceived as a threat to your students—as a corrupting influence on their faith?

Whatever the issue, both at the micro and at the macro level, one of the most troubling feelings that LDS graduate students of religion could experience may be the realization that, as a consequence of our studies, we do not feel that we belong as much as we used to. We may sense tension between our new membership in the academic community and our enduring membership in a community of faith. Certainly, some may welcome a sense of detachment from the Church through a more tenuous sort of belonging. However, I know many Latter-day Saints in graduate programs of religious studies who have embarked in this work as enthusiastic and excited returned missionaries, with the initial goal of perfecting Mormon apologetics. My own experience has introduced me to many who come to these studies while in the forefront of Church activity and with hearts fully dyed in the colors of Mormonism. And that is exactly what can make the sense of loss and disorientation particularly disturbing.

Finally, consider the experience of disappointment when LDS graduate students of religion compare their previous expectations to the present reality. It may be that where and what we are—spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually—after years of graduate studies is nothing like what we had envisioned and predicted when we first began. Some students may have envisioned themselves as academically trained experts in defense of the faith, but now find themselves wondering about that very faith on which they had always built their lives and futures. Certainly, alongside the ecclesial context, other difficult dynamics may deepen this tension as relationships with one's family, both earthly and heavenly, are included in these problematic equations. Probably few of us have never wondered whether our Heavenly Father approves of

our acquisition of this new and often interesting yet uncomfortable knowledge about religious subjects. How does this concern affect our spiritual relationship with the Divine?

Whatever disturbing feeling may be experienced, we will be driven to seek a resolution. I believe that these moments may provide unique opportunities for growth and maturity, notwithstanding the discomfort. In some cases, students will not feel able to reconcile new academic perspectives with their LDS identity. Some will choose to cease association or activity in the Church, and others will leave the academic world of religious studies entirely to take a different direction in life. Of course, these are highly personal and difficult choices. On the other hand, some will find a way to resolve the tension, perhaps by coming to accept that very uniqueness that has caused personal distress and then by looking for ways to integrate it with their identity and commitment as members of the Church. This resolution is often accompanied by the realization that the Church's needs and policies do not cater primarily to the intellectual, but to the weakest and most inexperienced of its members. There will be resignation to the fact and even desire for a refining and restructuring of one's pre-existing identity in relation to the Church. I hope that conferences like these, journals, blogs, and personal friendships will be forums in which the new identity of Saint-scholar and scholar-Saint can be strengthened and supported by camaraderie and interaction with others who are following the same path.

Furthermore, since belief and belonging are intricately interconnected, these changes in identity will often be accompanied by cognitive forms of restructuring, which allow the coexistence of faith and of secular knowledge of religion. One such form may focus on the recognition of two distinct layers of explanations of reality: a faith-based one, with supernatural foundations, and a secular one, with a focus on human dynamics within the phenomenon of religion. Another approach may involve sifting through the teachings and concepts acquired through years of life in the Church and selecting principles that seem unfalsifiable and absolute, while maintaining a more agnostic attitude in areas where academic study and reflection find their niche. A third approach may be the discovery of a novel structure of explanation that enlarges both faith and understanding. An example of this third ap-

proach is the recognition and acceptance of constant tension and paradox in human theological descriptions at various levels, as Terryl Givens described so accurately in his examination of Mormon culture.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, questions and uncertainties will remain. They are built into the very nature of learning. Problematic aspects of history, theology, or ecclesiology will continue to trigger our interest and attention; but as we accumulate more experience, these areas will be less troubling. Then, as we come to look at our relationship with God through different eyes, as we view our membership and role in the Church with humility in our uniqueness, and interact with the world through an increased capacity to acquire truth from it, my hope is that we can cultivate a new and expansive sense of belonging. It will be different than what we experienced in our pre-academic days; but perhaps, to borrow Eliot's well-known lines:

. . . the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

### Notes

1. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 227.

2. See Edward C. Lehman and Donald W. Shriver, "Academic Discipline as Predictive of Faculty Religiosity," *Social Forces* 47 (December 1968): 171–82; Edward L. Long, *Religious Beliefs of American Scientists* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1971); Edward C. Lehman, "Academic Discipline and Faculty Religiosity in Secular and Related Colleges," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13 (June 1974): 205–20; Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991). Although some of this literature is dated, I doubt that more recent studies would result in significantly different conclusions.

3. Gerald Stott, "Effects of College Education on the Religious Involvement of Latter-day Saints," *BYU Studies* 24 (Winter 1984): 43–52, has often been used to refute O'Dea's predicament. Indeed, Stott discovered that college-educated Latter-day Saints generally do not experience a negative correlation between most measures of religiosity and their ed-

ucational level, as is common in other denominations. However, he also showed that some Mormons' beliefs were negatively affected by increasing education. A negative correlation was related to belief in God, belief in the existence of Satan, acceptance of the Church president's infallibility in matters of doctrine, and the acceptance of religious over scientific beliefs when the two appear to clash. To my knowledge, no large study has yet been carried out on the effects of the academic study of religion on the religiosity of the Latter-day Saints.

4. Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), popularized the notion of "Believing without belonging." However, David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, "Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging," *Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 11–28, seems to contradict Davie's findings.

5. See Rod Bond and Peter B. Smith, "Culture and Conformity: A Meta-Analysis of Studies Using Asch's Line Judgment Task," *Psychological Bulletin* 119, no. 1 (1996): 111–37.

6. Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

7. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*, <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/gidding.html> (accessed March 23, 2009).