Truman Madsen: In Memoriam

Truman Madsen, Architect

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Truman Madsen was a speaker *extraordinaire*, one of the finest orators in the Church, able to speak extemporaneously in a captivating voice. Alert to his audience, he was able to thread the pieces of his story together in a way that made each listener feel that he was speaking personally to him or her. For many American members, his tapes and lectures on Joseph Smith have been the basis for a contemporary myth of the Prophet. I see no one on the horizon who is likely to be able to take his place as our official orator and story-teller. But Truman's importance to readers of *Dialogue* is less as a speaker than as an architect. Almost single-handedly, he built a room to talk.

Truman's slim volume, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), had a profound effect on me, and others who were also students in the late sixties or early seventies say that it was equally important for them. If my informal survey of students in philosophy classes at Brigham Young University is accurate, it continues to have that kind of influence on earnest seekers. The book was not academically profound, but it had no pretensions to be. As Truman says in the introduction, its chapters were intended "as a kind of 'midrash.' . . . The goal has been to clarify rather than to verify, with little room for argument, except an implicit appeal to introspection" (viii).

The result of that goal was that one can find much to challenge in the book. For example, is it true that we must understand the doctrine of preexistent intelligences to imply that we have existed eternally as individuals? Truman takes that assumption as settled doctrine; and though I lean very much in his direction, it is not obvious that the question has been definitively answered.

And doesn't Truman create straw persons in his descriptions of orthodox Christian and other beliefs? For example, is it true that religious existentialism, such as that of the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, is "utter pessimism"? (29). That is a strange way to describe the attitude of the author of *Works of Love*. And doesn't Truman assume that being is a thing rather than a process or event—doesn't he reify being—when he argues against the dualism of traditional theology by dismissing its concerns for nothing and for being? (31–32, 44). Similarly, doesn't he dismiss too easily some of the traditional problems of theology and the philosophy of religion, such as how it is possible to speak meaningfully of a being who transcends our mortal finitude? (35). And how does defining freedom as self-determination remove all of the problems of freedom and determinism? (66 note 9). It would not be difficult to add to the list.

But adding to the list would be beside the point. It would mean refusing to recognize the book and the subsequent work for which it is a metonym for what it claims to be and is: a primer to aid us in introspecting on the intellectual strengths of our belief in the premortal existence of spirits. If, as such a primer, the book raises these questions and more, it fulfills its function, inducing us to think. Perhaps it will someday even goad one of us to provide the promised "tome which is not pressed [as Truman was] for abbreviation" (viii).

For those like myself, *Eternal Man* was important, not so much because of the problems with which it dealt or the positions that it took on the questions of the eternality of individuals, divine omnipotence, the materiality of the Divine, human freedom, and so on, but because of what Truman Madsen created by writing it. More than teaching a particular doctrine or suggesting any particular solution to a philosophical or theological problem, *Eternal Man* gave its readers permission to think and talk about these kinds of problems, to read the books listed in its many footnotes and books like them. Speaking through his book, Truman said, "It is good to think about and deal with these issues." It gave those of us in college and graduate school in the late 1960s an alternative to the two most common positions taken with regard to such things, positions that Truman describes well: "One position assumes that they [the ideas about preexistence] are so remote and

incomplete that a 'practical man' avoids thinking about them. The other assumes that by mere reference to pre-existence one can 'explain' all events and eventualities" (14). By publishing *Eternal Man*, Truman Madsen said to me—and to many others—"Take seriously the admonition from the Prophet Joseph Smith that introduces chapter two: 'When things that are of the greatest importance are passed over by weak-minded men without even a thought, I want to see truth in all its bearings and hug it to my bosom'" (23). Reading *Eternal Man* made me want to avoid being one of the "weak-minded." The book gave me an intellectual goal and told me that my new goal was not only commensurable with my faith, but an expression of it.

Reminding us that Joseph Smith described the gospel as requiring "careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts," Truman said, "A related kind of authority is needed in this realm. It is what, in the vernacular is called 'room to talk'" (ix). By suggesting the possibility of taking our faith seriously while also understanding the writings of scholars, of thinking about both without being ashamed of or frightened by either, Truman Madsen built such a room and opened its door. Many entered.

Given today's hypersensitivities of various kinds, such room to talk is as difficult to come by as it ever was. Some, recognizing that many current trends of thinking are not consonant with the gospel, think that we should shut our eyes and ears to such things and that we especially should not speak of them to the young for fear of corrupting them. For others, repetition of conventional wisdom about the gospel without investigation is enough to answer all questions. And still others, convinced that this or that seemingly new-fangled notion is, at last, the answer to our problems and questions, would either ignore the gospel or twist it into a shape that fits better their new-found intellectual faith? But all these kinds of problems respond to the difficulties of the intellect with one kind of dogmatism or another. They shut the door on any room to talk.

Truman Madsen was not interested in shutting doors. He did not shut his ears or repeat conventional wisdom or fall prey to every new idea that came down the pike. Truman made it perfectly clear that turning one's mind to the beliefs, history, and culture of