

# An Interview with Sterling McMurrin

Editors' Note: Sterling M. McMurrin has been a leading philosopher and educator for many years. Among his publications pertaining to the philosophy of religion are *Religion, Reason, and Truth* (1982) and *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (1965). He served as United States Commissioner of Education under President John F. Kennedy and is currently E. E. Ericksen Distinguished Professor at the University of Utah. The *7th East Press*, then an independent student newspaper at Brigham Young University, published this interview on 11 January, 1983. The concluding comments on ritual and the temple were added by Ostler and McMurrin later. Some adjustment in the order of the questions and answers has been made in the interest of consolidating related comments. Paragraphing, punctuation and typographical errors have been corrected silently, when necessary.

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OSTLER: Let's start at the beginning. Where were you born and educated.

McMURRIN: I was born at Woods Cross, just north of Salt Lake City. In the twenties my family moved to Los Angeles, and I went to high school there. I started at UCLA and later came to the University of Utah, where I received an A.B. in history and an M.A. in philosophy. I received a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Southern California and did postdoctoral work at Columbia, Princeton, and Union Theological Seminary.

O: At one time weren't you affiliated with the seminary and institute program?

M: Yes. I began to teach seminary in 1937. I was also an instructor in the Religious Conference at Arizona State University and later was director of

the Institute at the University of Arizona. In some ways this was a pleasant experience, and in others it was not. The most pleasant part of it was, of course, the personal relationships with students and with others with whom I was associated. I have in mind especially Frank L. West, the Church commissioner of education, and Lynn Bennion, the director of seminaries. I also had a very pleasant relationship with some, but not all, of the stake authorities with whom I was associated. I left the institute at the University of Arizona to join the faculty of the School of Philosophy of the University of Southern California.

O: What is your emphasis in philosophy?

M: I have been involved with most branches of academic philosophy with the exception of aesthetics. I have no competence in aesthetics or the arts. My main interest has been the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history. I have no strong attachments to any philosophical school.

O: Are you interested in the recent and current hassles over the writing of Church history?

M: I have read the address on the writing and teaching of Church history by Apostle [Boyd K.] Packer, as well as the replies to his statement by Michael Quinn, Jackson Newell, and James Clayton.

O: Do you think that it is fair for Church authorities to stipulate the type of history that Church historians should write?

M: Well, that depends on what you mean by fair. The Church authorities control the Church, and I suppose they can do as they please in such matters. I'm sure that some of them would like the histories to be honest. But obviously some want distorted history — distorted to order.

O: Is it honest to control history?

M: Certainly dishonest history isn't honest, but it isn't always possible to determine what written history is honest. Besides, honesty is not a particularly common virtue of churches or of any other organization. There is nothing new about churches perverting history. This has been done ever since we have had churches, and I suppose it will continue as long as churches persist. Most institutions, including churches, governments, and government agencies, look out for themselves and . . . often find it advantageous to ignore historical facts and do a little reconstructing here and there on their own history. Most certainly this is not a new thing in our Church. But a historian who intentionally distorts history is obviously a dishonest historian. He doesn't deserve to be called a historian. If the Church is interested in controlling its history to make it look better than it actually is or as a means of achieving a measure of thought control over its people, Apostle Packer's advice and instruction would seem to be quite in order. His task is to pursue the purposes of the Church as a defender of the faith. It would appear that he feels that the end justifies questionable means.

O: Would you see this as desirable?

M: Of course not. It is reprehensible and odious. I suspect that in this matter the situation is worse now than it has ever been in my lifetime. A historian who does not respect all the relevant facts available to him and make a

serious effort to give honest interpretive explanations of those facts simply isn't a historian. When the Church refuses its own historians access to the materials available in its archives, it obviously has something to hide. Apostle Packer apparently doesn't want the Church historians to produce honest history. There are some things in his statement that I can agree with. For instance, you should teach children — small children — differently from the way you teach adolescents, and you should teach adolescents differently from the way you teach adults. The problem, in part, is that Apostle Packer wants to treat the adults as children. But this is nothing new in the Church. Much of our adult literature and teaching is on a child's level.

But in one sense I'm not sure that the historians who are in the Church's employ have solid grounds for taking issue with Packer's paper. Surely they knew when they hired on as historians for the Church that they would be up against this sort of thing. I have known that for a good many years. Yet when I became an employee of the Church back in the thirties, in many ways things were quite different — believe it or not. Those of us who went into seminary and institute teaching in those days were really led to believe that the Church wanted genuinely honest scholarship, and I think that for the most part it did. But I don't see very much evidence that warrants that belief today.

I don't know who among the General Authorities would agree with Elder Packer in the matter of Church history, but I am sure that the average run of LDS people would fully approve of his views. After all, the Church doesn't pay its teachers to destroy the religious faith of the people, and it is apparent that Apostle Packer regards genuinely honest Church history as dangerous to the faith. His basic interest, naturally, is the defense of the faith. Apparently for him and for many other Church leaders, the faith can't survive the light of all the facts.

O: Do we have so much to fear from history?

M: Sure we have. In this respect Apostle Packer is on rather safe ground. Nothing can produce a more rapid deterioration of religious faith than the honest study of the history of religion. Now, I don't mean to say that a person can't face history honestly and still remain religious, but you just have to recognize that in the case of Mormonism, the faith is so mixed up with so many commitments to historical events — or to events that are purported to be historical — that a competent study of history can be very disillusioning. Mormonism is a historically oriented religion. To a remarkable degree, the Church has concealed much of its history from its people, while at the same time causing them to tie their religious faith to its own controlled interpretations of its history. So there is no point in arguing whether a serious study of Mormon history may have a deteriorating effect upon the faith of large numbers of Mormon people. It certainly will in countless cases. But that is the Church's fault or the fault of the weakness of the faith, not the fault of today's historians, most of whom are both honest and highly competent. The Church shouldn't tie religious faith to its history. Religious faith should be faith in God and in one's fellowmen — not faith in some historical events and their official interpretation.

In the case of Mormonism, historical events have been made in effect the foundation of the faith and in a sense the touchstone of orthodoxy. Due to the position taken by official Church writers, Mormon history has such a large bearing on the Mormon faith that I think it is inevitable that from time to time there will be trouble between the Church historians and history teachers, and those who are appointed to be the protectors of the faith. Our historians should take this for granted. During the Leonard Arrington era things became progressively better, but I guess it was too good to last. Arrington did very good things for the Church.

O: So what you're saying is that the Church has allied itself with a historical interpretation which may in fact prove to be false?

M: The Church hasn't settled on a single treatment of history but has been involved with several approaches to its own history. I have no objection to this in principle because no one should rely on a single historian. Full historical objectivity is an impossibility, and there is no justification for assuming that any particular historian has the whole picture or the entirely true picture. The writing of history is exceedingly complicated and difficult. The best that any lay person can do is to read several historians on the same subject if he wants to achieve an adequate grasp of the facts and a satisfactory causal explanation of the historical events. No one should settle, for instance, for a single historian on the origins of Christianity, or of Mormonism, or of any other religion. The Apostle Paul, Joseph Smith, and Buddha were immensely complicated persons, and it is futile to think that we will ever have a full and accurate picture of them. To settle for a single historian or a single historical view would be as foolish as to sell out to a single philosopher or philosophical position.

O: That places a lot of responsibility on the individual who must judge the evidence.

M: Certainly it means great responsibility for the individual. Each individual is ultimately responsible for his own beliefs. The problem we have is that at the present time the Church is not encouraging the individual to accept that responsibility and really think through his problems. We are going through a stage of intense indoctrination in the Church that robs the individual of intellectual freedom.

In my opinion, no church can stand a very close scrutiny of its origins and history without a good deal of moral and intellectual cringing. Mormonism should judge itself by its accomplishments, its fruits, the strength and happiness that it brings to its people, and hopefully someday to large numbers of others as well, rather than by its early beginnings where it encounters a good many unsavory things that must be faced and should not be distorted and misrepresented simply because they have become stones in the foundations of the faith.

O: Are you suggesting that certain spiritual experiences were fabrications?

M: I'm not sure how much territory you mean to cover by the term "spiritual experiences." What is spiritual to one person is not necessarily spiritual to another. And churches don't have spiritual experiences. Only individuals and, in some cases, groups of individuals have spiritual experiences. I never challenge anyone's report on his own religious experiences. This is a very personal and subjective matter.

I don't say that the Church has intentionally fabricated historical data. What it has done at times is become somewhat confused on matters of fact as well as on the interpretation of fact. Many things have been intentionally ignored and sometimes concealed or have been taken to have religious meanings or implications which, in my opinion, have no religious connections whatsoever. I believe that the Church has intentionally distorted its own history by dealing fast and loose with historical data and imposing theological and religious interpretations on those data that are entirely unwarranted. Historians must be selective in identifying the data which they will treat, and they must have some kind of framework for the interpretation and evaluation of their data. It is a question of the justification of their grounds of selection and of their interpretations.

O: If, as you said, in your day they were yearning after honest history, when did this distortion start?

M: What I am saying is that there was a genuine interest in honest history and honest everything else in Church education. At least this is what some of my colleagues and I thought was the case. It wasn't that everyone fit that pattern but simply that it was a prominent characteristic of the education system. There was a feeling that the best things in Mormonism would survive an honest and open search for the truth and that even the skeletons in the closet should not be hidden from the people. Obviously, that openness does not prevail today. For example, I was personally acquainted with Dean Milton Bennion, who was . . . head of the Church Sunday Schools down to the early fifties. He laid great stress on the importance and necessity of cultivating good scholarship in Sunday School teaching. He used the term "Sunday School scholarship," by which he meant he wanted good, honest, and frank scholarship in the teachers. This, of course, is often difficult to get because the Sunday School teachers as they are selected and installed today include some people who scarcely have the time, energy, disposition, or talent to pursue scholarly work for their Sunday morning teaching.

During the several years that I was an employee of the Church, when Franklin L. West was the commissioner and M. Lynn Bennion was supervisor, I did not personally encounter any criticism whatsoever from my superiors in the department resulting from my efforts to treat the subjects which I taught in essentially the same way that I would now treat them in the university. I encountered plenty of local criticism, you understand, but not from my superiors in the Church Education System. In those days, however, we did encounter many things that were discouraging, as for instance the infamous message for ward teachers that read, "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done." That came out when I was at the Institute at the University of Arizona.

O: Did you oppose that phrase?

M: To say that I opposed it is to put it mildly. As a matter of fact, there is a good deal of descriptive truth in the statement. But taken in the normative sense in which it was intended, it was an outrageous thing. Many Church people were offended by it, and I think it proved to be a serious embarrassment

to the Church leaders. Nevertheless, I am sure that a large segment of the Mormon people would find nothing wrong with it today. After all, the people who own the Church are not a bunch of university and institute instructors who are eating out of the Church trough. The Church is owned by the people who finance it — those who raise their hands to sustain the authorities and who contribute their time, energy, and means to the sustenance of the institution. It is their Church. When I went into the Church Education System, I didn't say things like this because in those days we were really encouraged with the idea that the Church belonged to all of us and that in some way or another we should all make a serious contribution to it. There were even some grounds for thinking that our opinions were respected. I was soon to find out, of course, that to a considerable extent this was wishful thinking. But at least many of us were led to believe that there was a real desire on the part of the Church for an honest and open pursuit of knowledge and that our efforts might count for something.

O: Did the authoritarianism of the Church disillusion you?

M: I really can't say that that was the case. I don't like authoritarianism; but anyone who was reared as a natural-born Mormon, as I was, became accustomed very early to authoritarianism in the Church. That's the way the Church is set up and that is the way it runs. There's no indication that this will ever change — at least not in our day. Like most other Mormons, I am simply calloused and somewhat insensitive to Church authoritarianism. That the authoritarianism of the Mormon Church should develop on American soil among American people is, in a way, rather strange. But it is hardly a disillusioning thing for Mormons, simply because they have been accustomed to it all their lives. Authoritarianism did not affect me as a teacher in the Church because I encountered less authoritarianism in the Church Department of Education than simply as a Church member.

O: Are you disillusioned with the Church?

M: No. In a general sense I am really not disillusioned because I was never illusioned in the first place. I have never experienced the frustrations and disillusionment that many Mormons experience. I now occasionally encounter young people who are discovering for the first time things about the Church that they should have known from their childhood. They are the ones who become disillusioned. Often they are caught in a difficult intellectual and personal struggle with themselves and their families.

I will say, however, that in those more open days some of us thought that through dedicated and persistent effort, working for and in the Church, we might conceivably help to effect changes that appeared desirable. I was probably disillusioned with regard to that prospect, as I don't take it at all seriously now. I have had numerous experiences that have confirmed my conviction that from the standpoint of the intellectual life things are not getting better, but rather worse, in the Church.

For instance, a few years ago I was invited to give a lecture on academic freedom to the BYU chapter of the American Association of University Professors. Against my better judgment, I accepted the invitation. When the

time came, the affair, which was scheduled at 3:00 in the afternoon on a day when the university was in session, was held off the campus. In addition to three persons who accompanied me, five other people came, three of them officers of the association. They were a little embarrassed by the size of the crowd as well as by the fact, as one of them acknowledged, that they were not permitted to hold the event on the campus. We discussed academic freedom, a matter that apparently at that time was of some concern to some members of the BYU faculty. I told them that I could see no reason whatsoever why BYU professors should experience disillusionment on the matter of academic freedom pertaining to matters of religion and morals as they should have known before they signed on at BYU that they would not have this kind of freedom. There are various types of limitations which university teachers encounter, and a limitation upon this kind of freedom is to be taken for granted at BYU.

I have the impression that some years ago the situation was somewhat different, especially under the leadership of President Franklin S. Harris. But for several decades the policy of the Church, which was clearly enunciated in an official statement read by President J. Reuben Clark at BYU's Aspen Grove in 1938, has placed severe limitations on academic freedom in matters relating to religion and morals throughout the Church Educational System. In my opinion, those who elect to teach at BYU in fields relating to religion should simply face that fact in advance. I have had very little contact with BYU in recent years, and I am willing to be corrected if things are different now. For instance, I greatly admire President Holland's decision to allow your newspaper on the BYU campus. This is a very good thing, and I hope that if you print this interview, it will not be seen as a violation of the trust he and others have placed in the *Seventh East Press*.

O: Are there certain limitations even here at the University of Utah?

M: In my honest opinion, the University of Utah is as free a university from the standpoint of academic freedom as one can expect to find anywhere in this country or in the world. Of course, there are limitations in all institutions. There are limitations which a qualified instructor should impose upon himself — such things as not using the classroom as a podium for any kind of political propaganda, or exercising genuine propriety in matters pertaining to moral conduct, and good judgment in treating issues that are locally very sensitive. Those who lack the judgment and sense of responsibility necessary to impose both moral and intellectual standards upon themselves have no business teaching in a university or any other kind of school. A university, such as the University of Utah, does not function under some of the limitations that a parochial school such as BYU might. On the other hand, private institutions are free from the imposition of some pressures that public institutions must contend with. They don't depend on legislatures, for instance, and all that that may involve. They depend rather on the largesse of private donors or parent institutions — in the case of BYU, a very wealthy church that is remarkably generous in its appropriations for education.

O: What was your opinion of the Book of Mormon when you were a teacher for the Church, and what is your opinion of it now?

M: I never did consider the Book of Mormon to be authentic. At least I have no recollection of ever seriously believing in the Book of Mormon. No doubt when I was a child I did hold that belief, but I have no recollection of it. Frankly, I am always somewhat amused by those who make extensive studies of the Book of Mormon through archeological remains, computer word studies, etc., in their attempt to prove its authenticity or to come to some conclusions as to whether it is what it purports to be.

O: Are you saying that the story of Moroni bringing the Book of Mormon to Joseph is a fabrication?

M: I won't comment here on Joseph Smith and his claims because he was a remarkably complicated person, and we don't know enough about him to competently judge his motives and mentality. My point is that I came to the conclusion at a very early age, earlier than I can remember, that you don't get books from angels and translate them by miracles; it is just that simple. So I simply don't believe the Book of Mormon to be authentic. I think that all of the hassling over the authenticity of the Book of Mormon is just a waste of time. You should understand that I don't mean to say that there aren't some interesting and worthwhile things in the Book of Mormon. I really don't even mean to attack the Book of Mormon but rather to simply deny its authenticity. I don't believe that it is what the Church teaches it to be. I know of no real evidence in its support, and there is a great deal of evidence against it. As you no doubt know, B. H. Roberts set forth some of that evidence in an unpublished book-length study of the Book of Mormon.

O: Doesn't that mean then that in your opinion the Church is merely a facade?

M: Of course not. I think it is unfortunate that a church should ground itself so thoroughly on something that is, in my opinion, not genuine and obviously is seriously doubted by thousands of persons who are in the Church and love the Church. But the Church is not a book, nor is it a collection of books—the standard works. Nor is it simply an ecclesiastical organization. The Church is the people who constitute it and their relationships to one another, their hopes and aspirations, their mutual love, their joys and tragedies. Whatever one might say about the Church's scriptures, its ecclesiastical organization, or its theological or historical claims, the Church is certainly not a facade. It is a living, moving, religious community and should not be judged on any other terms than its character and quality—its capacity to bring satisfaction and happiness to the people, to give them the strength and courage to live through the dangers and tragedies of life.

I am well aware that the Book of Mormon has had a strong impact on the life of the Church, particularly as an instrument for conversion. Anyone who studies the history of religion knows well that a religion that has a literature of its own is strengthened, and the Mormon Church has been strengthened in its institutional life and in the faith of its people by the Book of Mormon. But it is the simple existence of the book rather than what is in it that has made the big difference. Whether the Bible would not have been sufficient as a scripture is an open question. I do not agree with the common Mormon view that the



Book of Mormon was necessary as a “new witness for Christ.” The Bible itself was a sufficient witness as far as literature is concerned. I know of nothing in the Book of Mormon that is of importance for religion and the moral life that is not already at least in principle in the Bible.

This is not to say that there are not good things in the Book of Mormon, as well as some bad things. Nor is it to say that the Book of Mormon is not sacred literature. Things are not sacred in and of themselves. They are made sacred by those who regard them as sacred or holy and develop sacral attitudes toward them. Though I don’t regard the Church’s position with respect to the Book of Mormon as authentic, I certainly recognize that it is a very remarkable book and I respect it in the way that I respect any religious literature — even more, of course, because it is the sacred literature of my own people.

O: Is there anything at all that could count as evidence for the Book of Mormon, given that angels don’t exist?

M: I’ve never said that angels don’t exist. I don’t know whether they exist or not; but I’ve never met an angel, the kind that spend at least part of their time in heaven. I’m just saying that you don’t get books from angels. Mortimer Adler recently published a book about angels — which I haven’t read and don’t intend to read — but I doubt that even Adler, for all his theological eccentricities, would have angels carrying metal books around.

O: How is it that you could teach in the seminaries and institutes of the Church and yet not believe that the Book of Mormon is a genuine article that was delivered by ancient prophets?

M: When I became a teacher for the Church, I was not questioned about my beliefs. Rather, I was interviewed with respect to my competence in relevant scholarship, my attitudes toward religion, my moral judgments, and my concern for the well-being of the Church. In retrospect, I feel that no doubt I should have been more forthcoming in revealing my heresies, such as my disbelieving in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. But those who interviewed me were not interested in searching for heresies. They were looking for competence in the teaching of religion and faithfulness to the Church. Moreover, they made it very clear that they wanted the work of the seminaries and institutes conducted on a high scholarly level as a search for truth. In my day there were no classes in the seminaries directly on the Book of Mormon. Seminary classes were on the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Church history. In my institute teaching I was never involved in classes on the Book of Mormon. I have never taught a course on the Book of Mormon and would not do so. Long before I left the employ of the Church, my views on such matters had been made entirely evident to those under whom I served. This was not the result of their inquiries into my views but, rather, simply the outcome of serious conversations with them with regard to Mormonism.

I realize that it is often difficult for the orthodox to grasp the fact that some of us in the Church who are unorthodox in our views love the Church as much and are as sincerely devoted to it as they are. I have found that there are elements of heresy in virtually all of the orthodox whom I have known and that there are elements of orthodoxy in all of the heretics. I recall a statement by

Heber C. Snell, the leading Bible scholar of the Church, who in his late years said, "I'm orthodox; it's simply that I have my own doxy."

The problem is that most people tend to confuse heresy with apostasy. In my language an apostate is one who turns against the Church. A heretic is simply a person who disbelieves in whole or in part the teachings of the Church. They sometimes, of course, go hand in hand, but not necessarily, and there is a difference. I readily admit to heresy, but I reject any charge that I am an apostate. As a person holding heretical views, in my teaching for the seminaries and institutes, and also in other Church classes, I have tried very conscientiously to avoid expressing heresy. There is so much good in Mormonism as a religion and moral culture, and so much basic strength in Mormon theology, and so much goodness in the Mormon people that a teacher can concentrate on these without indulging in classroom heresy. Even a quite radical heretic is not under some compulsion by the nature of the subject of Mormonism to indulge in heresy in his classes. Actually, I haven't been the instructor of a Church class for twenty-three years, since 1960, though I have met with three or four fireside groups.

I don't mean to say that some students did not detect that I was unorthodox, but I certainly have never been interested in disseminating heresy or in any way affecting negatively the religious faith of my students or of anyone else, Mormon or non-Mormon. I presume that my teaching has had negative effects at times, but this certainly has not been intentional on my part. I have never had any disposition whatsoever to argue for or against a person's religious beliefs or to try to change another's religious views. I rather think that is the reason the Lord never called me on a mission. To be a good missionary, you have to be sure that you have the truth and that the other person is in error. This is a qualification that I do not possess. (Perhaps the fact that I was never asked to fulfill a mission could be used as evidence that we have the true Church!)

But to get back to your question. I must say simply that when I entered into the employ of the Church as a teacher, the intellectual environment and the attitudes of Church leaders were in many ways quite different from what they are at the present time. As teachers we were encouraged and expected to be searchers after the truth and to be honest. Some of us who had heretical leanings were made to feel that we were just as much a part of the Church and that it belonged to us just as much as it belonged to some of the ultra-orthodox who, at the other extreme, constitute the broad Mormon lunatic fringe. To illustrate my point—I have often been condemned as an apostate for not believing in the devil, and yet I know of a seminary teacher, held in the highest regard as an orthodox person, who taught his students that the devil smells like a wet dog. Another seminary teacher taught his students that the devil is responsible for the behavior of persons manipulating ouija boards. It's a little like politics in Utah. Those who are a little far to the left are counted as being rather bad, but you can go as far to the right as you want and, for the most part, Church people regard you as quite acceptable.

My interest as a teacher is to encourage people to think and to think carefully and honestly—to have a genuine respect for evidence and a passion for

truth. I am not interested in telling them what they should believe. I recognize, of course, that the very young should be inducted into the value system of their society, but there are good and bad ways of indoctrinating the young. Do you make bigots of them — and our Church has its fair share of bigots — or do you teach them to think intelligently about their values?

I am not defending the fact that I became a teacher for the Church but am simply undertaking to explain why I was willing to do it despite my unorthodoxy. Having said this, I am willing to admit that under what seem to be the Church's present policies, I probably should never have been in its employ as a teacher. Things have changed.

I would not want to be regarded as an orthodox Mormon. I must say this even though I am aware that many people will be offended by it, among them some whom I would least want to offend.

O: Are you a Mormon in any real sense of the word?

M: Of course I am. I am a member of the Church. I was reared in it, and my parents and all of my grandparents were reared in it. My personality and character, for good or bad, are to a large degree a product of it. Its teachings continue to greatly affect my attitudes and ideas. It is the foundation of my religion. Its history is just as much a part of my cultural heritage as if I were orthodox. Its social life is an important element of my environment. Its ecclesiastical affairs are of positive interest and concern to me. Its moral teachings are the basis of my own moral beliefs and ideals. I must say again that many of the orthodox, who often are not nearly so orthodox when you get under the surface, find it strange that most of the unorthodox feel close to the Church.

Most important, the things that are sacred to the generality of Mormons are sacred to me. I commented to several people a few days ago that while I don't believe in baptism for the dead, I am deeply offended by the fact that in the new visitors' center on Temple Square there is a replica of a baptismal font of the [Alberta] Temple — something for the tourists to gape at and climb on. This deeply offends my religious sensitivities. The temple is a sacred place and the baptismal font is a sacred object. It belongs in the temple and for me it is a profanation of religion that a cheap replica of it has been produced for the tourists to climb on and photograph. I have the same feeling with respect to the use of models and drawings of the gold plates which you see used on book covers and for teaching purposes. In these matters I may be involved in a kind of contradiction, but religion is not simply a rational affair. It is a sentiment that is rooted in the sense of the holy. I don't believe there were any gold plates, but the gold plates are a symbol of something of great importance in the religion of the Mormon people, and, like other religious symbols, they should receive a kind of respect which is often violated even by the orthodox.

O: Would you consider yourself an agnostic?

M: Technically, yes, I am an agnostic. But I have strong religious sensitivities. I am an agnostic in the sense that I do not profess to know whether there is or is not a God. I do not believe that we can either prove or disprove the existence of God. In my opinion, belief in God must be essentially a matter

of faith rather than any kind of proof. But don't assume, as many would, that when I say I am an agnostic I mean to simply say in a more polite way that I am an atheist. Because that is not the case. Incidentally, I should say here that the great question is not whether Mormonism is true or even whether Christianity is true — but rather whether religion is “true.” And what that means is, “Are the things that matter most ultimately at the mercy of the things that matter least?” The real question has little to do with the authenticity of books or prophets, or the truth of typical religious dogmas. It is far more profound and important than any of these. Religion does not depend on the churches.

O: If you were brought to trial for excommunication, what would be your defense?

M: I can speak with some experience on this matter because back in the middle fifties there was a serious effort to put me on trial . . . , but the trial did not come off. I was never informed of any specific charges against me, but I am sure that the general charge would have been, as it usually is, “apostasy and wrongdoing.” They could have easily got me on wrong thinking, but I am not sure what I actually did that could be regarded as wrongdoing. As a matter of fact, the bishop who was handling the affair, a Church employee at a rather high level, told me that they had been unable to find anyone who would testify against me and asked for my assistance in locating people who could be used as prosecution witnesses. He was sure that I would know some. As a matter of fact, I knew quite a few; but I felt that the prosecution should locate its own witnesses. I did name two leading apostles whom I had fully informed of my heresies, both of whom later became Presidents of the Church, but he insisted that he could not use them as witnesses. It seemed to me that they would be excellent witnesses.

Now, you ask what defense I would make. It was my definite intention at that time and would be at any time in the future if I were brought to trial to make no defense whatsoever. Unlike some of my friends who preferred not to show up at their excommunication trials, I would certainly attend. I wouldn't want to miss it. And I would want to have a competent witness present simply as an observer. But I would certainly have no one speak or write in my defense. If the charges were completely erroneous, I would, of course, want to call attention to the errors; but if they were justified, as they might very well be if they referred to my unorthodoxy, I would offer no defense and would be willing to answer any and all questions that might be raised respecting my beliefs. If permitted to do so, I would want to make one statement, simply to the effect that the judges in the case had the responsibility to decide whether an unorthodox person of my stripe should be kept in or thrown out of the Church. I would make it plain that it is a decision for the Church to make and one which I would not in any way contest or appeal. This is a problem, of course, that every church faces. What is to be the status of the dissidents among its members? This is a problem for the Church, not the dissidents. It is not a simple problem.

O: In view of the fact that in recent years many people have been excommunicated for their beliefs, how is it that you are still in the Church?

M: In the first place, I have no desire to be severed from the Church or even alienated from it, and therefore would not request excommunication. I want to make that clear. I really have a genuine love for the Church and a concern for its well-being, as difficult as this will be for some of your readers to understand. But as we all know, excommunication from the Church is in part a function of geography. It depends to a considerable extent on where you live and the character, thinking, and attitudes of your associates in the Church, especially of the local officials. I say this even though I am well aware that many excommunications are initiated from the general Church headquarters, as was the earlier move to excommunicate me. Some persons would not have been excommunicated if they had lived in a neighboring ward or a neighboring stake. I think that is entirely obvious.

I have lived for over twenty years in my present ward and stake. I didn't move there after checking out the local officials to determine what their policies in such a matter as this might be, but as it has turned out, I live in the best ward and the best stake in the Church. There is no question whatsoever that my stake president is the best stake president in the Church, and the bishops of the ward have been more than generous in their attitude toward me. Now, of course, they may come after me tomorrow, or after this interview is published, but I have to take my chances on that. As things now stand, my wife and I enjoy the most pleasant relationships possible with the people of our neighborhood and ward. I realize, of course, that this is due in part to the fact that I don't go around the Church very often. I learned long ago that the best way for me to be on pleasant terms with the members of my ward is to have nothing to say about religion.

While I am at it, I must mention my home teachers, though I don't want to get them into any trouble. They are without any question the best home teachers in the Church. They are remarkably generous in their attitude toward me, and we have very pleasant and worthwhile discussions on religion. Having the home teachers call is one of the most pleasant experiences of our home life. Of course, one reason for that is that one of them is a very beautiful, talented young woman. Some wards send around teams of men and boys. A bad practice. You can't say much in front of the teenager, so nothing of real interest is said. In assigning a woman as part of the team the Church has certainly surged ahead. The great qualities that reside in its women — qualities of wisdom, sensitivity, and leadership — have never been adequately exploited.

O: You have mentioned orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Mormonism. Is there a true heterodoxy or orthodoxy other than the current trend in doctrine?

M: Yes, I think it is possible to identify Mormon orthodoxy, or at least elements that must be part of an orthodox faith or belief — such as the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the reality of revelation, and the divinity of Christ.

O: Do you believe in the divinity of Christ?

M: No, not if the concept of divinity is anything like the typical conception of Christ that has prevailed through the history of the Christian church or that the Mormon people accept today. I realize that in saying this I am

committing the basic Christian heresy and that the stock-in-trade reply to me would be that apparently I think that Jesus was nothing but a great teacher or something of the sort. But that doesn't do justice to my views on Jesus. There is a middle ground between being simply a great teacher and being God, the Creator and Savior. That Jesus had a transcendent, charismatic personality and a remarkable insight into moral and spiritual matters is too obvious to permit his being thought of as simply a great teacher. I am disappointed that Jesus was so much involved with incidents relating to evil spirits, if we are to literally accept the Gospel accounts, and I regard it as a serious error to attempt to deduce a social morality for today's world from his teachings; but I sometimes think that I have as profound an appreciation of him and as sensitive a grasp of the meaning of his teachings as those who profess the belief that he is Jehovah, the creator of heaven and earth, and at the same time speak of him familiarly as their "elder brother." In our Church we have a remarkable talent for trivializing theology.

My views respecting Jesus and the concept of Christ as Savior began to take shape at a very early age, when I was in elementary school. In those days we sang a hymn in Sunday School that went something like this: "How great the wisdom and the love that filled the courts on high, and sent the Savior from above to suffer, bleed, and die." Every time I encountered that hymn, I was impressed by the fact that there seemed to be neither wisdom nor love in such an arrangement — that if some kind of saving act were necessary it surely could have been done in a better way. It made no sense to me as a child, and it makes no sense to me now. So I don't believe it. It made no sense to Tertullian, Kierkegaard, or Karl Barth, but lacking a good Mormon upbringing, they were convinced that we should believe things that make no sense, sometimes, indeed, *because* they make no sense. One of the best things about Mormonism is that it wants religion to be reasonable even when it isn't.

O: Why are you willing to admit to such fundamental personal heresies as that you do not believe the Book of Mormon and do not accept the divinity of Christ?

M: Simply because you asked me the questions, and I presume that you want honest answers. I certainly don't go around intentionally advertising my heresies. This would be reprehensible behavior. But I am quite unwilling to misrepresent my views when such questions are responsibly raised with serious intention. I often think of a saying of a very dear friend of mine, Grace Tanner, who would often say, "Nothing but the truth is good enough for us Latter-day Saints." Grace also has another saying, "We shouldn't lie for the Almighty."

O: What is your opinion of the state of Bible scholarship in the Church?

M: The general state of Bible learning in the Church is at a very low ebb. But we have had some competent scholars. I have personally known three of them — Heber C. Snell, who ended his career at the LDS Institute in Logan but thereafter taught biblical courses for the University of Utah's Continuing Education program; Russell Swenson, who is now emeritus at BYU; and Lewis M. Rogers, who moved in the fifties from the BYU to the University of Utah.

W. H. Chamberlin, who was at the BYU from 1911 to 1916, when they deprived him of his Bible classes, was a good Bible scholar. There may be some excellent Bible scholars now at BYU whom I simply do not know. Of course, there have been a considerable number of Church scholars who have been well informed on the Bible — as for instance Jack Adamson at the U of U in Bible literature — and quite a few at BYU and elsewhere who have given instruction in Bible courses aside from their specialties in other fields.

O: What about James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ*?

M: Apostle Talmage was an excellent expositor of Mormon doctrine, and from this point of view *Jesus the Christ* is a very good book. But from the standpoint of competent Bible scholarship, there is little to recommend it.

O: What about the philosophy of religion?

M: We have a number of people of competence, but nothing of major importance has happened in the philosophy of Mormonism over the past fifty or sixty years. Obert Tanner is a wise person in the philosophy of religion, and Kent Robson, in the philosophy faculty at Logan, is very good, as is George Boyd, now retired from the Institute system and living in Provo. Lowell Bennion, of course, deserves his excellent reputation; and I should mention Gerald Bradford of Santa Barbara and a recent convert to the Church in Perth, Western Australia, Max Nolan. Except for Truman Madsen, who has a lot of philosophical study under his belt, I simply don't know the BYU philosophy faculty. There are, of course, others here and there in the Church who can make important contributions to Mormon philosophy, but for the most part they are ignored or discouraged. Apostle Neal Maxwell, in my opinion, is the intellectual leader among the General Authorities and over a period of time will no doubt have a very large impact on Church thought. The annual Sunstone Symposium on theology is a very good thing.

O: In your opinion, what are some of the institutional problems which the Church faces at the present time?

M: I think the Church's largest practical problem is its extremely rapid growth in membership involving cultures of which the generality of Mormon people know very little and sometimes almost nothing, the conversion of large numbers into a culture basically foreign to them. I am referring to Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Granted that there are individuals in the Church who know a great deal about these cultures, the Church as it now stands is essentially an American product. Those who have shaped it and its beliefs are almost exclusively from North America, the British Isles, and Northern Europe. Mormonism is more than a religion in the ordinary narrow sense. It is a society and a culture. It is a product of America and Europe and is quite foreign in character even to most Latin Americans, to say nothing of native Asians and native Africans.

I realize that the Church has moved rapidly and, I am sure, effectively on its administrative front to face this large and difficult problem; and I am willing to assume that it will work through it effectively. But it is a very large task and will call for some serious policy decisions. Does the Church, for instance, intend to impose a Utah-Arizona-Idaho-California style of Mormonism on the

converts from these cultures regardless of whether they are coming out of a kind of combination of Catholicism and primitivism or a combination of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Protestantism? The Mormon people have remarkable capacities for good judgment in practical affairs, and I think under President Kimball's administration the Church has developed in directions that should greatly facilitate the handling of this problem from an administrative and managerial standpoint. But the real question is what it portends for the future of the religion. What kind of religion is Mormonism likely to be as it becomes a universal, world-wide religion? As you well know, Christianity became a different kind of religion when it moved from Palestine to the gentile hellenistic-Roman world, and it became a different kind of religion when it moved from Southern Europe to Northern Europe. Universalizing Mormonism as a religion is a tremendously important step, one which the Church should take and has taken. But there is no point in minimizing the problems which will follow and, I suppose, are already developing as a result of this step.

O: What is your opinion of Mormon theology?

M: I believe that Mormon theology has great strengths and very serious weaknesses. At the present time, in some respects it is in a very crude state, and it needs a thorough, competent working-over by the Church's theologians. Its chief strengths are its denial of the absolutistic conception of God and the doctrine of original sin, together with their implications of salvation by grace only. But that is a long story.

O: Do you mean it doesn't have consistency?

M: It isn't entirely consistent, but that in itself is not an unusual thing as there are inconsistencies in virtually all theological and philosophical systems.

O: Haven't you in the past referred to the life-killing veneer of theology or something of the kind? Wouldn't the uniqueness of the Mormon faith be compromised if a normative, systematic theology were developed?

M: It is quite true that theology can destroy much of the character and quality of religion. But religion without theology tends to be just a matter of superstition and emotional excess. In my opinion, theology is a very important thing for Mormonism, and Mormonism has a very good and strong theological base. The trouble is that for the last fifty years, since the death of B. H. Roberts, no really competent work has been done on Mormon theology, largely because the leadership of the Church has been occupied with other matters, and those outside the leadership who have theological talents and might make important contributions to the theology receive far more discouragement than encouragement from the Church.

O: We sometimes hear the complaint that Mormonism has become anti-intellectualistic.

M: Rationality or reasonableness has always been a Mormon ideal, and this is one of the best things about the religion, that it should be reasonable. I think the ideal of reasonableness or rationality is very firmly grounded in the thought and attitude of the Mormon people, but reasonableness is a fragile commodity. In Mormonism, as elsewhere, it is an ideal that is all too commonly violated. At the present time, there is a great deal of anti-intellectualism,



a movement away from reasonableness and knowledge as a basis for religion. This, of course, is a world-wide phenomenon, not peculiar to Mormonism.

O: Should theology be a task of the institution or should it be left entirely to the individual?

M: Religion is an individual, personal affair, of course. But in the case of Mormonism, as in most instances, it has very strong social foundations. Theology, which is the attempt to make sense of the basic religious beliefs and practices of the people, cannot be left entirely to the individual. This would produce a great deal of intellectual and practical confusion. This is not to say that the individual should be coerced in his theological ideas, but he at least needs the guidance of those who may have special competence in theology. And if a church is to survive as a viable and strong institution, it must have some quite clear set of beliefs and a firm basis for those beliefs. It is unfortunate, however, when theologies become static and frozen and religious beliefs become inflexible and so institutionalized that the individual is robbed of his own individuality and religious freedom. But theology is a serious and difficult discipline. The average individual doesn't have the time or the talent to be a competent theologian any more than he has the time or the talent to be his own physician or chemist. Nevertheless, an institutionalized theology should not be permitted to rob the individual of his right to think and believe as he pleases in matters of religion. I'm sure that most of your readers are acquainted with the truly admirable statement of Joseph Smith in his reference to the case of Pelatiah Brown, when the Prophet said, in opposition to established creeds, "I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled." (*History of the Church*, 5:340) President David O. McKay used the same language in a conversation with me back in the fifties. He said, "I have only one piece of advice to give you — that is that you think and believe as you please." When I urged him to give the same advice to everyone in General Conference, he simply replied with a benign smile. There's a limit to how far you should try to push the prophets.

O: Speaking of prophets, do you regard President Kimball as a prophet?

M: I certainly do. In 1978, after long and perhaps agonizing days and nights of what I know was searching thought and the most sincere prayer, with one stroke he transformed a parochial religion into a universal religion, the most important event in Mormondom since the founding of the Church. If he is not a prophet, we haven't had any prophets.

Here I should say that I obviously approach such things as revelation and religious experiences such as visions entirely from an essentially naturalistic standpoint. You are aware, of course, that the central element of Joseph Smith's first vision as described by him was well established in the thinking of his own family before he had the vision. His mother's book on his life that can be purchased today in the Deseret Bookstore gives full evidence of that. Some of his father's visions, prior to his own, were geared to the belief that the true gospel was not on the earth and the hope of its return. The first vision must be seen against the background of Joseph's time and place and family life. I think it was mainly my Mormon upbringing in a church that opposes the conven-

tional idea of the supernatural that accounts for my treatment of religion in basically naturalistic terms.

O: Back to theology — does the individual have the time even to learn and understand the theology which the institution develops?

M: Obviously, many people today have no time for this sort of thing, and in theological matters today I think there is some desertion in the Church from what have been well established as the fundamentals of Mormon theology. I think Mormon theology receives far less competent attention today both from the leadership and the rank and file of the people than when I was young. There is not the competence for theology in Mormon officialdom that there was a few generations ago, but there is plenty of competence here and there in the Church if those who have it were given serious encouragement to contribute to Mormon philosophy and theology. But the rank-and-file people in the Church can understand far more than their leaders seem to want them to know. The function of theology is to make some kind of rational sense of what are taken to be the fundamental beliefs. A good theology should have a great deal of flexibility in it and should allow plenty of space for people to think and decide and think again and change their decisions. President Joseph Fielding Smith once mentioned to me that the people of the Church should realize that there is much room in Mormon theology for freedom of thought. I personally think that they would have more intellectual freedom if they simply had the courage to take it. Too many seem to be afraid to say what they think.

O: But isn't theology also a set standard on what people should believe?

M: Personally, I don't like the idea of even discussing what people "should" believe. I think people should believe whatever they care to, that is, whatever their experience and the evidences which they have and their best thinking recommend to them. I don't think we should even say to anyone, "You should be a Mormon." A person should be what he wants to be. On the other hand, I am willing to say that churches should approach this matter in whatever way they regard as advisable. If they want to have an established set of dogmas which their people are required or at least expected to accept, I have no strong objection as long as there is no coercion and as long as a person is not under some kind of requirement to join the organization or to continue membership in it. All institutions, of course, must have standards of some kind or another if they are going to maintain their organizational integrity and viability, and I see nothing wrong with churches having established theologies. Many people want it that way, so they should have it that way. I have already indicated that I think some kind of theology is necessary to avoid irrationality and superstition in religion. At the same time, I don't like the idea of a person being under some kind of pressure or coercion to accept a set of theological beliefs.

The best kind of theology is one which is open to criticism and growth and improvement. Moreover, we should never forget, as too often we do, that there is nothing wrong with a person's changing his mind or disagreeing with the crowd. It is not an indication that someone is a bad person because he disagrees with the beliefs of others, or because his own beliefs change. An un-

orthodox Mormon may be a bad person, but his moral deficiencies do not lie in his heresies. Of course, if his heresies turn him to drugs and rape and murder, there is a problem. But it would appear that in Mormondom the moral evils are as likely to come from the orthodox as frequently as from the unorthodox — especially the evils in the white-collar crime category.

O: Is it consistent to have ongoing revelation and a theology at the same time?

M: I see no necessary inconsistency in this. As a matter of fact, if there is a belief in revelation, it is a good idea, it seems to me, to have ongoing revelation if this allows for criticism and correction of past revelations. In Mormonism, of course, it is common to insist that revelations do not conflict with other revelations, but the history of Mormonism, fortunately, actually contradicts this view. Believers in revelation are usually opposed to any policy that suggests that revelations might be in error, but, as you well know, Joseph Smith himself held that he could be in error in his revelations. I suspect that the average Mormon thinks of revelation in terms of infallibility. I think this is a most unfortunate idea, especially in view of the fact that the Mormon conception of revelation is not well defined. In recent years the term “revelation” has been kicked around in the Church to the point where it no longer has very much meaning and the whole concept of revelation has been trivialized. It seems like revelations are now occurring all over the place, or at least people think they are. It’s becoming a little like the unhappy days in Kirtland. This is most unfortunate for a church that believes in revelation. It should keep the meaning of revelation under control with rather strict limitations.

O: It seems that Mormonism has at times adhered to a finitistic theology, that is, the idea that God is conditioned in a sense by his environment, and yet we want to use absolutistic language when referring to the attributes of God.

M: In ordinary religious discourse the language of absolutes is, of course, very common. It always sounds good from the pulpit. Words like “infinite,” “absolute,” and the multitude of “omni’s” — “omnipotence,” “omniscience,” “omnipresence,” etc. — are the kinds of things that religion tends to thrive on. Expressions like “the infinity of God” seem offhand to be somewhat more appropriate for a sermon than terms such as “limited” or “finite” in making reference to God. Mormons, like most others, are seduced by absolutism in their sermons and ordinary class discussions.

But, of course, you are entirely right in calling attention to the fact that orthodox Mormon theology, if Joseph Smith is to be taken as the standard of orthodoxy, is in principle finitistic rather than absolutistic. This is a view which some Mormon theologians have respected and others have ignored. Roberts, for instance, was very conscious of the finitistic elements in Mormon theology. On the other hand, President Joseph Fielding Smith once told me that God was finite until he became God, but from that moment on he was absolute. It is an error to suppose that all Mormon writers have followed Joseph Smith down the line of finitism, though I personally regard the finitistic position as being not only the standard for Mormon orthodoxy, but also the only tenable form of theism. The trouble is that most of us don’t stop to con-

sider the meanings of words. We are inclined to be very loose in our use of language and somewhat illogical in our discussions.

In my opinion, the chief strength of Mormon theology lies in its refusal to follow the classical forms of Christianity in their absolutism, an absolutism whose sources, incidentally, are mainly Greek and are to be found for the most part in hellenistic metaphysics rather than the biblical antecedents of Christianity. It is a strange thing that many Mormons talk and write glibly about the idea that human beings can become gods and that God was once a human being, ideas that, in my opinion, are sheer nonsense and are an embarrassment to the religion, yet still hold to the idea that God is absolute. I presume the only way to handle this is the way that President Smith handled it — finite until you become God. This is a remarkably naive approach to the problem, but it is one way of going about it.

Nonabsolutistic theology is, of course, a heresy from the standpoint of traditional Christianity. As everyone knows, one of the most difficult problems faced by theology is the problem of evil and suffering. In my opinion, it is quite impossible to handle this difficulty on an absolutistic basis. I am not suggesting that it is a simple problem within the framework of a finitistic theology, but certainly finitism provides some access to solutions that make sense. It is unfortunate that at the present time some of the Church writers are returning to the old absolutism, which means in effect the abandonment of the most characteristic feature and major strength of Mormon theology.

O: Aside from the problem of finitism, what kind of theology is consistent and true to the roots of Mormonism?

M: It is possible, of course, to overdo the matter of consistency for the simple reason that even if you were successful in achieving 100 percent consistency, which is probably impossible outside of logic and mathematics, you would produce a kind of watertight system, and watertight systems of theology, if they existed, would not be good for religion. What is needed is something that is flexible and open. Such a consistent theology would be essentially a rational discipline with no genuine relationship to religion, which has to do with life and the problems of life. Religion is an experience which human beings have, a particular kind of experience involving such things as the relationship to God or sensitivity to the sacred. In itself it cannot be described in terms of such categories as consistency and, therefore, theology has to be a bit loose in order to serve the interests of religion.

But as I have already said, the first requirement for Mormon theology, if it is to avoid settling back into the tradition of orthodoxy against which it rebelled in the teachings of Joseph Smith, is to be nonabsolutistic in character. I personally think that the tendency toward absolutism, which is rather common among Mormon writers today, is a serious betrayal of Mormonism's intellectual heritage. At this point I regard myself as entirely orthodox and some of the apostles as unorthodox. It seems to me that those who are attempting to turn Mormonism back toward absolutism are in danger of moving it into a kind of Protestantism that is distinguished from Protestantism in general mainly by its possession of the Book of Mormon. I think the present trend, if I discern it

correctly and as it is indicated by some of the stuff being sold on the main floor of the Deseret Bookstore, is unfortunate. Whether it will continue in the future is, of course, a question.

Our best theologian was B. H. Roberts. He was not a top-drawer theologian, but he was the best officially accepted theologian that we have had, though even he was not always accepted by some of his colleagues among the General Authorities. He saw a lot of these problems with a great deal of wisdom and insight. I think his strength as a theologian lay especially in the fact that he had a strong sense of history and a well-developed historical consciousness. He was a good historian, as he was a good theologian, but he was not a great historian. Some of our present historians have a better grasp of the principles of historiography than Roberts had, and their research in minute, detailed matters is probably on the whole quite superior to his. But what you find in Roberts was a man of expansive intellect, a genuine historical consciousness, with good access to the materials, and, what is most important, he wanted to be honest. The present critics of our historians should consider seriously Roberts's statement in the preface of Volume 1 of his *Comprehensive History*, where he says that to write exact history and yet not destroy faith it is necessary "to frankly state events as they occurred, in full consideration of all related circumstances, allowing the line of condemnation or of justification to fall where it may." I am aware that there are some things Roberts wanted to get into the history of the Church that didn't get in. But he managed to get by with some things that probably would never appear in an official history today. Roberts's history of the Church, which is the official history, could not pass the criteria that are set up in the statement that you mentioned earlier by Apostle Packer. For instance, his handling in Volume 1 of the so-called Canadian copyright incident where Joseph Smith said, "Some revelations are of God; some revelations are of man; and some revelations are of the devil." (*Comprehensive History*, 1:162-66) There are three things in that account that could not be published today in an official Church history if the author and publisher subscribe to the prescription that is laid down in the address of Apostle Packer — three things that definitely are the opposite of "faith promoting": In the first place, the outrageous idea of selling the Canadian copyright of the Book of Mormon as a means of raising money. I don't think that would be allowed in an official history today. Second, that the prophet's revelation on which the attempted sale was based failed. And third, that he said some revelations are from man and some from the devil. It isn't likely that this kind of talk would be allowed in an officially published history today. Roberts himself recognized that this may not have been a reliable report, but he said that the source was such that it could not be left out of the history. Those who want to get the full picture must read Roberts's notes that appear at the end of the chapter.

To give another example that probably would not get by today, although it is in the official Church history: It is my recollection that Roberts strongly criticized Joseph Smith in connection with the destruction of the press of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. He held the destruction of the press to be illegal; and if I

remember correctly, he quoted Blackstone to point out that it was contrary to English common law. (*Comprehensive History*, 2:231–33)

The very title of Apostle Packer's address, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect," seems to me to be a betrayal of a very important Mormon idea, that the mantle and the intellect should not be set over against each other. This is destructive of a Mormon ideal. But here we are again back in history. It's typical of Mormons to want to hassle over matters of history.

O: Some General Authorities thought that the King Follett Discourse contained unreliable ideas. What is your opinion of that discourse?

M: The main extract of that sermon is in the current edition of the *History*. In my opinion, there is a lot of nonsense in the King Follett discourse, and I have no interest in defending it. But, of course, much Mormon orthodoxy has been supported by it — the finitistic position, for instance, which is of basic importance, and the idea that the human intelligence is uncreated. It is a convenient summary, but I don't think that Mormon theology is in any sense dependent on the King Follett discourse. Mormons often tend to talk almost as if God were somebody down the block, only a good deal smarter, better informed, and a long time ago, because it took a long time to get to be God, and so on. This way of discussing the idea of the potential divinity in man and the ultimate mystery of the reality of God is not only destructive to sane religion, it is intellectually debasing. There are others who know far more than I about the history of Mormon theology and such things as the place in it of the King Follett sermon. Thomas Alexander, for instance, of the BYU history faculty is an extremely competent person in this field.

O: That is the problem with finitistic theology. The first question one must ask is, "How finite?"

M: Just enough finitism to create an opening that will release God from responsibility for evil and suffering. Not enough to pull God down to the human level, however advanced, as many Mormons would have it. Much of our theological talk and writing, if it were not well intended, would be sheer blasphemy. Finitistic theology is not in itself the problem. The kind of nonsense that often shows up in Mormon discourse is not to be found in the works, for instance, of Charles Renouvier, William James, William Pepperell Montague, or [Alfred North] Whitehead, all of whom in one way or another are defenders of a nonabsolutistic theology. I personally favor finitism in theology, as I have already indicated, but I don't think we should make fools of ourselves by reducing theology to extreme anthropomorphic nonsense.

In being critical of the King Follett sermon, I don't want to disparage Joseph Smith so much as his way of speaking. I greatly admire his independence of thought, his creativity, and his willingness to come forth with very untraditional and unorthodox ideas. We don't expect the prophets to be scientists or philosophers, or even theologians. I personally don't regard Joseph Smith as essentially a theologian, and certainly not as a philosopher. He fits the prophetic mold. In that function I think that he said some things that would have been better unsaid. On the other hand, he had some very profound religious insights, and one of these insights is the basis of what I would

regard as the orthodox position in Mormon theology, the nonabsolutism which now some Mormon writers are betraying — not intentionally of course, but simply because they are incompetent in assessing and treating fundamental theological problems. For many years I have felt that Mormon theology is in principle a much better theology than it appears to be because so often it is poorly presented and poorly argued in Mormon literature.

O: It certainly is not a pejorative comment on God to say that he is finite. We simply mean that above all he is a being who is related to us and, as Charles Hartshorne holds, this relationship is possible only if there is a finite aspect to God's nature.

M: I'm glad you mentioned Charles Hartshorne because he is an excellent example of a nonabsolutistic theologian and, incidentally, one who has indicated to me that he has some interest in Mormon theology. I personally regard Hartshorne as the foremost living philosopher of religion. Those Mormons who have a serious interest in and talent for theology would be wise to give attention to Hartshorne's philosophical writings. Hartshorne, of course, was greatly influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, one of the foremost philosophers of this century. A paper given at the 1981 Sunstone Theology Symposium by Professor Floyd Ross, a non-Mormon who is one of the leading scholars in comparative religion, draws attention to the similarities of Mormonism and the theology and religious philosophy of Whitehead. This paper was published in *Sunstone*.

As I have already said, I think on the intellectual side the Church is far better than it seems to want to be known as. It has more spiritual strength and a better intellectual foundation than it usually exhibits in front of the world. It seems to me that it often puts its worst foot forward rather than its best. At the present time this is due in part to its oversensitivity to its own image and its involvement in a kind of professional public relations. It is too self-conscious and altogether too anxious to look good to those of average or less-than-average taste and competence to judge quality in religious thought. To see this mediocrity exhibited, for instance, one needs look no further than the editorials on the last page of the Church Section and compare them with the excellence of the regular editorial page of the *Deseret News*.

Just a few days ago I was interviewed by a writer for a Netherlands journal who asked me why the Church does not publish a financial statement that reveals the Church income to its members. Before I could venture a reply, he said, "I want to tell you that when I raised this question with the public relations spokesman for the Church, his answer to me was ridiculous. It was, 'The Mormon people have no interest in knowing what the Church's financial position is.'" This kind of talk from official representatives makes the Church look rather bad in the eyes of serious journalists who are attempting to do an honest job of reporting.

To take another type of case exhibiting mediocrity in taste, look at the quality of most of our current architecture. Surely the Church should be able to produce more artistic buildings than most of those which have appeared over the last three decades. Compare the Ogden and Provo temples with the

early Utah temples and such buildings as the Salt Lake, St. George, Logan, and Paris, Idaho, tabernacles. I was in Rome not long after the razing of the Coalville Tabernacle, a most impressive pioneer structure. An illustrated article about the whole affair appeared in the Paris edition of the *Herald-Tribune*. The Italian Minister of Education brought the matter up with me, saying, "We don't understand why you Mormons destroy your old churches. We make an effort to preserve ours." I have the impression that we are indebted to President Kimball for bringing that era of destruction to an end. Anyone who wants to see a magnificent case of preservation of an old, beautiful church, while at the same time expanding it, should take a look at the ward building in the little village of Spring City, Utah.

A couple of years ago I went to the BYU to attend a lecture given by Wayne Booth of the University of Chicago on Mormonism and art. It was a brilliant lecture, and every Mormon should read it, for here was a leader in the nation's intellectual life confronting his own people with the shortcomings in their artistic ideals and tastes. Much of what we put out in the arts, especially architecture, is for the most part second, third, and fourth rate. On the other hand, much of what is done is first rate, especially our music. Often the Church seems to be more interested in being known through its entertainers, its golfers, and its millionaires than through the production of fine art or through its scientists, its historians, or its other intellectual leaders.

O: One last question: What do you think of the current revival of religious fundamentalism that is exhibited on TV and is strong on some college campuses?

M: The Sunday morning TV evangelism is often difficult to distinguish from ordinary commercialism. Its great national popularity is an indication of the mediocrity that characterizes much of today's culture. As for the "born-again" phenomenon, I think it is sometimes a sincere but misguided religion and often a mixture of pretended religion and real business and politics. Those "born-again" who insist that Mormonism is not a Christian religion, arguing simply by definition, like the recently created organization of "Ex-Mormons for Jesus," should be ignored. The only problem that Mormons face in this "salvation-by-grace-only" stuff is that it came mainly from the Apostle Paul. Paul saved Christianity from extinction as an obscure Jewish sect, but he was responsible for many of Christianity's most basic errors. I think Jesus would be shocked to read Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

O: As a result especially of the Protestant reformation, there has been considerable reaction against much of the ritual and ceremony associated with Christian worship. At the present time, many anti-Mormons in their crusade against Mormonism seem to concentrate much of their attention on the temple and its ritual. What is your attitude toward those who try to demean something that is sacred to others?

M: I regard it as somewhat despicable for anyone to demean the forms of worship of others though it is quite acceptable to be critical of whatever is abjectly immoral or, for that matter, utterly ludicrous. For the most part, how-



ever, the history of religion is the story of its overcoming much of its early primitivism and immorality. I personally regard the current attempts of some ex-Mormons to draw public ridicule upon the Mormon Church and its beliefs and forms of worship as beneath contempt. Responsible criticism of its doctrines or its public actions is quite another matter.

O: What value and what function do rituals have, if any, in the religion of today?

M: It is entirely obvious that ceremony and ritual play a very important role in religion, as they do in the secular life of individuals and society. It would be difficult for religion to have a very large impact upon the moral and spiritual life of an individual or of society if it did not develop symbols and ritual as the bearers of its meaning and message. Mormon ritual is for the most part confined to the temple. The question of the temple is a matter of major importance for Mormonism because of the beliefs on which it is predicated and the very large expenditure of time and energy by the Mormon people in "temple work." Here two or three things deserve to be said. In the first place, I would like to make it clear that I do not believe in the efficacy of work for the dead, the doctrine that rituals performed vicariously by the living can in some way affect the salvation of the souls of the dead. I think it is unfortunate that Mormonism ever became involved with this strange and primitive belief and practice. It is obvious, however, that this is in some way tied to the well-known fact that some of the early Christians practiced baptism for the dead.

The early Mormons were caught in the difficulty of believing, as most Christians have believed, thanks to their inordinate submission to whatever is in the Bible, that baptism is necessary to salvation. What do you do about those who lived in the wrong place at the wrong time? Despite my complete rejection of the idea of vicarious work for the dead, this very practice is an important expression of the profound universalistic character of Mormonism—hope for the salvation of all creation. This universalism, where there is a compassionate desire to save all souls, is consonant with the Mormon denial of the traditional Christian views on judgment and hell.

But all of that aside, I have no difficulty whatsoever in supporting the idea that religious symbolism and ritual may have considerable value for those who actually participate in the ritual. The Mormon temple endowment is a sacrament which is intended to sacralize every facet of life of the individual. The principle of the total sacredness of human life lies right at the heart of the meaning of Mormonism and should not be criticized lightly.

On the other hand, there is the problem of the nature of the ritual. I feel that it is unfortunate that in its origins the Mormon temple cultus had such an intimate relationship with Freemasonry. The result, in my opinion, has been that the temple ritual is in some respects not genuinely indigenous to the Mormon culture and religion and does not adequately or fully express the character and values of the Mormon people. I hope the ritual is not beyond the possibility of reform. I understand that it has been changed considerably in the past.

Temple work consumes a very large measure of Mormon time and energy. Whether, as compared with alternative activities, it contributes adequately to the vitality of the Church may be a matter of some question. But quite certainly it is a major factor in strengthening the religious faith and commitment of countless persons among the true believers. It not only is an ostensive symbol and expression of the sacred character of human existence and makes a sacrament of the totality of life, it ties the believer into a cosmic structure that adds meaning and value to his or her experience. But there is always the problem that religion inevitably encounters — the threat that the habitual performance of ceremony will destroy genuine religious piety, that the priests will drive out the prophets, that ritual will replace righteousness.