

I take great comfort in the wisest and best thing the greatest Mormon apologist, Hugh Nibley, ever said, “There may be things about the Church I find perfectly appalling. But I know the gospel is true.”⁵ Like most other intellectuals in the Church, I say “Amen.”

Creative Mormons of all sorts could sponsor their own exhibits, concerts, and productions to demonstrate better what real creativity is and how it can lift, inspire, and motivate. We could all publicly bemoan the fact that (last time I checked) athletic scholarships at BYU were far more generous than even the prestigious Spencer W. Kimball award for scholarship. So, will faithful members of the loyal opposition please stand and be counted.

How and Where Is Intellect Needed?

Francine R. Bennion

I’ve found it useful at times to think of Christ as an intellectual in the service of the faith. I find that he assumes and champions the ability of persons to examine and revise not only what they are doing but also the assumptions underlying what they’re doing. He suggests that they can turn upside down what they’ve thought and find new ways of perceiving themselves and the world, changing not only what they are, but also their whole sense of being.

Christ distinguishes words and interpretations of human beings, even priests, even authorities, from the ways of God — not for his own status or glory or advancement, but to help even those who are scorning and mocking him.

For example, we read repeatedly in Matthew 5, “Ye have heard that it hath been said . . . but I say unto you . . .” He counters one authoritative scripture with another and transcends one with another. For example, when Satan tempts him with a scripture, he responds with another scripture, suggesting to me a lot of things about the nature and uses of scriptures.

Christ recognizes the seeming contradictions, the constant tension between opposites in this life, even tension between two “goods” — not just the tension between good and evil, but tensions between the very matters of existence. He turns the tensions upside down to illustrate them: for example, “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (Luke 17:33) or, “But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:11). That pattern repeatedly suggests that for Christ the ways in which his people perceived things and their opposites were not necessarily the only ways or even the most useful ways.

FRANCINE R. BENNION has taught English at Ohio State University and, at BYU, English piano, Book of Mormon, and an honors colloquium. When she participated on this panel, she was president of a BYU Stake Relief Society. She and her husband, Robert, a professor of clinical psychology, are the parents of three grown children.

⁵ Hugh Nibley, in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, ed. by Truman G. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press for BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), p. xvii.

Frequently he was invited to sit on the horns of a dilemma, to be trapped in an either/or proposition. Again and again he would transcend both horns with a principle that embraced them both. (For example, see Mark 12:13–17: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”) That is an intellectual exercise I find interesting and useful. He goes beyond the problem presented to him and answers it in terms of a larger and truer view of the world. He simplifies and clarifies matters without, it seems to me, implying that existence itself is simple.

He speaks to persons according to their language and understanding with skill not mastered by many in his own or other days: he does not patronize or pander to the least of his listeners, nor does he insist that persons have ability equal to his own to be worth his trouble. He gives healing and hope and light, but does not pretend that life will be neat and simple or one-dimensional. He himself groans and weeps at times, for all his understanding and all his capacity. Some of his last words are a question: “Why hast thou forsaken me?” — the greatest intellectual of all seeming to find something incomprehensible.

Once you’ve begun a catalog of ways in which Christ can be seen as an intellectual in the service of the faith, you could write a book, of course; and discussing it would take more time than we have. We might, for example, look at possible loneliness not simply as a function of his not having others like himself, but also as a function of his not having others who understand what he is trying to give, what he is trying to say, what kind of light he is trying to bring.

It seems to me that Christ’s addressing of the problems of his people was not a matter of telling them what to do. At least in the accounts we have of his life, it is more often a matter of addressing the *assumptions* underlying what they do — beliefs about themselves, about existence, about God, authority, and scripture. Christ was not saying to them only, “Stop being evil.” He was looking with them at what they thought and was suggesting truer understanding which then would underlie changes he clearly wanted them to make in what they did — changes made for themselves, not just for him.

It seems to me that the problems Christ was addressing — problems not only with what is thought but also with *how* the thinking is done — are problems that did not die with him or with Joseph Smith. They are the same problems we have now. Too often we still assume our concepts of reality to be reality itself; and we trap ourselves in our own frameworks. There are intellectual and religious authorities alike who assume that their assumptions and their reasoning — their perceptions of reality — duplicate God’s. If we can prove that something is valid, if we can prove that it fits our framework consistently and that it is reasonable and logical and that our opponents are wrong, we may delude ourselves into thinking that we have the pure and comprehensive view of it, rather than a framework we have devised that makes sense of it and allows us to operate with it. I think the traditional name for this is pride, and I don’t think it is any different in “intellectuals” than it is in “religious persons.”

We struggle still with tensions between opposites — not only with the opposites of good and evil. Of course, those are with us. But we struggle also if we are righteous and are trying to give our best — our time, our energy, everything

we have, trying to become more like God. In order to become more like God, we still struggle with tensions and things that seem contradictory. Often we try to fit those struggles into the framework we have rather than looking at and enlarging our frame, learning how to use the kind of assumptions and reasoning with which Christ addressed human experience. We still struggle with the difficulty of changing either what we think or what we do, perhaps in part because we are afraid that if we do we'll acknowledge that we haven't already been perfect. I think this is not only a personal problem but an institutional and a societal problem. We still struggle with questions of authority and agency, tradition and innovation, individual and authoritative access to God. We still struggle with when to hold our assumptions and reasoning, and when to change.

The problems really haven't changed. I think when we speak of the intellectual in religious matters, often we are really not talking about basic religious matters: we are talking about defense of systems of reasoning — talking about *concepts* of religion and our understanding of them.

I don't think God can be known in terms of an intellectual exercise which we give to each other. I can have an experience with God that is as real, as true to me, as the finger on my right hand; but I can't give that to someone else with a nice intellectual argument. I cannot *prove* to someone else that God exists or that he does not exist. I cannot *prove* to an unbeliever the reality of anything by quoting a scripture, though I may prove something to be logically consistent with that scripture. I think the reality and love of God and the goodness of his ways are things we don't know or prove by Western reasoning; we believe them because they seem valid and right to us, though someone else may think differently; or we know them by direct experience, and like Paul and Joseph Smith, only state what we know, not reason it with argument past disputing.

We don't prove the existence of God to each other. What we who believe in him or know him do with intellectual abilities, with our undeniable habits of looking for consistency and reasonableness, is to examine our understanding and assumptions in light of our experiences. That doesn't change who God is, but it can have a great effect on what we do and what we choose, and how we feel about ourselves and him.

Two women have said to me this summer, "I don't think doctrine really matters. What matters is that we love each other and be good to each other." I agree. What matters is that we love each other, that we love God, that we love ourselves and act accordingly; but the problem is we don't always act accordingly. Loving is not a matter divorced from what we think, what we assume, and what we believe. The issue is not whether we need to think about doctrine — willynilly we do it. The issue is how to do it as well as possible. A needed contribution from persons of lively, inquiring mind and observing intellect in our day is to identify the problems more clearly, to identify the struggles, not only of wicked people, not only the struggles of those choosing between good and evil, but also the struggles of believing, committed people who are not happy, not feeling rich and capable and good about themselves or life, people who don't know what to do but think they should know, think that things should be easier, that life shouldn't be this way. I think one of the ways those

of lively intellect can serve the faith of their fellows is to give all they can give to identify better the assumptions which underlie our struggles, the definitions, the inconsistencies, the historical infusion of human ideas with the revelations of God.

I love our scriptures partly because they tell so much about what it is to be human. For example, I like Nephi's asking for the same vision his father had; and later, when his brothers ask, "What meaneth the river of water?," Nephi's answer that the water is filthiness, but "so much was [our father's] mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water" (1 Ne. 15:26–27). Even when two men are given the same vision, they don't see entirely the same thing.

I was walking in the hills early one morning last week with my husband. We were moving at a good pace, up and down hills overlooking the valley. All of a sudden he stopped and said, "Listen." So I listened. I could hear in the distance a car honk, traffic noises, a high-pitched whine that I couldn't identify, a bird, and then another bird. I thought, perhaps he wanted me to hear that bird, that maybe it was an unusual bird sound. Then he said, "Listen. I'm not even breathing hard." He just assumed that I would know what I should be listening to, and I was listening to everything but the absence of his breathing sounds.

I think often with religion, even when we talk to each other as Tom suggested, what we are saying is not what the other person is hearing, and what God is telling is not what we are yet able to hear or see completely as he does. We have our own contexts. Even Moses, who talked with God face to face, was not forever after free of error, free of misunderstanding. He still had his struggles with making sense of life and what he had to do. Laman was talked to by an angel. He continued to have his problems. I like the fact that when Nephi was shown a vision, the angel did not say, "This is how it is. You do this and this and this. And this is what is going on." Instead the angel says repeatedly, "Look!" When Nephi looks, then the angel says, "What beholdest thou?" (1 Ne. 11:12, 14) I think that this is a valuable acknowledgment of the importance of our seeing, our interpreting whatever is given to us. It suggests to me that God does not intend to do all our thinking for us but invites us to see and hear and think with lively vigor, in order that we might gain capacity to become more like himself.

I think that when persons of lively mind and commitment to the Church, persons with knowledge of God or faith in him, persons with a desire to further our faith in him and in ourselves, when such persons with an unavoidable habit of looking and asking and searching want to serve the Church, the question often comes, "How, and where?" I'm not sure, for all the value of articles in *Sunstone* and *DIALOGUE*, that these are the prime media for intellectual service to the faith. I think the prime place for such service is in our regular association with each other — for example, in Sunday School class, in Relief Society and priesthood classes, where we can enhance each other's understanding of principles by which we live.

To serve as participants in classes or conversations may involve courage and also costs. A day ago someone said to me, "I shouldn't have said that. I'm

never going to speak again in class. I've got to learn to keep my mouth shut." Another said, "I've learned to be quiet." For me, the kinds of change Christ was inviting are enhanced by courage to examine our assumptions and reasoning and replace them as needed with those that allow us to love each other and to love God and to feel good about ourselves — and to act accordingly. That kind of change comes because of individual effort in any setting, for a class member or stake president. It is not the position or the medium that matters, I think, so much as the courage to look and think, and speak and ask. I don't believe growth comes from a curriculum in which only the teachers ask questions. We should all be asking the questions.

If the climate becomes one in which questions are a part of the learning, not an interruption of the learning, then we will have made a contribution whether we write some wonderful scholarly paper or not. I think it is easier to have the courage and pay the costs of intellectual service if our intent is right, if our intent is service, if our intent is love and truth. It is a different matter than if our intent is our own status and glory.



