

# My Belief

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When I was growing up in Portland, Oregon, in the 1930s and 1940s, I always thought of myself as a believing Latter-day Saint. My parents were believers; even when they were not attending church regularly, they still believed. All of my relatives were Latter-day Saints and so far as I could tell accepted the gospel like eating and drinking, as a given of life. In Sunday School I tried to be good. I answered the teachers' questions and gave talks that brought compliments from the congregation. From the outside, my behavior probably looked like the conventional compliance of a good boy. But it went deeper than mere appearance. I prayed faithfully every night, and whenever there was a crisis I immediately thought of God. I relied on my religion to redeem me. I often felt silly or weak, and it was through prayer and religious meditation that I mustered my forces to keep on trying. As a sophomore and junior in high school, I was a thoroughbred wallflower, at least as I remember it now, with no close friends. At lunchtime, I often ate all by myself because no one noticed me, and I had no idea how to insinuate myself into a circle of people. At the end of my junior year, a Mormon friend in the class beyond mine said it was my obligation, for the honor of the Church, to run for student body president. One thing I had learned in church was to speak, and a good speech could win an election. I prayed that God would help me for the sake of the Church, got my speech together, and was elected. That made redemption very real.

Partly because of the student government responsibilities that fell to me as a senior, I was admitted to Harvard and left my family and Portland for Cambridge in the fall of 1949. I loved everything about

Harvard—the people, the studies, the atmosphere. I was more myself there than I had ever been in my whole life. Harvard helped redeem me, too, but it also eroded my faith in God. I went to church regularly and made good friends with Latter-day Saint graduate students, a faculty member or two, and the small circle of Mormon undergraduates. The undergraduates met Sunday afternoons to discuss the scriptures. We debated everything about religion, but we all were believers. I do not know why it was that by the end of my sophomore year my faith had drained away. Logical positivism was at a high tide in those days, trying to persuade us that sensory evidence was the only trustworthy foundation for belief. At the end of my freshman year, I wrote a paper comparing Freud and Nietzsche and confronted the assertion that Christian morality is the ideology of servile personalities who fear to express their own deepest urges. Up until then I had prided myself on being a servant of God. Was I also servile? These ideas and perhaps the constant strain of being on the defensive for believing at all must have eaten away at my belief. The issue in my mind never had anything to do with Latter-day Saint doctrine specifically. I was not bothered by the arguments against the institutional Church, which so trouble people today, or the problems of Mormon history, another current sore spot. I was not debating Mormonism versus some other religion; the only question for me was God. Did he exist in any form or not? I was not worried about evil in the world, as some agnostics are. I suppose Mormon theology had made the existence of evil perfectly plausible. I simply wondered if there was any reason to believe. Was all of religion a fantasy? Were we all fooling ourselves?

These doubts came on strongest in the spring of my sophomore year. During the preceding Christmas holiday I had been interviewed for a mission and received a call to New England, to serve under the mission president who attended the same sacrament meeting as the students in Cambridge. Did I have enough faith to go on a mission? I debated the question through the spring, wondering if I were a hypocrite and if fear of displeasing my parents was all that carried me along. And yet I never really considered not going. It may be, I think looking back, that my agnosticism was a little bit of a pose, a touch of stylish undergraduate angst. It was true enough that my bosom did not burn with faith; on the other hand, I was quite willing to pledge two years to a mission. So I went.

The mission president was J. Howard Maughan, an agricultural professor from Utah State and former stake president. In our opening interview in the mission home in Cambridge, he asked if I had a testimony of

the gospel. I said I did not. He was not at all rattled. He asked if I would read a book, and if I found a better explanation for it than the book itself gave to report it to him. Then he handed me the Book of Mormon. The next day I left North Station in Boston for Halifax, Nova Scotia. For the next three months, while trying to learn the lessons and the usual missionary discipline, I wrestled with the book and wrote long entries in my journal. I thought a lot about the Three Witnesses: were they liars? had they been hypnotized? were they pressured? I believe it was at that time I read Hugh W. Nibley's *Lehi in the Desert*. I also read the Book of Mormon and prayed, sometimes in agnostic form—"if you are God. . . ." After three months, President Maughan came up for a conference, and when it was my turn to speak I said with conviction that I knew the Book of Mormon was right. The reasons that I had concocted for believing were not the difference—though Nibley made a great impression—it was more the simple feeling that the book was right.

The mission left me with another impression. At Harvard in those days we talked a lot about the masses, envisioning a sea of workers' faces marching into a factory. In Halifax we missionaries met the masses every day tracting, and they did not exist. There were a great number of individual persons, quite idiosyncratic, perverse, and interesting. They were no more a mass than the Harvard faculty or the United States Congress. That realization planted a seed of doubt about formal conceptions. Did they conform to the reality of actual experience? After the mission, I never again felt that the issues debated in the academy were necessarily the issues of real life. This skepticism grew, especially after I entered graduate school in history and learned how formulations of the past had continually altered, each generation of historians overturning the conceptions of its predecessors and making new ones for itself. Rational discourse came more and more to seem like a kind of play, always a little capricious and unreal—and in the end, compared to the experience of life itself, not serious. To confuse intellectual constructions with reality, or to govern one's life by philosophy or an abstract system came to seem more and more foolhardy. My attitude as it developed was not precisely anti-intellectual. Ideas did not strike me as dangerous; they were too weak to be dangerous. I was depreciating intellectual activity rather than decrying it. But whatever the proper label for this attitude, it put distance between me and the intellectuals whom I so admired and whom, as it later turned out, I would aspire to emulate.

Paradoxically, in my own intellectual endeavors, I have benefited from this skepticism engendered in the mission field, for it has led me

to trust my own perceptions and experience over the convictions of my fellow historians, considered individually or *en masse*. I have always thought it possible that virtually anything taught and believed in the academy could be wrong. Repudiation of God by every intellectual in creation did not mean God was nonexistent. By the same token, any of the certainties of historical interpretation could be perfect errors. However fallible I might be myself, however much subject to influences and illusions, I had to trust my own perceptions above everything else.

After I returned from the mission field, I no longer had doubts, but I did have questions. They were not specific questions about the meaning or validity of specific doctrines, the wholesome kind of questions that enlarge understanding. They were the questions of some unknown interlocutor who asked me to justify my faith. "Why do you believe?" the masked stranger asked. This was the old question of my sophomore year, asked now, however, of one who did believe, who had faith and was being called upon to justify it. I suppose there was nothing complicated about the questioning. At Harvard I studied in the midst of people who made a business of defending their convictions. It was an unwritten rule that you must explain why you took a position or supported a proposition. "Why do you believe in God?" was a question that all of Harvard whispered in one's ears without prompting from any skeptical inquisitors. In fact, when I returned to Harvard in 1953 the religious atmosphere was much more favorable to believers. The president, Nathan Pusey, was himself a believing person, and he had seen to the hiring of Paul Tillich as a university professor and to the rejuvenation of the Divinity School. Even the agnostics listened respectfully to Tillich, and undergraduates talked more freely of their religious convictions. In my senior year, I headed a committee sponsored by the student council on "Religion at Harvard," and our poll of undergraduates turned up a majority who said they had a religious orientation toward life. Even so, the mood did not quiet my faceless questioner. I still wanted to justify my convictions.

How those questionings came to an end is beyond my powers of explanation. For an undergraduate reader today, still fired by fierce doubts and a desperate need to know for sure, one word may seem to explain all—complacency. But I myself do not feel that way. My questions have not simply grown dim over the years, nor have I answered them; instead, I have come to understand questions and answers differently. Although I cannot say what truly made the difference, a series of specific experiences, small insights, revelations, new ideas, all addressing

the same issue and coming over a period of thirty years, have caused me to change my views. I now have a new sense of what constitutes belief.

For a long time, twenty-five years or more, I went on trying to answer the questioner. I received little help from religious philosophers. The traditional proofs for God never made an impression on me. I did not find flaws in them; they simply seemed irrelevant. My empirical temperament and suspicion of grand systems worked against any enthusiasm for arguments about a prime mover. I never studied those arguments or made the slightest effort to make them my own. My chief line of reasoning was based on the Book of Mormon. It was concrete and real and seemed like a foundation for belief, not merely belief in Joseph Smith but in Christ and God. Joseph Smith and Mormonism, as I said before, were never the issues; it was God primarily. Although it was a lengthy chain from the historicity of the Book of Mormon, to Joseph's revelations, to the existence of God, it was a chain that held for me. I felt satisfied that if that book were true my position was sound. Without it, I do not know where I would be. I have imagined myself as a religious agnostic were it not for the Book of Mormon. That is why Hugh Nibley's writings played a large part in my thinking. Although I recognized the eccentricities of his style and was never completely confident of his scholarship, there seemed to me enough there to make a case. First Nephi could not be dismissed as fraudulent, and so far as I know no one has refuted the argument Nibley made in *Lehi in the Desert*. He offered just the kind of evidence I was looking for in my pursuit of answers: evidence that was specific, empirical, historical.

Nibley's style was important enough that I made one attempt myself to prove the Book of Mormon in the Nibleyesque manner, and this effort came about in such a way as to confirm my belief. When I was asked to give some talks in Utah during the bicentennial of the American Revolution, I decided to examine the political principles embodied in the Book of Mormon and make some application to our Revolution and Constitution. I thought this would be simple enough because of the switch from monarchy to a republic during the reign of Mosiah. I was sure that somewhere in Mosiah's statements I would find ideas relevant to the modern world. With that in mind, I accepted the invitation to talk, but not until a few months before I was to appear did I get down to work. To my dismay I could not find what I was looking for. Everything seemed just off the point, confused and baffling. I could not find the directions for a sound republic that I had expected. Gradually it dawned on me that the very absence of republican statements might in

itself be interesting. I long ago learned that it is better to flow with the evidence than to compel compliance with one's preformed ideas. So I asked, instead, what does the Book of Mormon say about politics? To my surprise, I discovered it was quite an unrepublican book. Not only was Nephi a king, and monarchy presented as the ideal government in an ideal world, but the supposedly republican government instituted under Mosiah did not function that way at all. There was no elected legislature, and the chief judges usually inherited their office rather than being chosen for it. Eventually I came to see that here was my chance to emulate Nibley. If Joseph Smith was suffused with republican ideas, as I was confident he was, then the absence of such sentiments in Nephite society was peculiar, another evidence that he did not write the Book of Mormon. Eventually, all of this came together in an article, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," published in *BYU Studies* in 1976.

While circumstances and my predilection to justify belief influenced me up to that point and beyond, my commitment to this kind of endeavor gradually weakened. Perhaps most influential was a gradual merger of personality and belief. By 1976 I had been a branch president and a bishop and was then a stake president. Those offices required me to give blessings in the name of God and to seek solutions to difficult problems nearly every day. I usually felt entirely inadequate to the demands placed upon me and could not function at all without some measure of inspiration. What I did, the way I acted, my inner thoughts, were all intermingled with this effort to speak and act religiously for God. I could no longer entertain the possibility that God did not exist because I felt his power working through me. Sometimes I toyed with the notion that there could be other ways of describing what happened when I felt inspired, but the only language that actually worked, the only ideas that brought inspiration and did justice to the experience when it came were the words in the scriptures. Only when I thought of God as a person interested in me and asked for help as a member of Christ's kingdom did idea and reality fit properly. Only that language properly honored the experience I had day after day in my callings.

Church work more than anything else probably quieted my old questions, but there were certain moments when these cumulative experiences precipitated new ideas. Once in the early 1960s, while I held a postdoctoral fellowship at Brown University and was visiting Cambridge, I happened into a young adult discussion, led, I believe, by Terry Warner. He had the group read the Grand Inquisitor passage in

*The Brothers Karamazov*. The sentences that stuck with me that time through were the ones having to do with wanting to find reasons for belief that would convince the whole world and compel everyone to believe. That was the wish of the Inquisitor, a wish implicitly repudiated by Christ. The obvious fact that there is no convincing everyone that a religious idea is true came home strongly at that moment. It is impossible and arrogant, and yet that was exactly what I was attempting. When I sought to justify my belief, I was looking for answers that would persuade all reasonable men. That was why I liked Nibley: he put his readers over a barrel. I wanted something that no one could deny. In that moment in Cambridge, I realized the futility of the quest.

I was moved still further in this direction by a lecture which Neal Maxwell invited me to give at Brigham Young University in 1974 as part of the Commissioner's Lecture Series. I cannot for the life of me recall why I turned to the topic of "Joseph Smith and Skepticism," but that was the subject. In that lecture I sketched in the massive effort to demonstrate rationally the authenticity of the Christian revelation. The effort began in the early eighteenth century, when Deism first took hold in earnest, and continued through the nineteenth century. The Christian rationalists assembled all the evidence they could muster to prove that biblical miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea, were authentic and therefore evidence of God's endorsement of Israel. In the course of the nineteenth century, as agnosticism waxed strong among intellectuals, the volumes on Christian evidences proliferated. I can still remember sitting on the floor in the basement of the Harvard Divinity School library, flipping through these books, each one almost exactly like the others. I realized then that the tradition of seeking proof was very strong in the nineteenth century and that Mormons had been influenced by it. B. H. Roberts, a man troubled by questions as I had been and a great apologist for the Latter-day Saint faith, borrowed these methods. His *New Witness for God* was a replica of the books in the Harvard Divinity School basement, except with Mormon examples and conclusions. Hugh Nibley dropped the nineteenth-century format for works of Christian evidences, but his mode of reasoning was basically the same.

Awareness of the affinity of Nibley with these Protestant works did not dilute my own interest in evidences. The study of Book of Mormon republicanism, my own contribution to the genre, came along two years later. But the contradictions were taking shape in my mind and readied me, I suppose, for a personal paradigmatic shift. It occurred in the early 1980s at the University of Indiana. Stephen Stein of the



religion department had some Lilly Endowment money to assemble scholars and religious leaders from various denominations to discuss their beliefs. With Jan Shipp's help, he brought together a handful of Mormon historians, some historians of American religion, a local stake president and Regional Representative, and a seminary teacher. The topic was Joseph Smith. The historians among us made some opening comments about the Prophet, and then over a day and a half we discussed the issues that emerged. It was a revelatory assemblage from my point of view because it brought together in one room representatives of the various groups involved in my religious life—Church leaders, non-Mormon scholars, and Mormon scholars. Although all of these people had been represented in my mind symbolically before, they had never been together in person before my face, talking about Joseph Smith.

Their presence brought together notions that previously had been floating about separately in my head. Sometime in the middle of the conversations, it came to me in a flash that I did not want to prove the authenticity of Joseph Smith's calling to anyone. I did not want to wrestle Stephen Stein to the mat and make him cry "uncle." It was a false position, at least for me, and one that I doubted would have any long range good results. I recognized then that the pursuit of Christian evidences was not a Mormon tradition; it was a borrowing from Protestantism and not at a moment when Protestantism was at one of its high points. At any rate, it was not my tradition, and I did not want to participate in it. There was no proving religion to anyone; belief came by other means, by hearing testimonies or by individual pursuit or by the grace of God, but not by hammering.

By the time of the conference, I had completed the manuscript of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*. The Book of Mormon chapter in that book hammered at readers. My urge had been to show that the common secular explanations of the Book of Mormon were in error and to imply, if not to insist, that only a divine explanation would do. In the revision, I tried without complete success to moderate the tone. I did not wish to dissipate the basic argument, which is that the counter-explanations are inadequate to the complexity of the book, but I sincerely did not want to push readers into a corner and force them to come out fighting. The desire to compel belief, the wish of the Grand Inquisitor, was exactly what I had abandoned.

At the present moment, the question of why I believe no longer has meaning for me. I do not ask it of myself or attempt to give my reasons to others. The fact is that I do believe. That is a given of my nature,



and whatever reasons I might give would be insufficient and inaccurate. More relevant to my current condition is a related question: how do others come to believe? I would like to know if there is anything I can do that will draw people to faith in Christ and in the priesthood. My answer to this questions is, of course, related to my personal experiences. I no longer think that people can be completed to believe by any form of reasoning, whether from the scripture or from historical evidence. They will believe if it is in their natures to believe. All I can do is to attempt to bring forward the believing nature, smothered as it is in most people by the other natures that culture forms in us. The first responsibility is to tell the story, to say very simply what happened, so that knowledge of those events can do its work. But that is the easy part, the part that could be done by books or television. The hard part is to create an atmosphere where the spiritual nature, the deep down goodness in the person, can react to the story honestly and directly. Some people can create that atmosphere quite easily by the very strength of their own spiritual personalities. It is hard for me. There are too many other natures in me: the vain aspirer formed in childhood, the intellectual fostered at Harvard, the would-be dominant male created by who knows what. But I do believe that when I am none of these and instead am a humble follower of Christ who tells the story without pretense to friends whom I love and respect, then they will believe if they want to, and conversion is possible. Questions may be answered and reason given, but these are peripheral and essentially irrelevant. What is essential is for a person to listen carefully and openly in an attitude of trust. If belief is to be formed in the human mind, it will, I think, be formed that way.

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