

SPECULATIVE THEOLOGY

THE KEY TO A DYNAMIC FAITH

by T. Eugene Shoemaker

Since the ancient Greeks, thinking people have looked to philosophical inquiry and theology to shed light on both the number and kind of problems with which the human family struggles. The present generation certainly contends with these perennial antagonisms and frustrations of happiness, but they are magnified because the struggle is universal rather than particular, world-wide rather than parochial. However, while the scope of the problem is large, this is not my greatest concern. The most fundamental problem confronting us today (many Mormons not excepted) is the loss of faith and the abandonment of the moral imperative, which is based on recognition of and commitment to the existence of an eternal transcendent moral order. Mormonism exerts great power in the lives of its communicants because it recognizes that innate personal freedom is the essence of being, is the primary principle upon which that moral order is based. All of Mormonism's theological doctrines and religious practices are circumscribed by this transcendent imperative; individual free agency is the central axiom. The history of mankind (the present generation not excepted) has been the dialectical struggle between innate personal freedom and the diabolical and collective forces of determinism. In fact we are warned that the saints will hardly escape the fatal consequences of the contemporary contest for the minds of men,¹ with the real end of the contest between the forces of good and evil being one of power. It is only by capturing the minds of men and denying them their agency and requisite choices that the illusion of power is acquired, maintained, and enhanced by the forces of evil. Conversely the forces of good, among which are the gospel and the Church, seek through free agency to establish real power (not an illusion) in each person. This power is maintained and enhanced by growth instrumentalities such as faith, study, meditation, prayer, and speculation.

Despite the completeness of theology, Mormonism still struggles to find the sufficient and necessary means to motivate day to day application in the lives of its adherents. In the nineteenth century, Mormonism was indeed the proponent of a radical speculative theology. This was so as much among communicants as it was among the leaders. But presently most members have abandoned their heritage of radical thought on theological questions and have substituted hyperactivity

for insightful inquiry as a justification for their faith. Put another way, they attempt to sustain their faith with works, believing that scriptural admonition and authority demand it. In truth, all too frequently the activity itself becomes the end. Consider the everyday perspective of happenings, events, and duties practiced by active Mormons: having personal and family prayer, blessing the food, holding family home evening, doing home and visiting teaching, attending worship services, holding teaching and administrative positions in the various Church organizations, studying the scriptures, and reading "Church" books. However, these everyday activities are not likely to include theological speculation as such. Contemporary Mormons are generally content to live off the speculative insights of others, regardless of the glaring contradictions inherent in such behavior.

Modern Latter-day Saints look upon life as a celebration, while their nineteenth century counterparts contemplated and speculated about the end of life. This transformation was not the result of some fatal flaw (as present-day Mormon apostates assume) in the Church's organizational structure or its theological underpinnings; but rather, it resulted from lack of faith in the soundness of individual initiative, discussion, and decision regarding theological matters. Mormons appear in most instances to be content with being led and governed by the few in leadership positions. But even among the organizational heads there is a glaring lack of speculative insight produced, if the quality of books and articles presently offered is evidence. Most Latter-day Saints are motivated by borrowed light rather than by insights and truths garnered by studious inquiry.

Ordinarily, this lack of inquiry would be but a description of an expected phenomenon exhibited in the failure of all previous radical innovations (that beset Christianity) to sustain themselves, a reality that is centuries old and universally acclaimed, making the "iron rule of oligarchy" more pervasive than is generally assumed. However, Mormon radical thought declares that every man potentially is a priest and every woman a priestess possessing unique powers embryonic in form and identical in substance to those possessed by Deity. The theology rejects outright the necessity of a hierarchy of spiritual elites and condemns such a notion as sectarian in the extreme, having no place in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation, temporal and spiritual, is an individual

responsibility. The Church and its programs and activities are but processes to assist each member in working out his own salvation. No person can be saved in ignorance, but it is not the Church's role to dispel ignorance. Rather it is the individual's responsibility to seek knowledge and then use the Church and its resources to help apply this new insight. To place the Church and its leadership in the role of saviors is

on the other hand, its form, method, and structure are composed of both secular and religious elements, all of which are in harmony with and essential to the maintenance of the doctrine of free agency. Neither substance nor form can impose any significant restriction on the individual's freedom to choose. This overriding imperative categorically circumscribes every doctrine and practice of the gospel of Jesus Christ. All speculative

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sacrilegious to the core. It would be a blatant denial of that most sacred of all doctrines and principles, man's agency. Each Latter-day Saint will be held accountable for the amount of knowledge he possesses, and on this he will ultimately be judged.

If indeed "the unexamined life is not worth living," why then do the Saints resist so universally such self-scrutiny? It is an error of immense proportion to assume that raising questions (speculation) about the restored gospel leads to apostacy. If in fact the gospel of Jesus Christ embraces all truth regardless of where it is found, then as seekers we will welcome the challenges and tests that come from a free exchange of ideas and beliefs. Revealed truth requires individual initiative, discussion, and decision regarding all of life's questions. Particularly this is true with regard to theological ones.

For the gospel of Jesus Christ speculative theology serves the same purpose as philosophy of religion serves for the field of philosophy. In saying this, it should not be assumed that the questions raised by the philosophy of religion are the same as those raised by speculative theology in Mormonism. While the questions raised are similar, they are not identical, and in one sense they are quite dissimilar. Speculative theology is not necessarily concerned either with justifying (as do Mormon apologists) or disparaging (as do the Mormon apostates) any particular belief, doctrine, or practice of Mormonism, nor is it concerned solely with the plausibility or reasonableness (as are some "cafeteria" Mormon doctrinaires) of the Church's dogma and teachings. More specifically, speculative theology tests the Church's claim of possessing a special and vitally important knowledge about the nature of the world and universe and the role of men and women in them. Properly pursued, it leads not to agnosticism or atheism. Neither does one have to be an agnostic or an atheist (as assumed by Mormon sophisticates) in order to engage in this intellectual endeavor. No, properly pursued, speculation leads to an affirmation—a continuing renewal, not destruction, although a destructive element is present—of one's faith. In other words, speculative theology affirms that which it questions, a role basically foreign to the philosophy of religion.

Speculative theology is both substance and form. On one hand it is a composite of a number of fundamental concepts, individual freedom being the chief cornerstone;

thought that is not monitored by this fundamental belief fails in the first instance.

The motivational force behind speculative thought is found in the belief that knowledge in and of itself is worthy of the effort. Mormons are encouraged to obtain knowledge, with mortality frequently referred to as a school. However, the acquisition of knowledge is infinite and continues eternally beyond the grave. "Knowledge is power" is a truism frequently expressed by Mormons, and this doctrine is inextricably tied to the notion that "no one can be saved in ignorance."² A correlative suggests that the advantages and benefits of having labored diligently to acquire knowledge are not reserved for mortality alone.³

Knowledge makes agency operational by the progressive expansion of choices. This is the meaning of the Savior's instruction in which he said, "If you continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."⁴ Before one can better do, he must better know. The process is eternal, and this truth holds the key to the deification of the human personality. Indeed, this one truth is known. God is omniscient. It is our destiny to be like him. In summary then, the quest for knowledge must be pursued with dedication and commitment.

The crucial issue for speculative theology is a general recognition that in revealed truth God seldom explains why he commands or instructs as he does. To find out why becomes our individual search. Our desire to know why causes unexpected consternations, and at times agonies. We accept what God has said on faith, the essential initial step if the journey to eternal life is ever to begin. However, our progression is minimal if our faith does not lead to knowledge. Speculative theology recognizes that knowledge of the truth is always partially destructive to faith. Scriptural instruction is quite precise on this matter.⁵

It is erroneous in the extreme to assume that the pursuit of knowledge through speculation is to be avoided because of its destructive qualities. Learning and growth include and proceed from a destructive element. This phenomenon is called positive disintegration. To a greater or lesser degree all knowledge is destructive to beliefs, faith, and other intangible values. Paradoxically, knowledge destroys the faith it replaces, calling into existence the need for a newer and more dynamic faith.

This new vital faith comes from the application of knowledge in the process we call living. Because we are imperfect in our apprehension of knowledge on one hand and are unable to perfectly apply it to reality on the other, new questions are raised for which answers are sought. The cycle is repeated and the continuous application of this process we call eternal progression.

Substantively speaking, speculative theology avoids

greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full.

And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given a lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries; and then they are taken captive by the devil and led by his will down to destruction. Now this is what is meant by the chains of hell.⁹

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the usual negativism that accompanies intellectual inquiry because creative doubt is substituted for scepticism. Creative doubt proceeds from the converse of scepticism—doubts arise because sufficient knowledge is lacking. Scepticism proceeds from the notion that doubts arise because of what is known. The creative doubter says, “I doubt because I don’t know,” and recognizes the obvious: “I simply do not know everything there is to know about anything (or everything).” The sceptic says, “I doubt because I know,” and recognizes (at least at the moment) no possibilities for further knowledge on the subject.

Creative doubt leads to growth and fulfillment because it motivates a desire to know the consequences of continued questioning, inquiring, and applying what we know to real life.

Concomitantly, and in some ways inextricably, a part of positive disintegration and creative doubt is the concept of incrementalism—a general acknowledgement that learning and growth develop (and disintegrate) step by step. In the language of the scriptures, it is stated this way: “For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little.”⁶ More explicit still are the words of Christ recorded by Nephi, “For behold I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little and blessed are those who hearken upon my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more....”⁷ Continuing, Nephi has a word for the sceptic, “...and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have.”⁸

The prophet, Alma, speaking of the personalized nature of learning gospel principles, teaches that truths will be withheld to the degree that receivers fail to give “heed and diligence” to God:

It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.

And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the

Knowledge is acquired (and lost) incrementally. However, the key to its retention is found in how, in what way, and for what reason it is applied in our lives. Activity multiplied by activity, unquestioningly doing “one’s duty” without understanding, will not reward nor fulfill, nor will it sustain faith. All are admonished to learn and apply diligently that which is known; success will then be the reward.¹⁰ Callings coming to individuals in the Church, whether General Authorities or local teachers, are not accompanied with “appropriate” job descriptions. And this is as it should be. Personal growth and creative development of personality are as important as the efficient functioning of the unit within the Church. The institution is ever a means, never the end. Thus it can be truly said that the Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for the saints. If there were no sin you would no more need the Church—not even the perfect “true” one—than you would need a hospital—not even a perfect one—if there were no illness or disease.

One must learn his duty, be creative in its application, and be guided by the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Thus agency is preserved and becomes operational; faith is enhanced; knowledge acquired and applied; success and fulfillment assured.

Related to the substantive elements of positive disintegration, creative doubt, and incrementalism are the epistemological forms, structures, and methods of speculative theology. The diverse elements of Mormonism’s epistemology, lacking synthesis, are scattered randomly within its doctrines and practices. These, like the substantive elements are meaningful only as they are circumscribed by the demands of free agency. The varied concepts embraced by speculative theology are reason, experience, authority, intuition, and imagination. In one way or another the structures and methods of these concepts are products of the mind and conscience.

Reason

The Ancient Greeks are credited with the discovery of reason and ever since scholars have taught that the most distinguishing feature of man is his rational faculty. Reason has been given wide exposure and definition. Briefly, it is the mental and/or intellectual processes by which data, facts, information, etc., are organized into a systematic order to provide understanding and meaning.

Reason's method is logic; its faculty, the mind; and its process, thinking. This uniquely human capacity for rational discrimination and decision-making sets man apart from other of God's creatures.

The human faculty of the mind, with its facility to reason, makes free agency meaningful. Through choices man becomes a moral agent and accountable for his actions. It has been suggested that we become what we

beginning of mortal experience, birth itself becomes the crowning event for all. With the uniting of the spiritual personality (premortals) with a properly suited physical tabernacle (mortal body), with the addition of each progressive growth instrumentality (in the first instance, spiritual, in the second, physical), the human personality (authentic self) is affected with a synergistic essence, as well as, capacity. This union accords the individual

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think about.¹² Our rational faculties permit us to learn vicariously, and thus we expand our universe considerably beyond our experiential world. The mind is sensitive to stimuli both physical and spiritual. Our ability to mentally handle enormous amounts of sophisticated data is truly a marvel. The physical senses are constantly bombarding the mind with all sorts of stimuli, and the rational function gives them meaning. The mind is a storehouse, but mostly it is a place of great activity, and those that think of the mind only as a data bank do themselves and others a great injustice.

The mind ought to be continually expanding, growing, and developing. It is the seat of knowledge, the citadel of learning, the fountain of truth. Our reason gives us a vision of what we are and what we can be. It contains the guidance mechanism that leads us forward; it is the control center over all other aspects of our personalities. Its station and relationship to the rest of our faculties are demonstrated in instructions to Oliver Cowdery: "But behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your *mind*; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore you shall *feel* that it is right."¹³ (Emphasis mine) Also the ancient prophet Isaiah recorded that reason is an attribute of Deity as well as of man and that spiritual concepts become subject to the demands of reason when properly applied to mortal reality.¹⁴

Beyond this, and of great significance, the mind is the repository of our will. The mind is intended to be the power by which our emotions and subconscious drives are regulated and kept within the bounds of propriety. Self-control and self-discipline are properly referred to as mental activities.

Experience

As intelligences all of us were organized (created) spiritually prior to being born physically into mortality. God in organizing or creating us provided the spiritual bodies in which the intelligences reside. As spirit beings under the direction of God, literally our father through spiritual creation, we grew, developed, and fulfilled ourselves until the time appointed for our entrance into mortality. Through our physical creation, our bodies became the tabernacles for our spirits, and we entered mortality by the process we call birth. The gospel of Jesus Christ gives great import to mortal birth. Not merely the

properties and capabilities that the spirit and the physical do not possess singly.

Experience in its usual meaning is defined as the conjunction of perception (physical senses) and reality. Its method is empirical; its faculty, the senses and the mind; and its process, observation. In a more formal and structured way experience translates to experimentation. Out of our experimentations and experiences come discoveries of eternal importance. A continuing priority is to place the physical in subjection to the spiritual. God has endowed man with reason to assist in the fulfillment of the desire for temporal salvation. Reason does not destroy faith; it perfects it and makes the physical laws our servants, not our masters. Reason makes possible the command to "subdue the earth."¹⁵

Authority

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have authorities in abundance.¹⁶ Having said this, I do not suggest they have too many. However, in having so many, there is always a danger of factionalism and favoritism. This danger is magnified because of the proclivity of many Mormons to rely on church activity and on the insights of others to assuage their doubts.

There is one sense in Mormonism in which authority has a meaning that is quite precise. It deals with the delegation of priesthood power from God to man and the ecclesiastical function of authority in Church order and liturgy. However, in the epistemological definition of authority, Mormonism is fraught with much ambiguity and confusion. Speculative theology plays a very insightful and meaningful role in helping the individual find his way in the maze of competing and conflicting authorities on critical theological issues and questions.

Intuition

The intuitive self is given a great deal of attention in Mormonism, but it is not properly understood as an epistemological form. Major among the reasons for misunderstanding is our failure to recognize the interconnectedness of the conscience and inspiration. Stated another way, intuition, revelation, and inspiration are unique learning forms, and, as the condition of the mind determines the knowledge gained from experience, so it is that the condition of the conscience determines the knowledge received through intuition. In any discussion of the conscience, one must understand that, like

electricity, it is universally recognized but, as yet, no adequate theory, theological or scientific, of it has emerged. But one thing is certain. The conscience cannot be ignored. We have all lived and wrestled with it too long. The conscience appears as a product of all three major components of the human personality (intelligence, spirit body, physical body). The gospel provides important insights into the meaning of conscience. Notably, there is

toward others. Some authorities would include love. Yet, whatever specific identity these sensitivities may take, they are what we call the feelings of the heart. In the everyday give and take of human experience they are the source of some of our greatest joys and deepest hurts. In no way are we more human than in the expression of our emotional selves.

On the positive side, our emotions and imaginations

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an intertwining of (1) chronological growth (age of accountability), (2) rational maturation (capacity to sin directly related to one's knowledge of an act and its consequences), and (3) spiritual sensitivity. The method of intuition is inspiration and revelation, its faculty is the conscience, and its process is prayer, meditation, and prophecy. By definition, intuition is the comprehension and understanding by non-intellectual perception and means, and by the large such learning resists empirical verification of the usual sorts. The major device by which intuition becomes functional is the conscience, and it would appear that the conscience acts as the receptor of the Holy Ghost and is very responsive to spiritual as well as physical stimuli. But, it may further be suggested that the conscience serves a homeostatic function, a kind of built-in regulator that provides stability and interharmony. If we ignore the warning signals of our conscience, we place our personalities in jeopardy. Fortunately, most people listen to this so-called "still small voice" most of the time. If this were not so, the human family would be much sicker than it is. Man, possessing free agency, may act or exhibit behavior contrary to the dictates of his conscience, with no apparent effect on his personality, and for a period of time convince himself, and others, that he has done himself no harm. But sooner or later the consequences of his violative acts will become manifest, revealing just how destructive such behavior has been.

Imagination

Speculative theology adds to its repertoire of epistemological forms imagination. Primarily because of its normative bent, it is only recently that imagination has been accorded some legitimacy in the theory of knowledge. It is standard to assign to the imagination an emotive character, suggesting a process of forming mental images of the objects of perceptions and/or thought in the absence of concrete external stimuli.

The human personality is in possession of a great variety of feelings and sensitivities. Their intensity and range vary from individual to individual. But it is generally recognized that our personalities, male and female, have a large emotional dimension which provides us with some of our most human and fulfilling experiences. The emotional component of the human personality contains our capacity for sympathy, empathy, friendship, and all feelings that reach out

have inspired some of our greatest human efforts in art, literature, philosophy, theology, and music. On the negative side, they have produced great tragedy and human suffering. Yet this is not sufficient reason to malign fantasy and daydreaming and relegate them to the emotional scrap heap. Positive daydreaming and creative imagining are an essential part of the human personality and, controlled through the application of gospel principles, should inspire us to make the world a more beautiful and rewarding place to live. These most basic of human qualities will make us "God-like" and "Christ-like." Without the guiding principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it could be argued that the emotions potentially will be a greater source for evil than for good. Nevertheless, fantasy can brighten, uplift and inspire creative productivity, and awaken the restorative powers of the worth of self and others.

Speculative theology is essential and its substance and form critical to a progressive life style. It inspires by the questions it raises; it fulfills and rewards by the answers it produces; it makes for a creative and exciting existence with consequences reaching into the eternities. Speculative theology produces a more dynamic faith and awakens deep within our souls a primal longing for that eternal reunion with Father whereby we may know all that he knows, do all that he does, and be all that he is.

Notes

1. *Doctrine & Covenants* 63: 32-34
2. *Ibid.*, 131:6
3. *Ibid.*, 130:18-19
4. *John* 8:31-32
5. *Alma* 32:17-27; Joseph Smith 2.
6. *Isaiah* 28:10
7. *II Nephi* 28:30
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Alma* 12:9-11
10. *Doctrine & Covenants* 107:99-100
11. *Ibid.*, 121:45-46; 20:45
12. *Proverbs* 23:7
13. *Doctrine & Covenants* Section 9
14. *Isaiah* 1:18-19
15. *Genesis* 1:28
16. The standard works, scripture, are the *Bible*, *Book of Mormon*, *Pearl of Great Price*, and *Doctrine & Covenants*. The words and instructions from general and local authorities, while not scripture, are of great importance as sources of authority.

T. EUGENE SHOEMAKER teaches in the government department of California State University at Sacramento. He is also bishop of the Arden Ward, Sacramento California East Stake.