



SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MORMON IDENTITY CRISIS

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Editors Note:

The following essay was the address delivered by the out-going president of the Association for Mormon Letters at the Fourth Annual Symposium held at Brigham Young University October 13, 1979. In addition, six papers were delivered and awards given for outstanding short stories, poetry, and essays published in 1978. The Association, organized four years ago, also sponsors regional meetings (e.g. California, Virginia, New Mexico) where papers on Mormon letters are delivered and informal readings by various authors of poetry and prose in progress. A quarterly newsletter of reviews and notices of interest to members is also published. The address is printed as delivered at the awards luncheon.

I must confess at the outset that I have very mixed feelings about presidential addresses, and I have long contemplated this one with a gamut of sensations ranging from eager anticipation to utter dread—mainly the latter. The remarks of an outgoing president tend to be a strange hybrid of the subjective and the objective, of much personal reminiscing, some scholarly insight, and a final admonition; perhaps it can best be summed up as a cross between a sentimental swansong and a full-throated, parting blast. Well, since I am the outgoing president and have no choice but to give this speech it is only fair for me to warn you that I intend to invoke all and any privileges of the chair which tradition accords outgoing presidents to say those things dear to their hearts, which might not be appropriate or even tolerated on any other occasion.

To begin on a sentimental note, let me say that meeting with you on the Brigham Young University Campus arouses in me strong feelings of nostalgia. Now, that may sound strange coming from a faculty member attached to that other institution—the University of Utah. But, you see, my favorite uncle, Professor Benjamin Franklin Cummings III, taught here for many years, and it was through his love of learning and his dedication to the life of the mind here at B.Y.U. that I was first tempted to consider an academic career. Indeed, the special insights into the Gospel which he developed as a result of teaching languages, literature, ethics, and religion here over a period of 31 years strongly influenced my own testimony and have a direct bearing on my remarks today. But I am getting ahead of myself, and I will explain the relationship between Uncle Frank's views and my theme in due time.

How can an organization such as the Association for Mormon Letters justify its existence? How can a group which has no official tie with the Church presume to serve as a valid outlet for serious scholarly and creative writing on Mormon subjects, and as a constructive forum in which to air significant Mormon issues? I would submit that the Association is a direct outgrowth of a creeping identity crisis which is gnawing at the very heart of Mormondom and that the Association provides a partial but salutary resolution of that crisis. Let me explain by relating a personal anecdote. As a graduate student at Stanford University, I belonged to a study group which was inquiring into the L.D.S. concept of deity with all the zeal one might

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expect of a group of devout returned missionaries. In that connection, we needed to locate the King Follett Discourse and were under the impression that it could be found in the documentary *History of the Church* edited by B. H. Roberts. We did find the King Follett Discourse listed in the table of contents of the first edition of Joseph Smith's *History*, published in 1912, but the chapter that was supposed to contain the discourse on pp. 302 through 317 was simply missing since those pages had been omitted at the time the volume was printed. Other copies of the volume had the same apparent defect. In fact, the page was numbered 301 on one side and 318 on the other.¹ Frustrated and intrigued by this circumstance, we sent an inquiry to Elder Joseph Fielding Smith who was then supposed to provide "Answers to Gospel Questions." We received a reply, which was as terse as it was prompt, to the effect that the reason the King Follett Discourse was not published in the *History of the Church* was because President Joseph F. Smith did not want it included. Of course that reply raised more questions than it put to rest, since no explanation was provided for President Smith's decision to delete the discourse. I have since learned from a personal account by the late T. Edgar Lyon that B. H. Roberts, who had a strong conviction that the King Follett Discourse contained "many wondrous truths," was infuriated at such highhandedness, all the more so because he had been assigned to tour a mission just before volume 6 went to press and discovered the crucial omission quite by chance after his return. The only reason that was given for this action was a vague hint that "the Brethren" questioned the authenticity of the discourse. He immediately proceeded to have 10,000 copies of the discourse printed and distributed throughout the Church at his own expense.² It is interesting to note that after all these

years, B. H. Robert's 32-page pamphlet is still on sale at the Deseret Book Store—for 55 cents!³

This incident, which is admittedly only one of many which could be cited if time and discretion permitted, can serve as a paradigm of the phenomenon which concerns me. B. H. Roberts set great store by the truth as he perceived it, and he felt that the King Follett Discourse belonged in the *History* for two reasons. First, it was an integral part of Church history, and, second, it set forth theological truths which, however radical or controversial, were essential to a grasp of Joseph Smith's teachings concerning the revealed nature of man and God. On the other hand, President Smith, for reasons which he never explained, decided that the historical and theological truths which B. H. Roberts prized so highly in the King Follett Discourse could be overridden by considerations of personal or ecclesiastical expediency and suppressed the entire chapter. Although most of the doctrines contained in the discourse were already available to the public in the *Pearl of Great Price* and in the hymn "Oh My Father," one can speculate that President Smith feared that publishing it might prove to be an embarrassment because it set forth the radical notion of a plurality of Gods and stressed a very literal anthropomorphism. The simple fact is that the president of the Church chose to exercise his prerogative as supreme arbiter of all religious matters without the slightest gesture of apology or even the courtesy of a perfunctory explanation.

However, it is also significant and reassuring that there is nothing to indicate that B. H. Roberts was taken to task for his rebellious gesture in publishing the pamphlet and that he was fully vindicated posthumously in 1950 when the King Follett Discourse was restored to its rightful place in the second edition of the *History of the Church*.⁴

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What does all this have to do with an identity crisis? It is simply a prototypical example of the clash between institutional authority and individual integrity and between the imperative of blind obedience and the claims of reasoned belief. Ultimately, it exemplifies a fundamental conflict between a metaphysical pluralism, which emphasizes the eternal autonomy and the divine potential of man, and a hyperorthodox, theistic absolutism, which underlines the subservience of man to deity and the subordination of individual members of the Church to the hierarchical superstructure.

If we are torn between an image of ourselves as having the intrinsic, timeless worth affirmed by Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse and the neoorthodox view of human nature as a corrupt embodiment of the arm of flesh whose only hope lies in abject submission to the will of an inscrutable, omnipotent God acting through his ordained servants, then we are indeed confronted with a major identity crisis.

It should be noted that, although the tension between these conflicting views has greatly increased within recent years, it has always been present in the Church. For instance, in support of the integrity of the individual, Joseph Smith stated categorically that "all men have the privilege of thinking for themselves upon all matters related to conscience. Consequently, then, we are not disposed . . . to deprive anyone of exercising



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that free independence of mind which heaven has bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts . . ."⁵ A few years later, as though deliberately contradicting this statement by Joseph Smith, Heber C. Kimball admonished the membership of the Church to "learn to do as you are told both old and young . . . if you are told by your leader to do a thing, do it. None of your business whether it is right or wrong."⁶ He went on to justify this approach with an argument which ominously reechoed the rationalization for the kind of unthinking obedience which has been fostered over the centuries by totalitarian regimes: "If you do things according to counsel and they are wrong, the consequences will fall on the heads of those who counseled you, so don't be troubled."⁷ If over the years this conflict between the enhancement and the disparagement of personal integrity has been in evidence at the highest levels of Church leadership, then it stands to reason that it will be at least as noticeable on the lower echelons. I know of no better example of this replication of the issue at the middle-management level than an unfortunate incident which occurred toward the end of Uncle Frank's life, and which, because of its relevance to my topic, I owe it to his memory to relate here today.

Although he served many years here as chairman of the Department of Languages, his first love was teaching—particularly his courses on religion and ethics. As a natural outgrowth of that teaching experience and in response to requests from many of his former students, he devoted his post-retirement years to the preparation of a manuscript which would serve as a personal, spiritual, and intellectual legacy containing the fruit of his efforts over the years to synthesize his insights into "the origin and destiny of Man, the nature of God and Man, the creation, and the meaning of existence."⁸ His main concern centered around "the concept of the nature of the Self," and in developing this concept, he drew heavily on Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse.⁹ Since he was a member of the Church in good standing and had enjoyed a distinguished career on the B.Y.U. faculty and since his manuscript provided affirmative and perceptive insights into the Latter-day Saint system of beliefs and values, he naively assumed that it would be publishable with some measure of official endorsement. He sent it through channels for consideration. After a year of the most tedious and disheartening bureaucratic runarounds imaginable, he decided to publish the book at his own expense, which he did entitling it the *Eternal Individual Self*. Then came the crowning blow: he approached the man then serving as the manager of the Deseret Book Store—an individual he had always considered a friend—to ask if it might not be possible to place a few copies there on consignment, only to be told after more polite temporizing, that his request could not be granted. The only reason given for the negative decision in both instances was that "it might not meet with the approval of the Brethren." There is something heartrending about a benevolent old man, a kind of intellectual "true believer," having the quintessence of his life work rejected by the Church that mattered to him more than all else. As Samuel Johnson

wrote to Lord Chesterfield in response to the latter's belated offer of patronage, "I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little."¹⁰ Uncle Frank died, literally nursing his wounds, a short time after this final indignity.

With all due allowance for the unusually personal nature of this second anecdote, I would submit that it can be regarded as an updated lower-level recapitulation of the first anecdote. Both incidents led to the publication of an officially unapproved document bearing on the King Follett Discourse, and, although publishing the first was a gesture of defiance whereas publishing the second was an act of resigned desperation, both represent individual initiative on behalf of personal integrity in the face of hierarchical hostility or indifference.

Another way of viewing the theological and ecclesiastical dichotomy which has produced the identity crisis to which I have alluded is to recognize a fundamental split among members of the Church which in turn bespeaks a corresponding duality in human nature. You can either lose yourself in the Church, or you can find yourself in it. Many of those who lose themselves do so by renouncing their autonomous identity through blind obedience and mindless activism. Those who find themselves through Mormonism, do so by taking literally the L.D.S. maxim that "the Glory of God is Intelligence" as well as the precepts set forth in the King Follett Discourse. We have an innate capacity which has been ours for all eternity and a God-given mandate with the Gospel plan before us to think for ourselves in working out our own individual salvation as we each separately see fit and according to our own lights.

Those who lose themselves in the Church constitute the majority. Some of them minimize or even disregard



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the identity crisis to which I have alluded because they find it convenient to refer their problems and worries to the "sure voice of authority" and let the Brethren think and plan for them. Those who seek to find themselves in the Church have difficulty basing their convictions solely on faith-promoting experiences but must also wrestle with their misgivings, reach their own thoughtful conclusions however painful, and forge their individual testimonies in the crucible of private doubt and personal despair. As Dr. A. C. Lambert, former dean here at B.Y.U., so aptly put it, those who seek to find themselves are "gnawed inside at times by...clear fallacies or even tyrannies in the strictly authoritarian pattern."¹¹

One of the current trends in Mormonism which provides strong reinforcement for the tendency to lose oneself in the Church can best be described as a kind of "cloning from the top." It is probably a natural concomitant of the rapid growth rate of the Church which produces a practical administrative need for increased conformism at all levels. The most dramatic instance of this cloning trend which has come to my attention was related by a close personal friend who visited the office of one of the highranking apostles some years ago when Joseph Fielding Smith was President of the Council of the Twelve. At one point in the conversation, the general authority in question, wishing to dramatize the need for conformity based on zealous obedience, pointed to a decorative picture hanging on one of the walls of his office. "If President Smith came into my office and expressed displeasure with that painting, the next time he came in it would have been replaced!" Contrast this ethic of total compliance even in areas of personal taste with the attitude of President Brigham Young when he declared: "My independence is sacred to me—it is a portion of that same Deity that



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rules the heavens... The Lord has not established laws by which I am compelled to have my shoes made in a certain style. He has never given a law to determine whether I have a square-toed boot or a peaked-toed boot..."¹²

Heretofore, I have given the Mormon identity crisis a predominantly anthropocentric focus. Shifting to a more theocentric perspective, it might be helpful to ask a question which, though academic, may prove to be fruitfully provocative: Do we worship the "God of Truth" or "the God of Expediency"? A scriptural basis for this question can be found in John 16:7 where Christ at the Last Supper declares: "Nevertheless, I tell you the *truth*; it is *expedient* for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you."¹³ The Savior speaking of his divine calling uses "truth" and "expedient" in the same sentence, and thereby suggests that at least for deity it is possible to reconcile the two. This reconciliation is further encouraged by the etymological fact that in 1611 when the King James version of the Bible was completed, the word "expedient" had only the positive meaning of being "clear of difficulties, fit and proper."¹⁴ It was not until the eighteenth century that the term took on the more pejorative and even Machiavellian meaning of being "conducive to advantage by going counter to that which is right."¹⁵ There is a general religious tradition that, when literal truth and practical ecclesiastical advantage come into conflict, it is somehow deemed more godly to seek the advantage than to tell the truth. A classical example of this tradition as it pertains to the Church occurred in 1850 when one of the leading elders, though an ardent practicing polygamist with six wives, found it expedient under admittedly extenuating circumstances to deny the facts in these terms: "Inasmuch as this Church of Jesus Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication and polygamy, we declare that we believe that one man should have one wife and one woman but one husband..."¹⁶

A more recent example which demonstrates that the tradition of expediency is alive and well with the Church today can be found in the strictures of another high-ranking general authority on what has been called by some the "New Mormon History," in an address delivered to religious educators in 1976: "... facts should not only be taught as facts; they should be taught to increase one's faith in the Gospel, to build testimony.... We would hope that if you feel you must write for the scholarly journals, you always defend the faith. Avoid expressions and terminology which offend the Brethren..."¹⁷ There is something disquieting about the manner in which that term, "the Brethren," can be invoked at all levels within the Church as a vaguely lurking sanction or threat, suggesting a kinship not so much with the brotherhood of man as with the ubiquitous "Big Brother" of George Orwell's 1984. It epitomizes the kind of authoritarian expediency which, in the name of efficiency, convenience, or simply the perverse arbitrariness of what Joseph Smith termed the "unrighteous dominion" exercised by "almost all men as soon as they get a little authority" negates the fundamental truths embodied in the King Follett Discourse.¹⁸ In summary, I would

suggest that, whereas theologically there can be no conflict between that which is true and that which is expedient, in the realm of practical affairs, whether ecclesiastical or secular, one must guard against a natural tendency to sacrifice truth to expediency.

If, as Joseph Smith declared, it is indeed "the first principle of truth and of the Gospel...to know for a certainty the character of God, and that we may converse with Him the same as one man converses with another, and that He was once a man like us..."¹⁹ and if, on the other hand, for reasons of expediency this core truth is being supplanted by a redefinition of our nature as compliant pawns of an awesome God who is as inscrutable as He is inaccessible, then our identity crisis, even though evident only to a sensitive minority within the Church, nevertheless strongly suggests that the Church is losing its theological moorings and may be drifting into the mainstream of traditional Christian belief.

Professor Hugh Nibley declared some years ago that "if Joseph Smith were to walk into a conference of the Mormon Church today he would find himself completely at home; and if he were to address the congregation, they would never for a moment detect anything the least bit strange, unfamiliar or old-fashioned in his teaching."²⁰

Anyone willing to face the Mormon identity crisis realistically must ask himself if Joseph Smith's imagined return to the Church today might not bear a closer resemblance to Christ's less-than-cordial reception in fifteenth-century Seville as conceived by Dostoevsky in the Grand Inquisitor episode of *The Brothers Karamazov* than to the cheery scenario depicted some time ago by Dr. Nibley.

It should be clear by now that I am defending a value which I consider to be the main distinguishing feature of Mormonism, which I personally hold very dear and which makes me proud to be a defender of the faith; namely, man as an "eternal individual self" and embryonic God so stirringly described in the King Follett Discourse as the core truth of the restored Gospel. Of all the teachings of Joseph Smith it is the one completely original concept which at the time he set it forth could not be found in any other philosophy, ideology, religion or belief system on the face of the earth. In saying this, I realize that I am contradicting as knowledgeable a commentator on Mormon theology as Sterling McMurrin who states that there is "nothing exclusive" to the "ideas that importantly characterize Mormon theology."²¹ Nevertheless, for me, this teaching offers at least one compelling piece of evidence to the most skeptical observer that Joseph Smith was either a divinely inspired prophet or, at the very least, a uniquely gifted religious thinker.

There are two paradoxes relating to this core concept which ought to be noted here.

First, it is precisely those who lose themselves in the Church, those who readily submit to "cloning from the top" and who surrender their autonomy to the sure voice of authority, who most readily consider themselves to be well along the way to godhood. And yet, on the face of it, there is much irony in the notion that one can develop divine maturity and insight by ab-

dicating initiative and trading integrity for spiritual dependency. It seems inconceivable that an unquestioning devotee cultivating tunnel vision on the way to perfection can somehow be metamorphosed into a God! Conversely, those who struggle to find themselves in the Church rarely receive the coveted "seal of approval" so readily conferred on the unreflectingly obedient, and yet they achieve a breadth of feeling and a measure of understanding which is far more godlike than the mimicry of the mindless activist who would toady his way into the celestial kingdom!

The second paradox can be seen in the fact that the King Follett Discourse has been given wider official distribution in the Church during the last 40 years than in the preceding 94 years since the discourse was first delivered, and yet the practical impact of the teachings it contains is less evident now than in the past.²² In this connection, we must commend three scholars, Donald Q. Cannon, Stan Larson and Van Hale for their splendid historical survey, textual reamalgamation, and doctrinal analysis of the King Follett Discourse which appeared in the Winter, 1978, edition of *Brigham Young University Studies*.

At the beginning of my remarks, I said that the Association for Mormon Letters is a direct outgrowth of the identity crisis which is the subject of this address. Clearly in the tradition of nineteenth-century blessing meetings and various twentieth-century study groups, the Association does provide an outlet for those heirs of the Mormon tradition who wish to think for themselves and give expression to their own creative impulses and their deepest feelings about the restored Gospel, without feeling diminished or passed over by the official impersonal leveling process which is epitomized by "Correlation."



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As an organization like the Mormon Church grows in size and strength, there is less and less room for individuality. Church leaders often like to speak of Mormons as "a peculiar people," but woe unto the individual member who chooses to be a "peculiar person" in the way he views his church or practices his religion! I suppose this is simply in the order of things because, speaking in purely practical terms, if the Church were to encourage each member to give full expression to his every personal quirk and bias in doctrinal matters and religious practices, it could only lead to ecclesiastical chaos. On the other hand, those in positions of authority too often become obsessed with the fear that to tolerate even a modicum of spontaneous, individual input from the rank and file would be to open the floodgates to disaster. It would be encouraging if the leaders of the Church could consistently grant to the membership the same kind of autonomy which my grandfather granted to my father as a boy of eight. Rather than impose his patriarchal will in the matter, the father simply asked the son very explicitly whether or not he wanted to be baptized and why. The fact that such autonomy is not the order of the day does create a practical and moral need for an appropriate setting in which to maintain one's integrity as an individual in a Mormon context. It seems to me that the Association does this admirably well and in so doing it serves not only the best interests of individual members who wish to maintain, explore, and express their individuality, but, given the Association's positive orientation toward Mormonism, it serves the Church's best interests as



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well. I would even go so far as to predict that there are ways in which the Association can contribute to the "building of the Kingdom" which "the Brethren" themselves will eventually approve!

And now for the admonition! May those of you who are committed to all that the Association stands for ensure its ongoing vitality by giving it the benefit of your best creative and scholarly efforts, and by making its activities and goals known to others who share your own concerns and interests.

FOOTNOTES

¹Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period I*, ed., B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1912), 6:301.

²T. Edgar Lyon, "Church Historians I Have Known," *Dialogue* (Winter, 1978), 11:4, pp. 14-16.

³Joseph Smith, *The King Follett Discourse: The Being and Kind of Being God Is; The Immortality of the Intelligence of Man*, ed., B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Magazine Printing Co., 1963).

⁴Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 2d ed., ed. B.H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1950), 6:302-317.

⁵Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1977), p.49.

⁶*Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Asa Calkin, 1859) 6:32.

⁷William Clayton, *William Clayton's Journal* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1921), p. 334.

⁸Benjamin F. Cummings III, *The Eternal Individual Self* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Co., 1968), p.v.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁰Letter cited in James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), p.154.

¹¹Asael C. Lambert, "Liberalism -- Orthodoxy," n.p., private notebook (Box 40, Western Americana Dept., Marriott Library, University of Utah).

¹²John A. Widtsoe, ed., *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1977), pp. 62-63.

¹³Italics added.

¹⁴*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Expedient."

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Three Nights Public Discussion between the Revs. C. W. Cleeve, James Robertson, and Philip Cater and Elder John Taylor of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at Boulogne-sur-Mer, France* (Liverpool: Published by John Taylor, 1850), p.8.

¹⁷Ezra Taft Benson, "The Gospel Teacher and His Message," Address delivered in the Assembly Hall, Salt Lake City, Utah, on September 17, 1976, pp. 7-8. (Transcript in the Western Americana Dept., Marriott Library, University of Utah).

¹⁸*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 143.

¹⁹As quoted by Stan Smith in "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *Brigham Young University Studies* (Winter, 1978), 18:2, p.201.

²⁰Hugh Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), p. 46.

²¹Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), p.x.

²²For a summary of the publication history of the King Follett Discourse see Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," *Brigham Young University Studies* (Winter, 1978), 18:2, pp. 190-192.

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