

Readers' Forum

Certainty Better Than Probability

C. Robert Mesle misrepresented the position of Elder Boyd K. Packer in suggesting that Elder Packer understands faith as "belief without evidence" (SUNSTONE vol. 7:6). On the contrary, Elder Packer would surely maintain that faith, built upon the witness of the spirit, is itself a fully reliable "evidence of things not seen." By immediate spiritual intuition Elder Packer and many others know beyond a shadow of doubt that Joseph Smith experienced the First Vision just as he described it in the official 1838 account. Elder Packer claims to have perfect evidence and *certain* knowledge in the only way one could have it: by an indubitable, immediate intuition. Brother Mesle might argue along with Bertrand Russell that many people "know" many contradictory things by "indubitable intuition." But this does not prove that Elder Packer is mistaken. He may be right where others are wrong. In any case, no historian can be *certain* that Elder Packer is wrong. As Brother Mesle pointed out, a historian's knowledge is always provisional, never fully objective.

But Brother Mesle did not carry his critique of historical knowledge far enough. He correctly pointed out that for historians "the past is never directly observable," that historians are confined to the interpretation of interpretations of the past. However, he failed to point out that even if a historian could be on the scene and directly observe a historical event, he would still have just another interpretation of the event, not objective knowledge. Most philosophers nowadays concede that we have no access to ultimate *reality*; we simply have a set of assumptions and a version of reality consistent with our assumptions. Brother Mesle's assumptions surely color his talk about "evidence" and "our dilemma" (*our* cannot include Elder Packer or thousands of other Latter-day Saints); his assumptions color the assertion that "one thing does seem certain: we cannot be certain about the First Vision" (thousands of people with other assumptions are certain).

A startling reversal can follow from this analysis. If by evidence we mean reality itself (the only absolutely reliable evidence) then it is possible that Elder Packer bases his belief on evidence while it is certain that Brother Mesle holds his belief without evidence. Elder Packer at least claims to have immediate access to reality; historians cannot make this claim. And if Elder Packer does absolutely know that Joseph Smith saw God, he is quite right to insist that no one can properly write Mormon history without believing Joseph's report. A historian should try to explain away the apparent contradictions between Joseph's various reports if he shared Elder Packer's certain knowledge that Joseph saw God. That which is certain must always take precedence over that which is merely probable.

For my part, I share Brother Mesle's assumptions, and I applaud his effort to preserve faith from historical falsification by mythologizing our dogma. I think, however, that he has not properly emphasized the cost of changing one's definition of "faith" from *true belief* to *loving commitment*. I have followed the course he outlines in recent years, and I am keenly aware that one loses a good deal in making the transition. I do not think that the Utah church could survive as the dynamic, confident faith that it is if the Saints generally regarded our dogma as myth rather than as history. Delivered before the Mormon History Association or published in SUNSTONE, "History, Faith and Myth" is a blessing. If published in the *Ensign*, it might be a curse.

Val Larsen

Religion or Culture

Dian Saderup's story "Out There" contains all the essential elements for good SUNSTONE fiction: a little apostasy, a little death, some slightly illicit sex, a little carefully placed profanity, and lots of nostalgia and bittersweet memories of home and bottled fruit.

Stories of disenchanted young

Mormons who hate their parents but can't quite break away must have great appeal, because they appear with some regularity. Who is it, exactly, that reads these stories? And more importantly, what is it that they get out of reading them?

Perhaps what bothers me is that I share some of the feelings and doubts of the protagonists of stories such as Saderup's; but I am always brought up short because the details used to portray Mormonism have little to do with any Mormons I ever knew. Having grown up in a Mormon family outside Utah (and Idaho and Wyoming and California), it strikes me that these stories have a lot more to do with Utah than they do with Mormonism, even though they claim to deal with religious issues more than just local culture.

Richard Popp
Chicago, Illinois

"Both-sideism" Charged

Gary Browning's article, *The Russian Chimera*, in the November-December SUNSTONE (vol. 7:6) was, to put it mildly, exasperating. He is apparently a practitioner of what Meg Greenfield has called irreverently "both-sideism." For those who may have missed her editorial a while back, I will just say that "both-sideism" describes the stance that blame should in all cases be evenly distributed among the contending parties, e.g. the Soviets have thus and such good reasons for arming themselves because America has shown itself to be untrustworthy in thus and such ways, just as Pol Pot in Cambodia had good reasons for decimating his country's population a few years ago. Do you get it? All bastions of fashionable thought, such as the national media, feel obligated so to be "fair."

As Latter-day Saints who believe passionately in our religion (many or most of us), we may draw a clear line. The skeptics and naturalists among you out there may smile condescendingly as I say this, but I cannot deny that I have experienced the reality of an influence in this world that is committed to the degradation of mankind and of an influence that is committed to our betterment. For the sake of convenience I think of those influences as God and Satan.

How can a Latter-day Saint equate, however roughly, the policies of the USSR which denies its citizens access to the gospel, and one like the United States which permits this access? Browning suggests that the Soviets fear us for precisely the same reasons

we fear them, but more on this later. This is the tactic of the "both-sideist." One is implementing policies which further Satan's enterprises, while the other is pushing in the other direction. If our Church is God's church, we cannot condone any policy or system that impedes our efforts.

If the two great superpowers are equally benevolent or malevolent, the historical record should bear this out. But what is that record? The Soviets crushed all of Eastern Europe except Yugoslavia in the late forties and are still there. They have been gassing innocent civilians in Afghanistan for a few years. Vietnam wasn't a debacle because we sent troops there—it was just that our ham-strung military wasn't permitted to do its job. Thieu and Ky and the others may not have been tooth fairies, but in their years there were not boat people. The Berlin Wall did not go up because western talent was flooding east and we haven't asked that it stay there. The "both-sideist" might describe this edifice as a symbol of East-West tension as if in some arcane way we are equally to blame. But are American hands clean? Well, we didn't stay, for example, in the Dominican Republic, and today the citizenry there is at least permitted a variety of religious options, as are the Chileans and the South Africans.

I for one have nothing against the Russian people. I pray daily that they will see a governmental change in their land to allow religious freedom. It is the policies of their rulers that are reprehensible, and anyone who thinks otherwise has his or her head in the sand. I don't see a Russian chimera, but I recognize a Soviet (there's an enormous difference) threat.

Frank Riggs
Montgomery, Alabama

Jekylls and Hydes

In the article "The Russian Chimera," which appeared in the November-December issue of *SUNSTONE*, Gary Browning does not dwell overmuch upon the pervasiveness of totalitarianism in Russia. Nor does he distinguish between (1) the fundamental Anglo-American jurisprudential premise that legal authority should be limited to allow each individual a protected private sphere of civil rights in which to act without governmental interference or abridgement, and (2) the opposing premise, underlying the totalitarian regimes of Russia and other countries, that the totality of human and natural resources must be controlled by the

state so that the affairs of every department of life may be directed by social planners in order to bring about one, uniform, materialistic utopia for all citizens.

What Browning and many others apparently cannot face is that a totalitarian premise undergirds all of Russian culture and life (the good and the bad of it), and that it is this political premise that is evil. It is evil for the same reason that any aggressive war is evil: it operates upon the principle of unbridled coercion directed to the attainment of ends defined by a few individuals who, in seeking their objectives cannot and will not recognize the existence of any private zone of individual rights that is off limits to the probes of their meddling superiority.

But America (both the good and the bad of it) rests upon another premise: all power ought rightly to be limited and the use of legal force ought always to be restrained by a superior commitment to a belief in individual, unalienable rights which no earthly sovereign can bestow nor earthly authorities abridge or take away.

Any similarities between this American concept of individual rights and the Soviet concept of group rights are superficial and rhetorical. For in Russia one's rights are a privilege bestowed upon an individual in return for his loyalty to the group in power. Rights do not exist separate from this group; and they may be changed, abridged, or abandoned by powerful and influential individuals whose self-proclaimed expertise give them the status to define and redefine the power group's structure and goals without regard to the rights or interests of individuals within the collective.

The question, of course, is not "Are We Making Monsters Out of the Russians?" Attempts to paint America as lily white and Russia as blood red are superficial and ultimately self-deceptive. The truth is we are all mortals, and there is a monster or two in each of us and, certainly, in every nation. We are all Jekylls and Hydes.

But the Soviet leaders have drunk so deeply and so often from that seductive cup of totalitarian elixir that they can no longer maintain their Jekyll personality. They will turn into Hyde and obsessively employ their technique of unlimited political power in the pursuit of even the most trivial of objectives.

In this country, I believe, the Jekyll in

us is still dominant. But here, too, regrettably, it will only be a matter of time before all the hopes and expectations of which we can conceive as Dr. Jekyll will appear achievable only by means of Mr. Hyde.

Paul James Toscano
Orem, Utah

No Name Calling

According to Bruce Fairfax (letters, Jan.-April, '83), my earlier criticism of Marvin Rytting involved "name-calling." The loaded expression "nominal member" was, I then felt, obviously implied by Rytting's own position in the article with which I took issue. But a personal attack was never intended. I wish therefore to apologize to Brother Rytting for leaving that impression with him or anyone else. Though Brother Fairfax's rebuttal has not changed my view of the matters raised, I would like to reiterate my admiration for much of what Brother Rytting has written. Right or wrong, I took exception to two of his contributions and, unless he was being ironic, still do.

Thomas F. Rogers
Provo, Utah

Thanks

Just a few lines to say "thanks" for printing "I am Not a Good Egg" (*SUNSTONE* January-April) by Marvin Rytting. His surprisingly compassionate insight and perception probably provoked more silent "hurrah's" than the members of the lucky majority would ever imagine. For those of us who can not even sign letters such as this, Rytting's comments offered hope that one day the prophets may allow themselves to wonder why it is we Mormon gays keep saying the same things over and over again.

Not Ready for Excommunication

More Dialogue Needed

As a believing Mormon woman whose affectional/sexual preference is for other women, I have found Marvin Rytting's articles addressing the quandary of the Mormon homosexual to be a concerned, allied (albeit tardy) voice in the silence which has long shrouded our heterosexist Mormon culture. Rytting perhaps approaches this taboo subject with a certain credibility and safety not available to most lesbian and gay Mormons, for he is a good—meaning straight—egg. Even so, he risks seeing life through the eyes of a gay person by imagining a world where same-sex love is the

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