

Do secular religion classes destroy faith?

SOULCRAFT 101

FAITH, DOUBT, AND THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

By Boyd Petersen

ON ONE OF OUR FIRST DATES, ZINA, MY SOON-to-be fiancée, took me to a BYU Honors Program devotional given by Eugene England. I had recently returned from a testimony-strengthening mission to France; was attending religion classes coupled with weekly temple attendance; and had mountains of zeal for spreading the gospel. I remember very distinctly sitting in that small auditorium in the Wilkinson Center as England began talking about how God seemed capricious by requiring Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, how Mormons had conspired to commit the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and how Church leaders had incorrectly prophesied that the Willie and Martin Handcart companies would get through to Utah without trouble. I felt a bit sick to my stomach as he approached these topics with such candor. "What kind of a devotional is this?" I thought.

But then, Brother England turned the discussion around and walked us slowly through each of these problems to find resolution—not a resolution that covered up, made light of, or ignored the facts, but a resolution that helped us come to a deeper faith while not ignoring or glossing over these facts. I spent that summer reading England's book *Dialogues with Myself*, which I still believe is one of the most important books on faith within Mormon thought. And after we were married, Zina and I ended up in the BYU 139th Ward, where England was our bishop. I now see Eugene England as a major influence on my life. Because of him, I began to explore the attics and cellars of Mormon history and thought, with a firm conviction that, with patience and sufficient

study, faith can deepen in spite of, perhaps even because of, encounters with doubt.

This and similar experiences during my college years at BYU in the 1980s led to both my love for studying religion and my respect for Mormonism's theological depth. My education was informed by teachers such as Eugene England, Hugh Nibley, Suzanne Lundquist, Donna Lee Bowen, and a host of others who engaged Mormon thought with a smorgasbord of ideas from other religions and cultures, from secular as well as religious thinkers. This exposure to a broad view of Mormonism was enhanced by a part-time job in a local used bookstore where I had long discussions with Mormons of every stripe: liberals and conservatives, orthodox and heterodox, feminists and fundamentalists, scholars and crackpots. I was also part of a flourishing "Mormon underground," trading photocopies of articles from writers such as Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, D. Michael Quinn and Andy Ehat, each containing gems of history, theology, and sometimes wild speculation. I found Mormon thought a rich, provocative, and entertaining field for exploration.

When I went off to graduate school at the University of Maryland, I took classes in the Hebrew Bible from two Jewish scholars, Susan Handelman and Adele Berlin, where I confronted much faith-challenging knowledge. For example, learning of the Documentary Hypothesis challenged my understanding of the Genesis account of the creation story. Reading biblical criticism challenged me to reevaluate the authorship of Isaiah. And a literary reading of the Bible challenged my understanding of prophets and especially of Jesus. But I pursued my studies with that sincere belief—born of Eugene England's example and teachings—that struggling with doubts can deepen one's faith.

However, my own faith has been less challenged by my academic studies than by my personal life. My darkest nights of the soul came in moments when I felt the deepest



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need for God's comfort—homesickness in the early weeks of my mission, pain from marital conflicts, frustration with unemployment, grief after my father's death, a constant insecurity about finding my vocation in the world—and found instead distance and silence. I know now that I suffer from fairly chronic depression that can rise and fall like the tides but without warning or provocation, and I try to remember to seek medical help when I am heading into a low point. But I also know that these symptoms can cause one to doubt the existence of God. I understand the feeling that comes from praying and hearing only deafening silence.

Despite these very real moments of doubt and insecurity, I pursued my education—both at Maryland and at the University of Utah—and now teach religious studies classes at Utah Valley University. I have taught an introductory course in Western religions and two religious studies courses in the English department: "Literature of the Sacred" and "Mormon Literature." Curiously, I find myself in the very position Eugene England was in when I first met him: I am an instigator of doubts, a provoker of cognitive dissonance. I have one disadvantage that England did not have when I knew him at BYU. Since I work at a state university, the law prohibits me from evangelizing or promoting any particular religious viewpoint. In fact, the law grants my students more freedom to express their personal views in my classrooms than it does me.

From time to time, students will visit me in my office and discuss their own faith. I always try to listen with respect and without confrontation. What I have gathered from these conversations is somewhat disturbing: while each of them shares my passion for religious studies, quite a few are leaving the Church. Initially, I wondered if the classes themselves were leading these students out of the Church. But what I have come to believe is that something damning in our Mormon culture is causing these students to leave: namely, the conception Mormon culture has about the relationship between faith and doubt.

Doubt is viewed as the enemy of faith, something to be

feared, repressed, and avoided at all costs. Too often our community offers an all-encompassing either/or argument about faith—either everything taught about the Church is true, or none of it is; either Joseph Smith was a flawless prophet, or he was a fraud; either the Book of Mormon is historically true, or it isn't. Such extremes and ultimatums may set these students up for a fall. When they encounter, as they surely will, problems in our history, theology, or scripture, the message they have been given since birth tells them

to reject the whole thing. They feel they must either deny the problems or renounce the Church, retain a naïve faith or adopt a sophisticated agnosticism. This simple, either/or view of faith seems not only unproductive but detrimental to true, abiding faith. It confuses the interplay that doubt and faith have in the development of the soul.

TO HELP ME better understand both my students and the concept of faith, I surveyed some of my current and former students about their faith and will share some of their thoughts. But first, I want to emphasize that this survey was not scientific in any sense: I have surveyed only some of my students. Many religious studies students at UVU never take my classes, and I have not tried to contact all of the students I have ever

taught. This is not a random sample, and it is clearly not sufficient to draw any major conclusions, even though I will attempt to draw some conclusions. Nevertheless, these are the voices of real 20- and 30-something students at a secular university who are taking religious studies classes. Their experiences are legitimate in and of themselves, and, after listening to their experiences, I have come to understand better where my students are coming from and what they are going through in negotiating issues of faith while pursuing academic knowledge.

What surprises me most is that all the students I interviewed have passed through periods of serious doubt and inactivity. Some have remained inactive. Only one has had his name removed from Church records (though, from informal



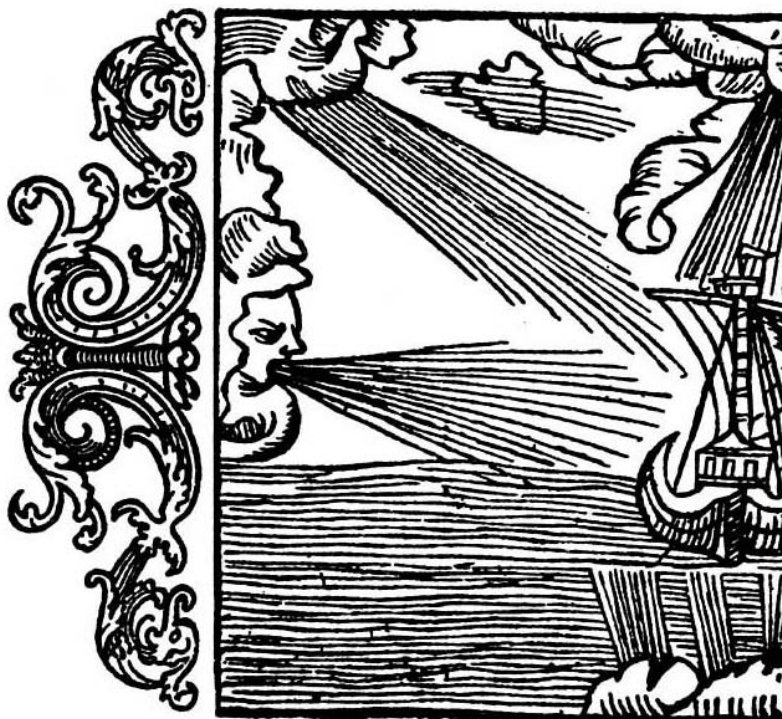
conversations with students besides those I have surveyed, I know many more have taken this step). However, the encouraging news is that most of these young people have come back to full activity, and all of them have some positive things to say about their religious heritage.

The reasons students begin to have doubts about the teachings of the Church are varied. For some, it is a result of their becoming more aware of social and political problems; they are often developing an emerging political activism that they perceive to be at odds with the Church's positions. Gay marriage, women's issues, the war in Iraq—all are concerns that students are dealing with in their other classes, so no wonder these same issues lead some to question their religious moorings. Those who start looking into Mormon history confront questions about Joseph Smith's prophetic authority, the moral and spiritual ramifications of polygamy, and the historicity of the Book of Mormon. These students often express the feeling that the Church has lied to them by covering up the facts about its history. For example, one student, a returned missionary who had grown up in a very devout family—his father teaches Institute—wrote, "My wife and I just found out this year that Joseph Smith had several wives while he was alive. I was never told that in church, seminary, my mission. I just don't know why the Church sometimes goes out of its way to not talk about some things."

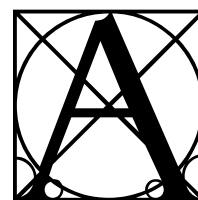
For others, as they gain respect for other religious traditions, the Mormon position of being the "one and only true Church" seems, as one student put it, "arrogant." Still others have problems with Mormon theology. "I was struggling with [the] idea that God was just like us, but exalted, and that really bothered me. I did not want God to simply be a human being who had gone through his own trial and got a passing grade. I felt fairly devastated that that idea could be the truth." Some feel the culture of Mormonism is drifting from the teachings of Mormonism. One student laments the "unrelenting talk of obedience to Church leaders" which he sees as carrying over "into other aspects of human experience, such as politics and, locally, the administration of BYU." Still others feel the high expectations of Mormon practice interfere with spirituality. One writes, "My primary cause for leaving was the lack of closeness I felt with God while in the Church and my lack of emotional wholeness I felt in the light of the Church's un-meetable expectations (I mean expectations of perfection)."

I suppose it is not much of a surprise that all of the women I interviewed reported feelings of marginalization or harassment about their gender or marital status. One student writes, "I went through several periods [where] I was horrified by polygamy and the misogynistic behavior that I perceived in the administration and leadership structure of the Church and I had (and still have) a problem with singing 'Praise to the Man' in the chapel." Another wrote that if she could change one thing about the Church, "I would put the pictures of the female Church leadership on the wall with the general authorities." Yet another student wrote that she

feels like she is "treated like a leper at times because I am not married yet." And another stated, "I had one bishop tell me that the best thing I could ever do was to stop focusing on school and start focusing on marriage . . . I took that advice with a grain of salt and pushed forward with my college career!!"



All of these students did report confronting difficult questions in their studies, especially in their religious studies courses. A student who had encountered many sacred texts and had studied textual criticism in his religious studies courses commented that he came to see "the Book of Mormon [as] spiritually authentic but historically dubious." A student who was enrolled in my "Literature of the Sacred" class, in which we studied Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism, reported that the class "broadened his worldview," but also caused him some cognitive dissonance:



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My experience in being raised Mormon gave me the world view of no revelation or visions, etc., previous to 1820 when the heavens were supposedly opened once again . . . This belief was destroyed when I began reading about the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystics who were experiencing very similar visions and revelations [to those of Joseph Smith] as early as the 11th century. This was the main idea that caused me to look at my religion

more intensely and even more objectively.

He reports that this experience has led him to read other books and articles, which in turn has led him to have doubts about the origins of the LDS faith. He compares his religious reorientation to Plato's allegory of the cave. "I have just exited the cave and my eyes have been sore ever since . . . from



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been inactive in the Church, it was not the result of religious studies courses they have taken. Nor were their doubts and inactivity a result of a confrontation with ecclesiastical leaders or offense taken from another ward member. My perception from my youth has been that in previous generations, "taking offense" at something another ward member had said or done was one of the most common reasons for leaving full activity. However, these young people appear to have a more sophisticated view. Most have had some confrontation with an authority figure or have been bothered by something a member has said to them, but few consider these to be significant factors in their struggles with the Church. In general they have a forgiving attitude about Church leaders and members, recognizing them as human.

I found much to hope for in these interviews. First, even the most critical voices reported being deeply affected by the Book of Mormon; this goes even for those who no longer be-

looking at the sun for the first time."

I was surprised to find, however, that when my students reported being or having

lieve it is a true history of the ancient Americas. For example, one student who no longer accepts the literal historicity of the Book of Mormon states that he still feels "the Spirit moving in me when I read the Book of Mormon." While these students do not always find the Book of Mormon more important than other sacred texts, they do find it to be a source of power. Second, I am impressed that these students see that the position of denying the existence of God requires just as much faith as accepting His existence. As one student writes,

When I temporarily quit going [to Church], it was largely due to my doubts of God's existence. No God = No need to go to church. My return to church was partly because of a feeling that staunch atheism was just as arrogant and problematic as staunch theism. I also felt that the gospel (as found in the scriptures) was a largely untapped resource for doing a lot of good in the world.

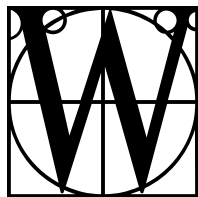
Another student writes,

I have serious issues with the term "closed-minded" and take particular offense when individuals use it in conjunction with Mormon or religious people in general. I have a completely different view. I could quite easily flip that around and ask someone, "Do you believe in God?" If they say "No," I could just as easily say, "Well, that's closed-minded." But I think it's become culturally acceptable to associate Mormons with closed-mindedness, especially by those who haven't taken the time to study Mormonism or its doctrine. I think if they took a sincere look at it, they would discover that Mormonism not only has an expansive world view, but an even more expansive eternal view.

ONE OF THE most important things I discovered in these interviews, however, caused me concern, and led me to rethink Mormonism's relationship with faith and doubt. Several students reported sensing within our culture that doubt is so bad, such a taboo, that they feel no room to remain in the Church with their doubts. As one student writes:

As a philosophy student, I get frequently told by LDS members that I will lose my testimony. Eventually I got the feeling that I *should* lose my testimony. This undoubtedly assisted in my agnosticism. There is also a big sense among many of my friends that there is little room for a progressive/liberal Mormon in the Church today, especially in Utah County. It feels like one must either constantly try to prove how good and spiritual he/she is, or [how] atheist and anti-religious he/she is. Those of us in the middle too often feel lost and alone.

Some students, it appears, feel trapped by both sides of a Mormon culture war—one must be either a complete believer or a complete doubter, a conservative Mormon or a progressive non-Mormon. I believe this is where our cul-



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tural message hurts our students: we give them an either/or option, and as they gain new knowledge, encounter troubling things about their religion, and face doubts, they assume there is simply no room for them in the Church.

I believe the best thing we can do for these students—and for all of us, for that matter—is to rethink the relationship between doubt and faith. In a 2005 BYU Forum address, Terryl Givens defined faith in a radical new way: as a choice, one made when legitimate evidence supports each side of possibility. While some people, Givens believes, are simply born with faith or a gift for faith, more often faith is an acquired trait. And “among those who vigorously pursue the life of the mind in particular, who are committed to the scholarly pursuit of knowledge and rational inquiry, faith is as often a casualty as it is a product.”¹ In this setting, life becomes, as Givens maintains, a test of our own willful decision to choose faith over doubt. As Givens continues:

I am convinced that there must be grounds for doubt as well as belief, in order to render the choice more truly a choice, and therefore the more deliberate, and laden with personal vulnerability and investment. The option to believe must appear on one’s personal horizon like the fruit of paradise, perched precariously between sets of demands held in dynamic tension. One is, it would seem, always provided with sufficient materials out of which to fashion a life of credible conviction or dismissive denial. We are acted upon, in other words, by appeals to our personal values, our yearnings, our fears, our appetites and our ego. What we choose to embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of who we are and what we love. That is why faith, the choice to believe, is in the final analysis an action that is positively laden with moral significance.

For Givens, “the call to faith is a summons to engage the heart, to attune it to resonate in sympathy with principles and values and ideals that we devoutly hope are true, and have reasonable but not certain grounds for believing to be true.”² Describing faith as a real choice between two possible mindsets seems to me a superior source of nourishment for the soul.

I believe, however, that we must go even further. What might we change in the culture of Mormonism if we want to encourage bright young people to remain active members of the Church? First, we would decriminalize doubt. As one student put it, “I would let people know that it is okay to question your faith, because that is the only way to really strengthen it.” That seems like such a simple idea, but it is

really quite insightful. Doubt is not a moral weakness; it does not inexorably lead to agnosticism or atheism. It does not inevitably destroy faith. Rather it is a real, possible, and likely stage of faith development. James Fowler describes faith as a developmental process that requires doubts to activate its higher, most transcendent, stages. If faith involves “an alignment of the will, a resting of the heart, in accordance with transcendent value and power,”³ its opposite is not doubt but, first, nihilism, “the inability to image any transcendent environment and despair about the possibility of even negative meaning;”⁴ and, second, idolatry, an alignment of the will with transient or superfluous values.⁵ When faith is regarded as a developmental process, doubt can be seen as “a part of the life of faith,” for “only with the death of our previous image [of God] can a new and more adequate one arise.”⁶

It would be refreshing if as a culture we began to understand that there are legitimate reasons for people to have doubts and that doubts do not necessarily originate in some hidden sin. Too often, practicing Mormons look upon a person in the depths of a faith crisis and assume that this is the result of a sin that has not been repented of. This reaction most definitely alienates the doubter. It would also be refreshing if our culture could acknowledge that just because one has doubts, one can choose to have faith.

Years ago, a dear friend gave me a plaque engraved with a quotation from Brigham Young: “Think, Brethren, think, but do not think so far that you cannot think back again” (JD 3:243). While the quotation is taken out of context (Brigham was actually cautioning us to yoke body and mind, to be active mentally and physically), I’ve kept the plaque near my bookshelves and read it as a reminder that education is a process, that doubts are part of that process, and that God should be the center of my searching. The response to doubts is not less thinking, but more thinking. Just as one can be arrogantly certain about believing in God, one can be arrogantly certain about believing in no God. We should, I believe, acknowledge the legitimacy of doubt, that it is not evil. And that it can, with more thinking, lead to deeper, stronger faith.

For example, Levi Peterson has written about how his doubts have led him to a uniquely deep sense of worship. “I sense that my worship differs from that of many with whom I share a pew in sacrament meeting,” writes Peterson. “This difference arises, I think, from a difference in the focus of our fundamental human anxiety. . . . [M]y anxiety is focused not upon whether my immortal soul may suffer damnation but upon whether I have an immortal soul.”⁷ Yet Peterson’s

doubts about life after death do not lead him to nihilism but to a sense of wonder and hope. “It seems a pity to take one’s immortality for granted, to expect it and count on it. It seems a pity to be so sheltered from the terror of death that one’s gratitude for the resurrection is merely dutiful and perfunctory. Perhaps truly there are religious advantages to doubt. Perhaps only a doubter can appreciate the miracle of life without end.”⁸

In my own life, during my bouts of depression, the frustration of not getting immediate answers to prayers, and the loneliness of wondering if God is even there, I have been more deeply moved by Mormon scripture. I have developed a greater appreciation, for example, of Joseph Smith’s cry in Liberty Jail—“O God, where art thou?” (D&C 121:1). The words are all the more poignant and simultaneously comforting as they resonate with the state of my own fragile hope. I had a mission president who reminded me, as I described to him my feelings of complete loneliness, of Latter-day Saints’ theological notion that Christ himself went through a similar loneliness as he suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane, when God withdrew his comforting Spirit. My mission president stressed to me that these moments may help me understand Jesus better and urged me to see these moments as a blessing rather than a trial. I confess that I have not been very successful in changing my attitude, but I do know that these doubts I have experienced have, ironically, produced a deepened faith, more attuned to scripture and more aware of human suffering and striving. I can completely relate to Father Flynn’s homily at the beginning of John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt*: “Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.”

I am haunted by the questions raised in Shanley’s film. Originally a Broadway play, the film stars Meryl Streep as the severely strict and utterly self-certain Sister Aloysius Beauvier, the principal at St. Nicholas, a Catholic school. Based on circumstantial evidence, she becomes convinced that Father Brendan Flynn (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman) has sexually abused one of the students in the school. While the film evokes the abuse scandal that has recently rocked the Catholic Church, its theme is really much more universal—the role doubt plays in preventing egregious acts of inhumanity. As Shanley stresses in an interview with the *New York Times*, “Doubt has gotten a bad reputation. People who are utterly certain are vulnerable to a brand of foolishness that people who maintain a level of doubt are not.”⁹

I believe wisdom is generally born of doubt. It is a potent corrective to vanity and self-righteousness and can put an end to disputations of all kinds, from ugly Sunday School classroom arguments to jihads and holy wars. One of our most loveable contemporary doubters, Garrison Keillor, has wisely stated, “Skepticism is a stimulant, not to be repressed. It is an antidote to smugness and the great glow of satisfaction one gains from being right.”¹⁰ As one of my wife’s students so aptly put it, “Smug is why people hate Mormons.”

In my Ph.D. work, I was drawn to Romanticism largely, I now believe, because of the Romantics’ love of paradox and perplexity. The Romantics did not shy away from confusion but reveled in it, recognizing that the word’s etymological root means “to mix together.” Confusion—that is mixing together philosophy, religion, poetry, science—is a central goal in Romantic texts. The result is a sort of mental overflow that produces new insights and new ideas. I think this is something Joseph Smith understood when he suggested that by “proving contraries, truth is made manifest.” Only when we bring together all the inconsistencies of our religious lives, fully exploring the paradoxes inherent in any belief system, can we begin fully to appreciate its richness.

Another concept that animates Romanticism is that of “imagination,” the mediator between “sensibility” and “understanding” in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. As James Fowler rightly notes, the word used for “imagination” in German is the compound word “Einbildungskraft,” which literally means “the power (Kraft) of forming (Bildung) into one (Ein).”¹¹ As I read Fowler, he seems to see faith as working in a Kantian way, mediating between our senses and our understanding. Faith, Fowler states, “grasps the ultimate conditions of our existence, unifying them into a comprehensive image in light of which we shape our responses and initiatives, our actions.”¹² Doubt is an integral part of that process. It acts as a corrective to help us recognize the “false gods,” or false images of God, that we have acquired and helps us shatter those images in order to discover a “more luminous, more inclusive and more true [image] than that to which we [were previously] devoted.”¹³ So perhaps we need a bit more confusion—a mixing together of faith and doubt—not less.

S ECOND, WE SHOULD not be afraid of the truth. Often we Mormons seem scared that if the truth somehow got out there—the truth about our history, our evolving theology, our fallible leaders—people would leave the Church in droves. But what tends to happen is just the opposite. We hide the truth, and then, when they discover it on their own, people feel like they have been lied to. Interestingly, William McGuire’s inoculation theory would postulate that our deeply held religious beliefs are, ironically, more vulnerable than less deeply held beliefs. According to McGuire’s theory, deeply held beliefs, such as a belief in God, are so fundamental to our sense of selfhood—who we are is completely tied up with these beliefs—that we actively avoid information that conflicts with these beliefs. Since we regard these beliefs as unassailable, we are left unprepared and unmotivated to respond when confronted with information that may contradict those beliefs. To overcome this vulnerability, McGuire suggests that people need to be informed in advance of the problems inherent in their beliefs—they need to be inoculated with knowledge of the vulnerability of their position and given information necessary to build a solid foundation.¹⁴ McGuire’s theory would suggest that people need more not less information in order

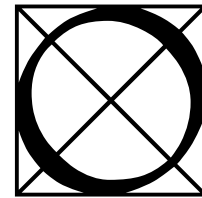
to develop a deeper faith. This is exactly what Eugene England did for me: he began by telling the truth—in all its perplexing and disturbing colors—and then offered ways for me to glimpse a more robust and deeper Mormonism than I had previously seen. In this, I believe, Eugene England was one of our strongest Mormon apologists (in the positive sense of building and advocating faith).

Third, we should come to think of faith not as a state of being, as many rigidly orthodox Mormons do, nor as a meandering journey without a destination, as some more New-Agey Mormons do, but as a quest. My wife is a medievalist, so I hear a lot about quests. In medieval literature, a quest is fraught with sore trials, great temptations, and serious doubts. But the goal is both very desirable and ideally attainable. However, for most knights, the reward of the quest often turns out to be something other than the original goal he had set out for. It is in searching for the Grail that the knight discovers himself. A unique individual is born as a result of the adventures and trials encountered on the journey. The quest becomes, then, a process of self-education, of self-development. The goal is to become whole and so become at one with God. That wholeness and at-one-ment is the Holy Grail. My former teacher Suzanne Lundquist pointed out to me that in English, our words “whole,” “health,” and “holy” come from the same root. “The notion of imperfection literally means to be ‘incomplete’ or ‘unfinished.’”¹⁵

The first step on this quest might be to find a faith mentor, someone who exhibits the deep, enlightened faith you aspire to. In the Mishna, it is written that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachia said, “Obtain a teacher for yourself, acquire a friend for yourself, and judge everyone favorably.” The importance of finding a spiritual mentor is a universal theme in religion. In Mormonism, we talk of being a good example but seldom talk about seeking a good example to

emulate. My teachers at BYU served this function for me. Anyone in a position to influence others, especially teachers, should not shy away from the inoculation function of educating. Eugene England, and so many others in my time at BYU, knew both the way into the conundrums and, more important, the paths out. They showed me the problems, but also taught me to search for answers; not easy answers that gloss over the problems, but answers that reveal a bigger sense of the sacred unaffected by the problems.

Finally, I believe that the cognitive dissonance that comes from studying religion—or from studying the contradictions and trials of life—can be positive, in fact fruitful, in producing deeper faith (or a higher stage of faith as James Fowler would put it) provided the faith community understands how faith develops: that it’s a developmental process rather than a state of being. In fact, my former teacher, Susan Handelman, has shown how in the Hebrew language the concepts of study and faith are etymologically tied together. The root of the Hebrew word *emunah*, or faith, contains the meanings of “to be strong, firm, or diligent.” Vocalized another way, the word becomes *ihmen*, which means “to train or educate.” From the same root comes the noun *amahn* which is an “artist, expert, or master craftsman.” The verbal forms of the word means “to foster, nurse, or bring up.” The word we use to end prayers, *amen*, also comes from this root and means “so be it, surely.” In the passive form, with a different set of vowels, the word means “to be found true, trustworthy, or firm.”



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Handelman reconnects faith with the academy, arguing “that *emunah*, faith, is connected to education and training in its very root. And education and faith both require much nursing and nurturing.”¹⁶ She goes on to say that “faith . . . is not a sentimental matter; it is a ‘craft,’ a ‘skill,’ and it needs to be educated, trained and nursed. It is not ‘blind.’ It is not [necessarily] something that people just seem to ‘have’ and others ‘just don’t.’”¹⁷ In sum, states Handelman, “*emunah*—or faith—is a long process of education. There will be times of abject frustration, disbelief and rebellion. But this comforts me, for it helps

me see that my skepticism and my faith are not necessarily opposites. They can accommodate each other, even though the relationship is going to be tempestuous.”¹⁸

In fact, I believe that a secular religious studies education can accomplish an important religious function, one that is an integral component of many traditions. In many aboriginal societies, the community purposefully brings up a child to reverence a sacred image and teaches that, in essence, the image and the sacred are the same. During initiation rituals, a fairly universal process occurs in which these sacred images are defamed in some way.¹⁹ For example, in Hopi culture, children are taught to reverence and fear the kachina dancers as gods visiting from the sacred San Francisco Mountains. During the rituals of initiation into



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adult society, renewed emphasis is placed on the kachina dancers: the neophytes are told many stories about the origin of the kachinas, and the kachinas appear to them numerous times both to entertain and to frighten. Finally, on the last night of the initiation:

The children are taken into a kiva to await a kachina dance—now a familiar event. They hear the kachinas calling as they approach the kiva. They witness the invitation extended from within the kiva for the dancing gods to enter. But to the children’s amazement, the kachinas enter without masks, and for the first time in their lives, the initiates discover that the kachinas are actually members of their own village impersonating the gods.²⁰

Once this ritual has taken place, the revered gods are dead for the initiate. The simple, one-dimensional world view of youth is forever gone, and the initiate is either confronted with a rejection of the Hopi ways or else finds a deeper meaning within the symbol. The initiates are forced to mature the original religious belief and begin “their religious life in a state of serious reflection and in quest of an understanding of the sacred profound enough to sustain

their new life.”²¹ The sacred object is symbolically killed, but there is a rebirth, a resurgence of meaning. This disenchantment process dramatically stresses to the neophyte that symbols, myths, and rituals are sacred only in that they are indicators of the divine, that they are not divine in and of themselves. A crude but useful parallel is our telling children about an intimidating, gift-bestowing, all-seeing, arctic-dwelling saint who visits their house at Christmas; however, in our secularization of Christmas, we tend to leave out the growth potential of the disillusionment in discovering the truth about Santa Claus. Another example of this process is found in the empty tomb scene in the Gospels, where the Marys go to find the dead body of a living God and must confront the death of their trust in Jesus the man and accept the Son of God for who he is. Disenchantment is clearly a necessary component of acquiring deeper faith.

I SEE THE possibility for a similar disenchantment process in the academic study of religion. The image of the sacred is shattered as the “initiate,” young scholars learn new information that cannot be accommodated by their previous understanding of their religion. They can then either choose to find deeper meaning or pass into a stage of unbelief—they can feel shattered by the non-existence of Santa and parental “lies” or energized by the tale’s parallels to God; can opt to stay, depressed, in the empty tomb, or realize the glorious reason for its emptiness. I see my role as one of helping students get past the either/or dichotomy presented to them by our culture (the “accept it as is or reject it entirely” mode of thought), of ushering them into the possibilities of deeper faith in a bigger God, and of helping them recognize the robust and unlimited nature of

Mormon thought. I do not mean to sound arrogant—I recognize I am no prophet or shaman. I seek only to do for others (i.e., my students) what others (i.e., my BYU professors) did for me.

Speaking about the crisis of positivist thought brought on by postmodernism, Paul Kugler has argued that we must at the same time “believe in our god term and use it as if it were the ultimate explanatory principle. But on a deeper level, we also know that it is not.”²² Kugler states that this “deeper level” of understanding prevents our ideologies from becoming secular religions. Perhaps Robert Bellah more clearly states it in an essay in which he calls into question the entire premise behind our modern secular universities. Stating that education in aboriginal societies has always been concerned with “initiation into reality with a capital ‘R’”—with an awareness of existence in a religious and secular sense—Bellah calls for what he terms a “new religious consciousness” or “second naïveté.”²³

The person who experiences new religious consciousness has passed through criticism, not avoided it . . . He knows that every interpretation of reality is finally only an interpretation, and not reality itself. And he cannot confuse his own words or the words of some creed or doctrine with ultimate reality. Second naïveté could be characterized in fairly traditional words as the final fulfillment of Biblical iconoclasm, which accepts nothing as a substitute for the Divine itself.²⁴

Bellah argues that the individual who has experienced this second naïveté will realize that religious symbols have “inexhaustible meaning” and will seek “every possible mode of interpretation.”²⁵ Faith and doubt must become partners in creating selfhood. Bellah concludes that “through iconoclasm of the most radical sort, there may not come nihilism but a new way of grasping religious meaning.”²⁶ In this light, I believe students who explore Mormonism do not necessarily face disbelief, but may, in fact, encounter deeper belief. For in exploring these paradoxes, we may encounter not nihilism but a reawakening of religious belief. After having torn down all the false gods of religion and tradition, we are free to seek and worship the Deity who remains undisturbed by the rubble.

NOTES

1. Terryl L. Givens, “Lightning out of Heaven: Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community,” forum address, Brigham Young University, 29 November 2005, <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=10924> (accessed 7 July 2009).

2. *Ibid.*

3. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 14.

4. *Ibid.*, 31.

5. *Ibid.*, 18.

6. *Ibid.*, 31.

7. Levi Peterson, “A Christian by Yearning: Pillars of My Faith,” *SUNSTONE*, September 1988, 20.

8. *Ibid.*, 22.

9. David Cote, “Filtering Priests’ Sins through Two Prisms,” *New York Times*, 20 November 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/20/theater/newsandfeatures/20prie.html?scp=1&sq=john%20patrick%20shanley%20david%20cote&st=cse> (accessed 11 June 2009).

10. Garrison Keillor, “Thinking Weaselish Thoughts at Eastertide,” *Salon.com*, 19 March 2008, <http://www.salon.com/opinion/keillor/2008/03/19/easter/> (accessed 11 June 2009).

11. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 24.

12. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

13. *Ibid.*, 31.

14. Mary John Smith, *Persuasion and Human Action: A Review and Critique of Social Influence Theories* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982), 286.

15. Suzanne E. Lundquist, “The Repentance of Eve,” *As Women of Faith*, edited by Mary E. Stovall and Carol Cornwall Madsen (Salt Lake: Deseret, 1989), 99.

16. Susan Handelman, “Emunah: The Craft of Faith,” *Cross Currents* 42 (1992), 294.

17. *Ibid.*, 295.

18. *Ibid.*, 295.

19. Sam Gill, “Disenchantment,” *Parabola* 1, no. 3 (1976), 7.

20. *Ibid.*, 9

21. *Ibid.*

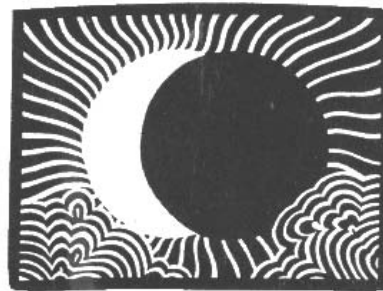
22. Paul Kugler, “The Unconscious in Post-Modern Depth Psychology,” *C.G. Jung and the Humanities: Towards a Hermeneutics of Culture*, edited by Karin Barnaby and Pellegrino D’Acierno (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 316.

23. Robert N. Bellah, “The New Religious Consciousness and the Secular University,” *Daedalus* 103 (1974), 111.

24. *Ibid.*, 114.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*



FOR A FRIEND STRUCK DOWN

Writhing arms of mountain mahogany,
wind through warping Jeffrey pine.
This granite boulder beside the trail,
this sage moraine—it all goes on.

A dog sits and pants for a space
in the shade of late afternoon,
ears pointed, alert to the doe
and spotted fawn that leap away,

the sudden quail. Each cloud
building in the sky is capable
of rain, of thunder. No one
ever opened a door for lightning.

—Hoover Wilderness

—PAUL WILLIS