

On Being Mormon and Human

By Eugene England

Short essay wrestling with the paradox of worshiping and living one's life within a particular religious tradition while simultaneously feeling part of and drawn toward the larger community of human beings and believers in religious truth wherever it is found.

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I GREW UP FEELING that because I was Mormon, I was different from other humans. I was special, even “peculiar,” separate, better than they: I sang, “I might be envied by a king, for I am a Mormon boy.” And history began in 1820 with Joseph Smith’s First Vision.

The little valley in Southern Idaho, where we raised dryland wheat, was completely, unquestionably Mormon, and my life of working on the farm and going to school with my friends, right across from the chapel, then going with the same friends to our Mormon meetings was a seamless, safe whole. Even the programs I listened to each evening, lying on the cold linoleum under the huge Philco radio, easily confirmed my complacent values (“Jack Armstrong, Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy”). We had our garden and cow and the wheat to grind for flour, so the Great Depression seemed far away, even when unsmiling hoboes made it to our place, far from the railroad, and steadily chopped wood for an hour for a packed lunch. World War II seemed barely to touch us: the Bickmore boy from next door, shot through the chest on Okinawa, coming home to testify he had been saved by God so he could later go on a mission; the regular, front-page maps in the *Deseret News* marking the quick expansion outward of Germany and Japan and then the slow retreat of evil so the gospel could be taken to the world after the war.

My repeated rounds of uncomplicated work and provincial faith came together as my father took me into the young wheat in the spring to kneel and ask God to bless and protect the crop. He promised the Lord to give it all, beyond our basic needs, to build the Church and kingdom, and I felt assurance of God’s approval of that consecration that has never left me.

We moved to Salt Lake City when I was twelve, coming back to the farm in the summers until my late teens, but meanwhile entering a new world. As I studied literature and art and history and science, at East High and the University of Utah, I found many humans whose minds and hearts seemed very much like my own—and who often were superior to me in at least some ways. Later, when I went away to Samoa and Boston and California and London, I became united in friendship with people who were completely non-Mormon, merely human, that I recognized as kindred spirits, loved and admired—and became convinced were much better than I was in every way, including faith and righteousness.

I became increasingly perplexed. Was my fundamental loyalty to the lovely, unified truths that had been given by God to Mormon prophets or to the exciting, diverse new ones I was learning from the full range of human curiosity and dreams? I had been enraptured with Mormon cosmology from age eight when my father, talking constantly as we worked together, began to describe how humans were not created out of nothing by God but had non-destructible, inherent existence like our Heavenly Parents. Like them, we were engaged in a journey that stretched from long before this life and into a future without end of learning and struggle and joy and growth—even a journey towards godhood.

Better than those or any other religion or philosophy I could find, these ideas helped me come to some peace with the mystery of evil. They helped me exult in the fruitful, exasperating, equal opposition of male and female. They helped me even to find joy and growth, even transcendent spiritual experiences, in my Mormon church service, where there was no separation of lay and clergy, ministers and consumers, but all were engaged as equals in struggling and learning to love together.

But was my identity centered in these great and peculiar ideas and practices that, I realized, were available only to the one tenth of one percent of God's children who were Mormons? Or was I mainly human, part of the great congregation of all those God has created and blessed with his saving and ongoing mercy—a God who, even as my own Mormon scriptures testified, had already revealed and was still revealing himself “unto all nations” (2 Ne. 29:12)?

This perplexity came into sharp and disturbing focus when I served, in 1981, as one of the directors of the Brigham Young University Study Abroad Program in London. I quickly began to feel deeply both the division and the connection between being Mormon and being human. Along with my students, I was ravished by the artistic beauty and spiritual devotion produced by the ancient and contemporary human cultures that we were for the first time so intensely studying and experiencing. Similarly, our Mormon heritage became more clear and precious as we visited the sites of the early missions of the apostles to Preston and Manchester and Herefordshire, as we learned of the conversion and emigration of tens of thousands, including many of our own ancestors, and the sacrificial devotion and now burgeoning diversity of the British Church that remained—and as we felt the spirit of the Holy Ghost in our own devotionals and conversations.

Sometimes being Mormon and being human seemed in sharp conflict. The utilitarian architecture and bland art reprints of our chapels and temple were overwhelmed by the superior genius and vision of the English perpendicular style at Wells Cathedral and the stained glass glories of Notre Dame and the challenging religious depth of the works of Giotto and Raphael and Michelangelo in Italian churches. Yet as we visited their sparsely attended services, we sometimes fell vastly superior to the Anglican and Lutheran and Catholic state churches, mired in apostate ideas, we thought, and in apathy (not enough members and tithe-payers even to keep the great cathedrals and churches in repair).

I visited the villages in Somerset and Dorset counties where my ancestors had lived. In the ancient parish churches where they had worshiped and some were

buried, I imagined again the convictions that had moved my great-grandparents to cut ties of family and land and culture and risk death to go into exile in a desert thousands of miles away. I stood in the fourteenth-century manor house next to the Mormon temple near Lingford, Surrey, and thought of my parents living there for three years in the sixties as president and matron, administering sacred ordinances and organizing hundreds of volunteer workers and teaching thousands of missionaries who came for special sessions.

I went each Sunday to the Hyde Park Ward and saw the congregation gradually deepening and brightening in color as the 1978 revelation giving blacks the priesthood began to produce more and more dark-skinned converts from London and the West Indies and Africa, some who came in flamboyant native dress. I watched lay leaders and teachers working together to overcome barriers of unequal, even antagonistic, education, of stark cultural and language differences, and growing in patience and charity as they helped others do the same. I went home teaching with a man from Lebanon to a family from Jamaica with little English. We gave a priesthood blessing to an extremely sick daughter with words the parents didn't fully understand, then sorrowed with them. One Saturday, as a group of us from Hyde Park Ward got ready to go by rented van to the temple, the reserved English gentleman asked to pray softly said, "Please, Father, help us, as we drive today, not to do anything to hurt anyone else."

In our humanities and history classes, we taught the details of Christian history and architecture and art, then visited the sites and museums throughout England and the Continent and Israel. We stood under the steeple of Salisbury Cathedral and thought of the faith and aspiration that could sustain artisans and tithe-payers through whole lifetimes to lift those tons of stone four hundred feet into the sky. We found a small Orthodox Church on a back street in Moscow and worshiped with a few old women and one young couple as they kept the faith alive, at great cost, under Communism. We stood in the darkened protective alcove of the National Gallery in London, before da Vinci's drawing of St. Anne, the mother of Mary, holding both Mary and Jesus on her lap, her elegant and haunted face looking at and beyond us as her left hand, barely visible, gestures upward—and then, in the Louvre, stood before Da Vinci's final painting, the one he kept with him until death, of John the Baptist looking at and beyond us with the same face as St. Anne's, his right hand gesturing upward in that same supreme symbol of art's ability to point beyond itself. And we stood in the grotto under the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and looked at the silver star on the floor marking the spot where Jesus was born—according to a tradition going back beyond the Crusades.

Our Mormon and Palestinian guides made me increasingly nervous by their too-constant insistence that the sites we visited had "strong tradition" backing their claims: This is "very probably" Rachel's Well; this is "most likely" where Christ suffered in Gethsemane; the Garden Tomb "fits more exactly" the description than the traditional site covered by a Catholic Church—and has been confirmed by "the feelings of modern prophets." But before long, I began to realize that the exactness of the sites was not important; what mattered is that devout Jews and Christians and Muslims (and now Mormons) by the hundreds of thousands had for many hundreds

of years come to those sites to express and renew their faith—to kneel and weep by that silver star, as I saw a Catholic priest doing; or leave a candle burning in the grotto at Gethsemane, as a young Mormon girl with us did; or stand on the stairs looking down into the torture pit in the Palace of Caiaphas where Christ may have been hung by his feet during that last night, and suddenly begin singing, with new emotion, an old hymn about following Christ whatever the cost, as a group of Baptists on tour with us did. That was the miracle.

At the end of our term in London, I was able to talk with the students about an enriching paradox—that our experience there could make us more committed to our specific, peculiar, and somewhat exclusive Mormon faith *and also*, without contradiction, more grateful to, and part of, the great human experience with God that produced the art and buildings and pilgrimages we had been witness to and participated in. Yes, we would continue to feel the tension, would move back and forth between the poles of being mainly Mormon and mainly human, sometimes with anguish. But we now understood with our minds and eyes and hearts that history, even our own religious history, began long before 1820—and could also value the unique movement toward God that began then and that we were part of. We could share the universal impulses and yearnings of the traditions we had studied and give particular creative expression to them through our own. We did not need to wander as strangers and foreigners among the struggling, sometimes backsliding, often stunningly generous people we met in London and Bethlehem and Moscow. We were fellowcitizens with them, fellow saints in the human household of faith.

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