



10-1-1968

The Faith of a Scientist Henry Eyring

John H. Gardner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gardner, John H. (1968) "*The Faith of a Scientist* Henry Eyring," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol8/iss4/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

dream of having a temple anywhere but in Jerusalem" (p. 59). But this we see is not the case, for there were temples built by Jews outside of Jerusalem. Nibley points to the famous Elephantine Papyri to show that there was a Jewish temple in Egypt. There is no longer a need to reject the temple building of the Book of Mormon as being out of place for it appears that the "Covenant People" have always been a temple-building people.

I have found the book to be an excellent introduction to many problems that until now never have been discussed. The introduction to each section is excellent and is handled in the usual excellent style of the author. But I feel that many of the sections that start out well fail to maintain this momentum because many of the points are overdrawn; the reader is often overburdened with irrelevant facts. It is also unacceptable in any scholarly work to omit a bibliography and scriptural index. This in no way detracts from the intrinsic value of the book, but it does make it a less valuable scholarly tool.

It should be stated that *Since Cumorah* is not a problem-answer book. This is not Nibley's method; for he states his hypothesis and then gives supporting evidence, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions from the evidence. In this manner the questions are left open-ended and the author invites further discussion.

In conclusion I must say that I found the book to be generally excellent, stimulating, and very worthwhile. I can only agree with Nibley that the Book of Mormon "enjoys no immunity to the severest tests and asks for none" (p. 44). Truths need no immunity. My only hope is that the scholars who have been so critical in the past will take up the challenge given them by the author to prove or disprove his original hypothesis.

HENRY EYRING. *The Faith of a Scientist*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967. 196 pp. \$3.00.

(Reviewed by John H. Gardner, chairman of the Department of Physics and professor of physics, Brigham Young University. Dr. Gardner is presently president of the Utah Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters and has published widely in his field.)

When one discovers a contradiction between a religious belief and the findings of science, he speaks of a conflict between

science and religion. Actually, there is no conflict between science and religion per se. A belief in a Supreme Being, faith in the efficacy of a moral code, and a belief in a purpose in existence are not precluded by science, though science may question the credibility of a particular religious belief and thus serve as a constraint on religion. But men tend to hold beliefs associated with their religious faith inflexibly, a consequence of their all-too-frequent failure to acknowledge the limited ability of man to receive through revelation a perfect comprehension of truth. This inflexibility puts religion at a disadvantage in the face of advancing scientific knowledge. The history of the past four centuries has been described with some justification by one writer as the history of the retreat of religion before the advance of science.

Science has brought such a flood of knowledge about the nature of the universe and provided answers to so many of the perplexing questions encountered in the course of one's existence that the necessity for the assumption of God as a cause in nature has been removed from immediacy to remoteness. With Simon LaPlace we "have no need for that hypothesis" for the formulation of a world view which generously rewards our intellectual curiosity about natural phenomena. Evidence of the hand of God in all that transpires is no longer so apparent as it was once thought to be.

Thus aware of many of the scientifically untenable appendages of the religion of his fathers and finding no immediate necessity for the belief in a Supreme Being as a causative factor in existence, the sophisticated student of today is often inclined to adopt a position of skepticism or agnosticism.

The response of organized religion to the ever-tightening constraint of science, though varied and often pathetic, has been in its more mature form to emphasize the spiritual content of religion and admit to a "naturalistic" explanation of the historical and philosophical tradition. This process has been painful and often destructive of the faith so necessary to the vitality of religion.

For Mormons, on the other hand, the reach of man's mind toward an ultimate understanding of God's creation is not only expected but demanded, and the foundations for accommodation of new knowledge are inherent in their theology. Man is regarded as an eternal developing being in a particular stage

of his God-assisted progression. To assure his maximum development as a free and independent being during his earthly existence, he is made forgetful of his premortal state and becomes heir to the accumulated wisdom and folly of his fellow creatures. An understanding of his nature and destiny is obtained only through his own struggle for enlightenment. The necessity for him to choose from a vast array of competing philosophies provides the supreme test of the quality of his eternal will or "intelligence," which rules a body suitably endowed physically and intellectually by its Creator.

Eternal progression and its concomitant, continuing revelation (which is a function of both God's will to reveal and man's will), capacity and effort to comprehend are then fundamental in the Mormon outlook: additional knowledge from science or whatever source is welcomed for the rigor it demands of one's thought and the consequent intellectual and spiritual growth it stimulates. This growth is not a simple accretion; it involves also rectifying, refining, and maturing one's beliefs. Doubt and self-criticism play the primary role in this process; yet it is his faith in God and the ultimate worth of the human soul that impells the Mormon to the task. Just as the Latter-day Saint expects spiritual and intellectual growth in the individual, he also expects it in a culture due to the cumulative character of knowledge in human institutions. In this light, to a Latter-day Saint, continuing revelation is a necessity for continuing spiritual growth.

But though the limitations of man's understanding keep him from a grasp of ultimate truth, he is capable of transcendent insight, and the discovery (though God may reveal, each must discover for himself: the Savior taught in parables in which truth is discovered rather than declared) of universals, true for all men of all times is the central objective of religious pursuit. Furthermore, there are invariant components of religion: for example, charity. Though integrity to one's experience may force him to change many of his religious ideas and even his religion, charity only grows or dwindles. This is a matter of attitude and desire more than of rational understanding. "Charity never faileth; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; . . . whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away." (I Cor. 13:8)

Though science is at first a constraint on religious thought, yet it constrains from error, consequently giving greater power and hence greater freedom. It also reveals man as Godlike in his intellect¹ and hence gives substance to the Christian claim that man is a child of God. Further, science reveals the profound nature of God's creation and makes it evident why God has not revealed through his prophets the means by which things have been brought to pass. The difficulties of the scientist in describing atomic phenomena in terms of a language which has been developed for describing everyday events suggests the difficulties God might encounter in revealing the ultimate truth to us in that language. While the scientist unravels the mysteries of the physical world, he at the same time reveals nature as more profound than had ever been supposed. Hence, the more deeply one penetrates into science, the greater his sense of awe. The scientist often has a humility greater than that of the philosopher or the practical man.

Thus the scientist is perhaps in a unique position to assist the student of today in his struggle for religious faith. Dr. Eyring's book reflects an outlook which in my view is characteristically Mormon and is exemplary for Mormon youth in whose hands lies the future of the Church.

Henry Eyring has ascended to greater scientific eminence than anyone else in the Church. No other Mormon has made scientific contributions of such significance nor has been so prolific in his scientific output. He is an acknowledged world authority in a broad field of physical chemistry and his brilliant mind qualifies him in scientific fields outside of his own, including physics and biology. He is therefore eminently qualified to write a book with the title *The Faith of a Scientist*, and his views are deserving of careful study.

His book is a series of popular essays on science, particularly on topics having a bearing on religion. It is not an orderly book, being a collection of magazine articles written over a period of several years. Neither is it a book written for the specialist: it is addressed to a typical *Instructor* or *Improvement Era* audience. Yet it contains many penetrating insights. It is a book full of the exuberance characteristic of a lively intellect.

¹Albert Einstein has said that the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that the universe is comprehensible.

But it is deserving of a wide audience primarily because of the philosophical outlook it suggests.

The key to an understanding of Dr. Eyring's philosophy is the recognition of its open-endedness. Open-endedness is in the best spirit of science, but it is also a cornerstone of Joseph Smith's philosophical outlook (continuing revelation; eternal progression; if there is anything praiseworthy or of good report we seek after these things; seek ye knowledge even by study and also by faith; a school of the prophets, etc.). "Our only concern is for the truth" is a phrase that threads throughout the book. We have no need to rationalize or temporize; let the facts be boldly put forth. If they show us to be wrong in some of our views, let us have the humility to revise those views and let us be grateful for the growth made possible by new understanding.

Typical of this outlook is the following exchange as told by Dr. Eyring:

One of the questions was addressed directly to me. A young man said: "In high school (we) are taught such things as pre-Adamic man, and that kind of thing, but we hear another thing in Church. What should I do about it?"

I think I gave the right answer. I said, "In this church, you only have to believe the truth. Find out what the truth is!"

He gave no answer to the problem of pre-Adamic men, but he threw wide the door to discovery. There was no temporizing, no rationalizing, no fear of what knowledge might do to faith, no need to put forth his hand to steady the ark. Scriptural difficulties present no problem to him: "The scriptures record God's dealing with His prophets and they are as accurate as He, in his wisdom, requires."

Yet, though we find in Dr. Eyring a recognition of the fallibility of scripture and the limitations of men to reveal God, we discover in him also an almost childlike faith in the gospel. To some, as noted in the book, this seems to be an inconsistency in his character. He is accused of having a "two-compartment mind." In my view his accusers could hardly be more wrong. He shows no disposition whatever to protect a cherished belief and on the contrary exposes his views to the scrutiny of all comers. His candor is complete. Perhaps the

charge originates from his very lack of dogmatism. Recognizing as he does his own limitations in understanding, he refuses to circumscribe his knowledge by rejecting at the outset all that does not harmonize with some particular world view. A philosophy which is open-ended cannot, after all, be a consistent and harmonious whole. And one who espouses such a philosophy must be prepared to confront questions and difficulties and recognize that these provide the catalyst for growth.

This is one area in which the study of science can be of considerable help to the student in his struggle for faith. In some of his experiments the physicist finds the electron behaves as a particle localized at a point while in others it acts like a wave filling all of space. Yet these two contradictory concepts describing the same thing have led to the powerful theory of quantum mechanics for the description of natural phenomena and this theory can be shown to be completely self-consistent. The paradoxical observation that light has the same speed in all directions relative to the earth, no matter at what point in its orbit about the sun the earth lies at the time the measurement is made, has led to the entirely self-consistent theory of relativity which gives us our most profound view of nature and implies the unexpected equivalence of mass and energy. The scientist is no stranger to paradox, and it is through his struggle to resolve these seeming inconsistencies that he gains his deepest insights. Similarly, it is through the struggle with religious paradox that man is brought in touch with the sublime meaning of life. Consider for example the problem of evil in God's creation, or the Savior's words, "he who would find his life must lose it."

They who read Dr. Eyring's book for scientific evidence in support of their faith will be intrigued, but let them assimilate Dr. Eyring's attitude toward their religion and the reward will transcend their own lives. It will bless their Church and their posterity through generations yet to come.