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# The Uses of the Mind in Religion\*

LOWELL L. BENNION\*\*

Since you have distinguished yourselves as thinkers and scholars and, by your very presence at Brigham Young University bear witness of your commitment to religious faith, I thought it not inappropriate to talk with you this evening about the uses of the mind in our relationship to the restored gospel.

Living in these latter days we are the recipients of many legacies from East and West, but the two which have been most influential in Western Culture are doubtless the faith and morality of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the rational and aesthetic emphasis of the Greeks. These traditions are not wholly distinct. There is considerable rationality in the Law and the Prophets and Jesus' words even as there is notable ethical reflection in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but there is a difference in emphasis.

Both the religious and rational footings of our civilization are beyond price. For me nothing in all the ethical thinking of mankind quite equals the combined ethic and morality of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. The prophets taught justice and mercy in human relations and tied these principles to the ethical character of a living God. Scholars call this ethical monotheism. Jesus, respecting his prophetic forbears, stressed the worth of the individual, and taught men to walk with humility, to act with love, and to trust in the Father. Both Jesus

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and the prophets exemplified moral courage as they attacked the superficialities and hypocrisies of their day. Greek philosophy delighted in man's capacity to create order out of mystery and chaos. They began to think about nature, how men think, and the rules of logical thought. They inquired into aesthetics and ethics, and the nature of society. They were not afraid—as were the Jews—to create works of art in sculpture and architecture, in addition to drama and literature. They laid the foundations not only for philosophy, but also for history, the natural and social sciences, medicine, and the arts. Most of all, they discovered and nurtured faith in man's capacity to think and to create.

I do not understand how a person who has come to know these two traditions in any substantial manner, can turn his back on either one. I confess my profound respect for each of them and try in my own life to effect a marriage between them—a marriage that has all the tension, adjustments, frustration, joys, and ecstasy one finds in a marriage between man and woman. Even as I prefer marriage to living alone, so do I prefer to live in a world of both faith and rationality rather than in a world of either alone.

It is not my intent this evening to try to reconcile faith and reason—a task that has been tried over and over again. Rather, my purpose is to indicate the value of thinking *within* the gospel. Rationality not only has its place in fighting cancer and in getting man to the moon; it also has a place within the gospel. A quotation from Pascal triggered afresh my own interest in this theme. It reads:

If one subjects everything to reason our religion will lose its mystery and its supernatural character. If one offends the principles of reason our religion will be absurd and ridiculous . . . . There are two equally dangerous extremes—to shut out reason and to let nothing else in.<sup>1</sup>

In the spirit of this quotation, let me hasten to make clear that religion is more than reason. Thinkers for centuries have noted that life and the meaning of things are greater than reason and objective study. Religion's first and unique mission is to transcend knowledge and to help man find meaning in

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<sup>1</sup>Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: The Modern Library, [1941]), pp. 94, 90.

this uncertain existence. If all were known, religion would disappear or change its meaning drastically. Religion enables us to take "the leap of faith," to rise above our contingency, to triumph over our tragic predicament as mortals conscious of our ultimate powerlessness. I am not suggesting that reason should displace faith, however, because man must transcend reason in order to face the future and his total existence.

Religion transcends reason also in the area of human values. I don't know how one can choose purely objectivity among competing values. Our choice among value positions rests ultimately, I believe, on feeling, on intuition, on our total experience—not on the cold analysis of empirical evidence. I respect the inspiration of the prophets and of the religious sages of mankind in this field. Micah's words have the ring of truth: ". . . what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God," (Micah 6:8), but I would not like to have to prove them to be true.

#### THINKING WITHOUT THE GOSPEL

It is often said that the gospel—in contrast to the thinking and philosophies of men—is eternal, unchanging truth. No thinking person, including the scientist himself, would dispute the fact that all human efforts to know the truth are tentative, unfinished, and changing. A glance at textbooks over the years is evidence of this. The hard won, laboriously acquired knowledge of the greatest of the scientists will be superceded one day by a larger, truer vision. Even the great artist is rarely satisfied with any of his creations. None fully expresses his felt impressions.

But the gospel—it is said by way of contrast—is divine, revealed of God, taught by the Christ, recorded in holy writ, and hence unchanging, eternal truth. From my limited experience, I believe the gospel of Jesus Christ is eternal, universally valid, and true in the lives of men and Deity. But my understanding of the gospel, and dare I suggest yours too, is not eternal truth and ought not be unchanging truth.

In the mind of God and Christ, the gospel is known in its full beauty and actuality, but in your life and mine, the truths of the gospel are only partially known and are relative to our capacity, humility, and experience. Faith, repentance,

love, God, atonement, are but words in a book, symbols of attitudes and realities that we comprehend only in part. This we sometimes forget, but the prophets profess it in moments of profound humility and insight.

Isaiah said for the Lord: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

"Woe is me!" said Isaiah when he was called to the ministry, "for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

The apostle Paul, who was not lacking in testimony and assurance, said in his sublime eulogy on love:

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. . . . For now we see through a glass darkly. . . . (I Cor. 13:9-10, 12)

Some of that same spirit of humility is found in Latter-day scripture. Moses had a remarkable vision of God and some of his unending creations. The prophet's fascinating response to that overawing presence was: "Now . . . I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed." (Moses 1:2) Satan took advantage of Moses' humbled position and said to him, "Moses, son of man, worship me." (Moses 1:12) To illustrate how relative man's view of the situation is, Moses recovered his perspective and answered,

Who art thou? For behold, I am of God, in the similitude of His only Begotten; and where is thy glory that I should worship thee? (Moses 1:13)

For a long time, I have been grateful for and impressed by the Prophet Joseph's description of his remarkable vision of the Father and the Son wherein he said, "I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description." Revelation, itself, is not a one-way communication, but a teaching process dependent on the learner as well as on the teacher. It is so described in the preface to the Doctrine and Covenants: "Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments

are of me . . . .” This is the divine part of revelation. That which follows reveals the human limitations on the divine word to man:

. . . and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to an understanding.

And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known; and inasmuch as they sought wisdom, they might be instructed; and inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time. (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24-28)

Perhaps I have belabored this point, but I feel that many of us are too complacent. Because of the remarkable events and teachings associated with the Restoration, we assume to know all about God and His ways. When we act on that assumption, we reduce him to our image, and we lose our hunger and thirst for his truth and his righteousness. Jesus said, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” (John 17:3) To know them we must come to think as they think, feel as they feel, create as they create, love as they love. We must, as Christ did, receive grace for grace. This is an eternal quest.

I have tried to distinguish between the eternal truths of the gospel and our limited, human understanding of them. I like the way Yvor Winter puts in his *In Defense of Reason*:

The absolutist believes in the existence of absolute truths and values. Unless he is very foolish, he does not believe that he personally has free access to these absolutes and that his judgments are final; but he does believe that such absolutes exist and that it is the duty of every man and of every society to endeavor as far as may be to approximate them. The relativist, on the other hand, believes that there are no absolute truths, that the judgment of every man is right for himself.<sup>2</sup>

The gospel of Jesus Christ contains eternal truths, but our knowledge of them is relative to our humility, study, capacity, and experience.

If we recognize our limited understanding of the gospel,

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<sup>2</sup>Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1947), p. 10.

our next step is to study it earnestly, searchingly, and prayerfully. May I suggest too, that the object of our major study ought to be simple, fundamental principles of the gospel. Too often, these are taken for granted or passed over superficially, while we occupy ourselves with "things which lead not to edification" or we "elaborate on the things the Lord has only touched on lightly."

What we need to understand more fully are the attributes of God—the meaning of integrity, creativity, intelligence, and love; the teachings of Christ which he reiterated again and again—humility, meekness, love, trust in God. We need to grow within our understanding of each gospel principle.

A child in Primary is taught: "We believe in being honest . . . ." But honesty is one thing to a child, quite another to a thoughtful adult. The former thinks of honesty in terms of not lying and not stealing. The adult includes these in his conception of honesty, but he learns the difficult role of being honest in human relationships and in being true to his own deepest convictions. He struggles between keeping his own integrity and his concern for the feelings of others and their well-being. Honesty must sometimes vie with mercy in the mind of the sensitive adult.

One of the rewards and joys of gospel teaching is what one learns from his students either directly or by the questions they raise. I remember a freshman in a large Book of Mormon class, who, when the class was asked how the covenant of baptism differs from a marriage contract, replied: "In a marriage contract, either party may fail, but in the baptismal covenant, only man can fail. God will not!" This was a new and beautiful insight to the teacher.

The restored gospel is a religion of action. It is not an end in itself, but was designed to bring about growth and fulfillment in man. To do so it must penetrate the inner life of the individual and the social systems of society. To accomplish this goal, religion must be more than feeling, more even than faith and good will. The life of man, living in society, needs to be understood. There are factual and rational aspects to the economic, political, and social life of man. To have any impact on these, we must understand both the nature of society and gospel principles. This is a rationale, as well as a question, of value. For example, roughly twenty percent

of our population in America live in poverty. They cannot succeed in our competitive, "free" society. The gospel teaches us to love those who have least, and that it is more blessed to give than to receive. How do we give love to the poor in ways that will build the freedom and respect of the individual? I submit to you that we have not begun to learn—on a large scale—how to live the principle of love in a modern complex society. I think this could well be the subject matter of a priesthood or Sunday School course of a study of a year, or a decade, and it would tax the mind as well as the heart to the limit. It calls for thinking to make the gospel viable in human relations.

One further example may illustrate the same point. We speak of free agency in sermon after sermon and in class after class. It is a beautiful and fundamental principle of the gospel, but too seldom do we recognize that we are not free. Every man has free agency—a desire and capacity to be free—but none of us are completely free. We fail to make the distinction between free agency and freedom. Some are not free to resist overeating, to communicate honestly with husband or wife, to forsake greed or lust, to acknowledge one's weakness or sin, to follow one's convictions of the right. Freedom is won with knowledge, with understanding, with wisdom, sometimes with love, and with cooperation from others. Here is another "commonly spoken principle" of the gospel a class could profitably study for a year or a decade.

I would like to suggest one more use of the mind in religion. Someone has said that there is nothing so lost as an isolated fact. In every field of study, facts are related to each other by hypotheses, by theories, by conceptual schemes.

This same learning process applies to the restored gospel. One needs to see it whole. It contains a basic framework of theology and an integrated ethical pattern for living. But the scriptures were not written by systematic theologians or moral philosophers—thank goodness—but have come to us as spontaneous records, quite miscellaneous in form, containing the experience, inspiration, and words of men as they have struggled with God and His people.

Without destroying the freshness and reality of the scriptures, we need to look into them to find these fundamental, oft-repeated, and established truths which give the scriptures

their great meaning and value. This is an intellectual and imaginative exercise as well as a spiritual search.

Not only does the gospel as a whole seem to hang together, at it were, but within it are several groups of beautifully integrated ideas. I can mention but two or three this evening.

Jesus and the prophets portray God the Father as a person of integrity and impartiality, love and mercy, and as a Father whose purpose it is to bring the abundant and eternal life to man. If we keep this character of God in mind, we shall not interpret his relationship to men in ways which contradict these divine attributes, even though isolated passages of scripture might give us license to do so. We will not believe him to be jealous, revengeful, and wrathful as we know these qualities of character in human experience.

The restored gospel teaches us also that the elements, some laws, the intelligence of man along with his capacity for freedom, are coeternal with God. If we believe and understand this, we shall not ascribe the limitations of nature and human nature to Him. Rather we shall be inclined to help Him overcome evil and to realize the ideal.

The Beatitudes are another example of a beautiful, logical framework within the gospel. I commend to your reading a book by Henry Churchill King, called *The Ethics of Jesus*,<sup>3</sup> in which he describes the Beatitudes as Jesus' map of life. He shows how each builds on and presupposes those that have gone before. Dr. King gives new insight into the meaning of "blessed are they that mourn," whom he calls "the penitent," and of "blessed are the meek," which he equates with self-control at its highest. The Book of Mormon, with the phrase, "who come unto me," inserted in the Beatitudes, adds additional meaning to this map of life.

Finally, I am impressed by the remarkably intimate relationship of the first principles and ordinances of the gospel. Faith in Christ leads to, inspires, and gives direction to repentance. Baptism bears witness to a new beginning and of a bond with Christ and with each other. And, in the words of Mormon, "because of meekness and lowliness of heart," which follows from faith in Christ and repentance, "cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with

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<sup>3</sup>Henry Churchill King, *The Ethics of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1923).

hope and perfect love." (Moroni 8:26) This whole process of becoming a disciple of Christ is renewed in the sacramental covenant.

### CONCLUSION

One has every reason to be intellectually eager and alert as he relates to the gospel of Jesus Christ and seeks to apply its principles to the demands and privileges of living.

I must admit that the thoughtful way is not in the short run the easy way. It is less troublesome to be as sheep led or herded without thought, and with little sense of personal responsibility. Thinking is always critical. It means analyzing, taking apart, and synthesizing, or seeing things in new relationships. Thinking means questioning, even doubting, and trusting that the gospel can stand the test of thought. Thinking means carrying one's own lantern, living one's own testimony.

God himself does not seem to object to our questioning even Him and His ways. Abraham persuaded the Lord to save Sodom if He could find ten righteous souls. Jacob wrestled with his heavenly antagonist until he got his way. And most impressive of all, Job challenged God's justice and compassion and stood by his own integrity through an extended debate. He learned that he had "darkened counsel by words without knowledge," but God did not condemn him for his honest thinking, whereas his complacent friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—who upheld the traditional, limited Hebrew view of the reason for suffering, received a judgment from God, for they had not spoken of Him "the thing that is right."

The gospel of Jesus Christ was restored in response to a youth's search for truth. Throughout our history prophets have asked questions and reasoned freely about truths of the gospel. I trust that you will bring your best thinking as well as your deepest feelings to bear on the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I hope that you will love the Lord thy God with all thy *heart*, and with all thy *soul*, and *with all thy mind*.