MORMONS AND EVANGELICALS

Mormons and Evangelicals

Reasons for Faith

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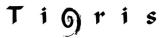
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The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the
American National Standards.

To
Patricia and Jonathan,
who understand

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PREFACE

The research behind this book represents the convergence of two major interests of mine. The first has to do with comparative religion, especially comparisons between religions that have clearly identifiable sacred texts. This interest gradually lead me to an investigation of Mormonism. Not only do Mormons have scriptures other than the Bible, they are also a relatively new religion and one whose sources are fairly accessible. Beyond this, Mormonism is a distinctively American religion that has become a global religious movement and that has experienced exponential growth over the past century. Religion scholars can no longer afford to ignore Mormonism as a subject of serious intellectual analysis.

The second interest represented here is philosophical. The question of faith and reason is one that will not let me go. Why do I believe what I believe about religion? Why do others believe what they believe? Do we believe because we were raised to believe, because we have religious experience that we cannot ignore, or because of rational evidence? Why *should* we believe—or not? These questions are, properly speaking, the purview of (religious) epistemology, the study of (religious) knowledge.

Early in 2006 I was offered some humanities grant money from the Eli Lilly Foundation, administered through and by the Center for Research and Innovation at Taylor University, to go to Utah and study Mormonism. I accepted the grant and carefully chose four Taylor University seniors to assist me with the research. These students (all Biblical Studies majors) were Christine Goslin, Andrew Jones, Kelly Biere, and Ben Taylor, all of whom did excellent work. They contributed to the project in three fundamental ways. First, they read and regularly discussed Mormon theology during the spring of 2006 along with me and my research assistant, Ian Church. Second, we all used an IRB-approved questionnaire that Ian and I created to interview both Mormons and Evangelicals during the summer of 2006 in different parts of the country about why they believed that their faith was true. Third, we all got back together during the fall of 2006 to interpret and organize the answers. Then, in October, the six of us presented our findings in a seminar on the campus of Taylor University.

This book is a presentation of that research with scholarly commentary on my part. It is not just another book on Mormonism or Evangelicalism, and it is neither polemical nor apologetic. It is, rather, contemplative in nature. I use the answers provided by our Mormon and Evangelical subjects to reflect on the relationship between faith and reason and to suggest a particular model for interpreting the sociological, spiritual,

and rational aspects of faith to the broader American populace. My target audience is any educated reader who wants to think both critically and sympathetically about *reasons* for faith—his or her own faith *and* the faith of others whose religious perspectives are different. Scholars tend to put intellectual effort into understanding *what* people believe, but often fail to reflect on *why* they believe. Understanding the rationale behind different belief systems fosters mutual understanding in ways that mere analysis of particular beliefs does not. I also offer this method as a model for other comparative religion research.

Special thanks go to Steve Snyder and Don Takehara of Taylor University for securing the grant money, to Ian for his researching of recent publications on Mormonism and his creation of the rough draft of the questionnaire, and to Kelly for double-checking portions of our work and for contributing substantially to the rough draft of Chapter 3. I am also grateful to Leah White, Geoff Wiggins, Tere Foster, Darin Rohatinsky, Cynthia Hallen, and Sam Mikel for putting their conversion stories into writing for inclusion in the book. Without the contributions of all who worked on this project, the book would not have been possible.

All of the interviews conducted with the questionnaire were confidential. Because of this, I report answers without identifying the names of the subjects interviewed. I also conducted a number of other, nonconfidential interviews with committed Mormons, ex-Mormons, and Evangelical missionaries to the Mormons (without the questionnaire), and I report the content of those interviews and/or the names of those interviewed where appropriate. And of course, I cite scholarly, published works throughout.

A brief word of explanation is in order for the reader who cares about my own place in the religious universe. I was raised in the Evangelical world (Baptist). My first two degrees are from Evangelical institutions; my last two from a state university. After spending time in several different denominational churches, I became a high-church Protestant. Today I choose to live and work outside of the Evangelical world. Because of this, I feel like I have the perspective of both an insider and an outsider. While this is not always a comfortable experience, it does give me a unique perspective on contemporary Evangelicalism. On a related note, the conclusions I draw and the views I express here do not necessarily represent those of the people who worked with me; they are strictly my own.

Finally, this project is a serious analysis of reasons for and influences on faith. For people who take their faith seriously, religion is the

most important thing in the world. But religion can be and sometimes is funny as well. We encountered some things along the way that put smiles on our faces, and I have attempted to pass them on here and there throughout the book. Feel free to laugh when the script calls for it—and even when it does not.

INTRODUCTION
FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH DESCRIBED

In the philosophy of religion course that I teach, I suggest to students that there are four basic approaches to the question of faith and reason available to people today. These are fideism, presuppositionalism, the classical method, and evidentialism.[1] It is possible to identify more than four, but other approaches appear to be derivatives and/or developments of these. Fideism is the view that faith and reason have virtually nothing to do with each other. Fideists believe that one should believe apart from, and even contrary to, rational evidence.[2] Presuppositionalism is the view that one should believe first, and then one will see that the evidence supports the religious world view.[3] Christian presuppositionalists believe that spiritual enlightenment and faith are necessary to see the evidence honestly because of the noetic effects of sin. According to them, sin so distorts our ability to reason properly that we must possess the Holy Spirit before we can honestly evaluate the evidence for Christian truth claims.

Proponents of the classical method believe that Christian religious experience (i.e. the work of the Holy Spirit) enlightens the mind and inspires faith, but they also believe that non-Christians can evaluate evidence honestly. The noetic effects of sin are not as drastic as the presuppositionalists claim, according to classicists. One should balance spiritual experience and evidence in determining what is religiously true, but give a slight edge to the work of the Spirit within. Technically, the inner

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[1] For detailed explanations, defenses, and critiques of all of these except fideism, see Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000). In this volume, presuppositionalism is defended by John M. Frame, the classical method by William Lane Craig, and evidentialism by Gary R. Habermas. Much of my description of these methods here is derived from this work.

[2] Evidence in this project is defined as anything that is objective (or reasonably objective) that appears to support a religious truth claim and to which virtually all people have access. Examples include philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God and archaeological confirmations of persons and places in the Bible.

[3] This approach was developed by a particular brand of Evangelicals, but people holding other religious beliefs—like some of the Mormons whom we interviewed—can and do believe in a similar approach to faith and reason from their own perspective. My impression is that different types of presuppositionalism show up in various religious traditions.

witness of the Spirit is sufficient for knowing the truth, but evidence can strengthen faith and demonstrate the rationality of faith to unbelievers.

Finally, there is evidentialism. Evidentialists place more emphasis on objective evidence for faith than proponents of the other three views do. Christian evidentialists believe that Christianity can be proven beyond a reasonable doubt, and that faith *should* have substantial evidence to back it up. It may not be possible for every believer to possess knowledge of the evidence, but the community of faith (i.e. the Church) should be aware of the case for Christianity and offer it to all who seek it. Religious evidentialists and atheists generally share the same assumption about the need for evidence, but disagree about the *weight* of the evidence for Christianity (and other world religions).

Which is the correct view, and how do we incorporate the obvious truth that beyond religious experience and reason, *upbringing* significantly impacts our religious beliefs? There are three fundamental reasons why a person might believe that Mormonism, Evangelicalism, or any other belief system is true.[4] First, they may have been raised to believe in it. Our upbringing *does* have a significant impact on our faith. In our interviews, we asked both Mormons and Evangelicals about how they were raised and how those around them influence their faith. I call these influences the *sociological* foundations of faith. Second, many people have internal, religious experiences that inspire and sustain faith. In Christianity, this is the work of the Holy Spirit who enlightens, convicts, regenerates, guides, and encourages. All devoted members of the major religions of the world claim internal, spiritual experiences that determine (at least in part) their religious beliefs. I call these the *spiritual* foundations of faith, and we asked people to put into words what these experiences were like for them. Although this is often difficult, we asked people to try and found that they did a much better

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[4] By "Mormonism" I mean the religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, and by "Mormon" I mean members of this Church. This is the dominant form of Mormonism in the world today. We did not interview members of other, smaller, "Mormon" groups. Also, for purposes of this project, "Evangelicals" are any and all theologically conservative Protestants, both denominational and nondenominational. For more nuanced definitions (or descriptions) of Evangelicalism, see Donald Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 125-130; and David Harrington Watt, *A Transforming Faith: Explorations of Twentieth-Century American Evangelicalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) 1-4, 155-157.

job than expected in articulating these experiences.[5] Finally, there is reason. People sometimes claim objective evidence for their faith. Occasionally people even claim to convert to a particular religion because of such evidence. We asked people questions related to rational evidence. Do Mormons and Evangelicals believe because of evidence, apart from evidence, or contrary to evidence? To the extent that people value evidence, to that extent they have a *rational* foundation for their faith. We also asked about doubt. Rational arguments can encourage or discourage faith. We wanted to know how Mormons and Evangelicals dealt with doubts about their faith.

The questions on the questionnaire were designed to elicit what committed Mormons and Evangelicals believe about these foundational questions. In what follows, I identify and reflect on the four approaches to faith implied by the answers our subjects gave. Then, in the Conclusion, I recommend a revised version of one of these as the best approach. Too often, I think, religious people engage in polemics and apologetics without reflecting on the relevance of reason to faith. For example, if one critiques the belief system of another person using reason, and the person holding the beliefs denies the relevance of reason, then the critique may not be very meaningful. One may also believe incorrectly that one's own religious beliefs have been proved beyond a reasonable doubt, when in fact the evidence may not be that straightforward.

Related to all of this is the issue of mystery. Virtually all persons of faith at some point must confess that they believe in things that are mysterious. Mysteries are things that people believe but only partially understand. There is a difference conceptually, it seems to me, between the mysterious and the irrational. A mystery is suprarational (above and beyond reason at certain points), whereas a true contradiction or inconsistency is irrational (contrary to reason). When pressed to explain and defend a belief that is partially suprarational, many people of faith will "play the mystery card" at that point; that is, they claim that the belief is beyond human understanding. Do Mormons and Evangelicals ever "play the card" to cover up irrationality? This project gives the thoughtful reader an opportunity to reflect on whether he or she is guilty of this as well. It is my hope that as a result of this project, the reader will be more understanding of why others believe things that to him or her may seem rationally

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[5] I discuss psychological influences on faith in the Spiritual Foundations chapter.

unfounded, and will be motivated to show respect and tolerance as a result, without necessarily agreeing with the religious beliefs themselves.

In what follows, I explore the sociological, spiritual, and rational foundations of faith evident in the lives of real Mormons and Evangelicals with the goal of shedding light on *why* people believe what they believe and why we should—or should not—adhere to any particular belief system. But first we look briefly at the history of Christianity and the two basic theologies that inform the answers our subjects gave.