

BOUNDS AND CONDITIONS

A STRONG FOUNDATION

By Rick Jepson

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second installment of the "Bounds and Conditions" column, which explores the intersection of science and health issues with Mormon theology, culture, and experience. Please submit your reflections to column editor Rick Jepson at bounds.and.conditions@hotmail.com.

THE TYPES OF explorations of science and health we hope to feature in this column wouldn't be possible without a strong Mormon tradition of science writing. In the last few decades, Duane Jeffery, Erich Robert Paul, Richard P. Smith, Keith Norman, David Bailey, and other capable authors have blazed a path for us to pave and enlarge.

Mining through their work has been among the most rewarding endeavors of my life. I've enlarged my testimony, humbled my intellect, and found a comforting camaraderie with authors who ably navigate through troublesome questions that keep my eyes open at night and my mouth shut at church. And though I'm still at the foothills of this expedition, several important themes have begun to emerge.

THE attempt to demarcate scientific knowledge from religious faith has been a perennial subject inviting varied approaches. For example, LDS scientist Henry Eyring denies any essential difference between the two, saying:

Every proof in science depends on the postulates one accepts. The same is true of religion. The certitude one has about the existence of God ultimately comes from personal experience, the experience of others or logical deductions from the postulates one accepts. People sometimes get the idea that religion and science are different, but they are not different at all. There is nothing in science that does not hinge on some primitive constructs you take for granted. What is an

electron? I can tell you some things about the electron we have learned from experiment, and if you accept these things, you will be able to make predictions. But ultimately you always get back to my postulates.

I am certain in my own mind of the truthfulness of the gospel, but I can only communicate that assurance to you if you accept my postulates.¹

But an anonymous social scientist disagrees with him. Claiming that his specialty is less faith-promoting than a physical science like chemistry, he described the difficulty of claiming to know anything and suggested a different ambition altogether for religious faith:

Now how does a scientist respond when he faces the query, "What do I know?" He can't go through a set of catechismic rituals that are implied by the eight year old or the twelve year old who is giving a testimony before a group—something approximating the memorized statement. He must make sharp, relative distinctions between "I would like to believe" and "I believe," and between "I had a past belief" and "I know." Now a testimony in the fullest sense seems to be introduced with the assertion, "I know." That is the most frequent rhetoric, "I know that," "I know that," "I know that," and "I know that." The characteristic of an educated man, on the other hand, is marked by the quali-

fications he puts on what he knows. . . . And the goal of religious development might not be the serenity of certainty, an absolute acceptance on faith, but the capacity to sustain the tension of not knowing. To be able to live with uncertainty, to be able to cope with the insecurities of an exceedingly complex world in order to control it would be a higher achievement religiously, I think. Now this is the description of a different kind of religion, but it is a religion that is consonant with progress, growth and development.²

Struggling with this same dilemma, Robert Fletcher describes the balance he finally reached between the qualified hypotheses of science and the claims of knowledge common to many LDS testimonies:

As I reflect back on my hesitance to use the word *know* in describing how I feel about the Church, I still feel that my use of the word is consistent with that described by Alma in Alma 32. We can know with some certainty of the burning within, or the enlargement of our souls, and yet have only faith in the truths of the Church. But at the same time, I'm not inclined to be critical of the culture in the Church which requires good members of the Church to say they know the Church is true. To me it reflects an indication of a strong degree of conviction about the Church. It's not too hard for me to translate "I know the Church is true" to "I know I have had a burning in my bosom which confirms the goodness of the Church and the truth of the principles which it teaches." This feeling can be so consuming as to eliminate all doubt.³

ANOTHER common theme is the comfortable acceptance that science and faith would frequently be at odds—at least for now. John A. Widsøe once wrote that "the struggle for reconciliation between the contending forces is not an easy one. It cuts deep into the soul and usually leaves scars that ache while life endures."⁴ Yet Mormon literature is full of authors willing to bear that burden, scientists unfazed by points of contention between their faith and their study.

The late Stephen J. Gould famously out-



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lined a philosophy of religion and science he called NOMA, or “non-overlapping magisteria,” wherein the two realms of science and religion are encouraged to maintain a respectful, strict separation. “NOMA seeks no false fusion,” he explains, “but urges two distinct sides to stay on their own turf” and to “develop their best solutions to designated parts of life’s totality.”⁵ In other words, faith and knowledge must remain entirely separate; any attempt at reconciliation invites disaster.

But Mormon literature demonstrates an alternate approach. With near consensus, LDS authors express something that might be called GOMA, or gradually overlapping magisteria. They seem to share a sentiment that while knowledge and faith may presently be at odds, once both are fully understood, they’ll harmonize perfectly. Richard P. Smith puts it best: “Since Mormonism and science are both basically true, they will converge eventually.”⁶

This belief does not imply that we should expect, or even want, any overlap today. It remains inappropriate, for example, for the Church to make an official doctrinal stand on evolution or geology. Duane Jeffery writes:

Authoritative statements concerning scientific matters seem neither necessary nor desirable, even if the knowledge to make them did exist, and it seems clear that it does not. Effective arguments can be marshaled to support the point that such pronouncements, necessarily restrictive in their nature, would stifle the very experience that life is supposed to provide; they would be inimical to the very roots of the process of “evolving into a God.”⁷

Nor, in fact, should we be too concerned about what Church leaders believe about the age of the earth, the mutability of species, or the details of the Creation. Eyring explains, “I never worry what the Brethren believe about my specialty today because it is part of the genius of the Lord’s Church that both they and I will understand the entire situation better tomorrow.”⁸

A THIRD prominent theme in the literature is a concern for the Church’s change in its general attitude toward science since the wave of anti-science sentiment led by Joseph Fielding Smith, Bruce R. McConkie, and Mark E. Peterson. Richard P. Smith asks:

When will I again see General Authorities, Church publications, teachers, and parents give assur-

ance to all that science blends beautifully with Mormonism? Yes, Virginia, that’s the way it was in the thirties when I was a child in northern Utah, and on into the early fifties. That sort of support for science is unknown to today’s young Mormons; instead they hear that much of what the schools teach is wrong and they had better not believe it. I’m thankful that my faith wasn’t subjected to that test and that I had help with my concerns about whether a scientist could be a Latter-day Saint. Are not today’s students and scientists in greater jeopardy of failing to develop strong faith in the Church?⁹

David Bailey echoes this concern and worries that we have replaced the pro-science doctrines of the early restoration with anti-science sentiment borrowed from traditional Christianity:

Latter-day Saint theology, with its rich tradition of naturalism and open-minded attitudes toward science, is to many intellectually minded members a major factor in their continued faith. There is no question that its foundation of natural law and rationality permits a significantly cleaner accommodation of the principles of science than most other theological systems.

However, this tradition may be in danger as the Church continues to experience exponential growth, bringing in converts whose beliefs are deeply rooted in the theologies of traditional Christianity. Current Church literature frequently includes statements about God’s absolute omnipotence and his ability to alter the laws of nature, even though these sectarian doctrines sharply disagree with traditional Mormon theology. Similarly, the conservatism that pervades modern

creation beliefs in the Church seems to have more in common with certain Christian fundamentalist sects than with the open-minded philosophies of the early Church leaders.¹⁰

OUTSIDE of these important themes, there have been numerous treatments of more specific matters: cosmology, evolution, psychology, and more. But in nearly all cases, even very specific topics are still related to or build upon the three themes I’ve listed here. And they are themes that will probably influence most future contributions as well.

It is exhilarating and daunting to begin a new column dedicated to the intersection of Mormonism with science and health. But discovering just how large and solid the foundation is, I’m all the more excited to start building. I invite your contributions to this important endeavor. 🙏

NOTES

1. Edward L. Kimball, “A Dialogue with Henry Eyring,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, nos. 3/4 (Autumn/Winter 1973): 104.
2. Clyde Parker and Brent Miller, “Dialogues on Science and Religion,” *Dialogue* 8, nos. 3/4 (Autumn/Winter 1973): 117.
3. Robert C. Fletcher, “One Scientist’s Spiritual Autobiography,” *SUNSTONE*, September 1985, 35.
4. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist: A Contribution to Mormon Philosophy* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 1.
5. Stephen J. Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 211.
6. Richard P. Smith, “Science: A Part of or Apart from Mormonism?,” *Dialogue* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 118.
7. Duane E. Jeffery, “Seers, Savants and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface,” *Dialogue* 34, nos. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2001), 222.
8. Quoted in Smith, “Science, A Part of or Apart from Mormonism?,” 13.
9. *Ibid.*, 106.
10. David H. Bailey, “Scientific Foundations of Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1988), 78.

 **Pontius' Puddle**

