

Of Cults and Men

The other day my wife and I went to a bookstore. She was looking for books to send to her mother, but I had nothing particular in mind, so I ended up wandering into the Religion section. I rarely have a specific reason for going there, but the result is often the same. This time I picked up a book whose title was something similar to "The Encyclopedia of Cults." I flipped open to the section on "Mormonism" and began to read.

One of the first things that struck me was that, to a large extent, everything written therein was factually correct. However, the writing was still fundamentally dishonest. Why? In the first place, because they were careful not to present certain facts, and there was a lot of innuendo. We are all familiar with how much one can do by presenting only part of a story. However, there was something much more basic, and much more insidious. Although this book is meant to be a reference to help people to avoid false doctrines, they never addressed the central questions: Was Joseph Smith a prophet? Is the Book of Mormon the word of God? Does God's authority rest in the priesthood? Those issues were never mentioned.

It is possible that the authors themselves were unaware of their dishonesty. The thrust of their presentation was to attack Joseph Smith's character, and to highlight inconsistencies in the Book of Mormon as a historical and archaeological tool. I am reasonably certain that in the minds of the authors their position is consistent – if a prophet or scripture doesn't meet their concept of a prophet or scripture, then it must be false. I suppose it might be instructive if I were to train the same level of criticism and innuendo on the basis of their beliefs. Actually, I am unwilling to do so, because their basis is the Bible and the Savior, and even to play devil's advocate I am unwilling to ridicule those sacred concepts¹. But I think the idea serves to illustrate the point I am making – their writing is dishonest, and it would not be at all difficult for the authors themselves to recognize that if they made a sincere effort.

¹ Perhaps I can be audacious enough to mention the question of authority. As these are people who reject the Pope as God's authority, it is fair to ask their source of authority for saying what is truth and what is not. I believe their basis is the Bible itself. "So was the Bible Christ's source of authority?" "No, he was the Son of God." "At what point, then, did he invest his authority in the Bible? Note that most of the basis for 'mainstream' Christianity rests in writings made well after Christ was dead." That may not be entirely fair, but again, I think it illustrates my point.

So, what is there to learn from this little vignette? Let me return to my questions: Was Joseph Smith a prophet? Is the Book of Mormon the word of God? Does God's authority rest in the priesthood?

These questions cannot be answered by man's reason alone. We may not like a prophet who truly was raised without formal education in a frontier environment, who was surrounded by superstition and lack of polish during his early years. However, that is not the issue. A prophet is one to whom God speaks, not one nominated by men. How can we know if Joseph was a prophet? Only by the witness of the Holy Ghost. There is no other way. God's word comes as God gives it, not whether men want it. God's authority comes from God, not from man. For those who honestly want to disprove Mormonism there are no easy answers.

A number of years ago a co-worker, who was not actually comfortable with religion in any form, challenged me on how I could claim to know the church was true when there is no objective proof. I assured him that there is objective proof, and that the truth of the gospel can be proved by an experiment as rigorous and well controlled as those used to prove any other scientific principle. He was obviously interested, and eagerly awaited my answer. I explained Moroni's promise, and he was immediately disappointed. The problem with the experiment that proves spiritual principles is that we have to risk ourselves – it cannot be run without our personal involvement.

And that is the challenge to those who would disprove Mormonism – the only way they can find out is by risking the proposition that it is true. Until they are willing to take that risk, until they are truly ready to test it on themselves, there is no answer as to the truth nor the falseness of the principles we espouse. The only comfort I can offer to such is that I have run the experiment. I may not have known it was a risk, but I took the risk, and I do know that Joseph Smith is a prophet; that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, and that God's authority is manifested on the earth today in his priesthood. Those truths are absolute, and they are the same for me, for you, and for anyone else who honestly wants to know.