

*A world-renowned scholar of rhetoric shares the fruits of his life-long, interior discussion between his boyhood Mormon religious fundamentalism and his adult "faith," which he calls rhetoricology (the pursuit of an ecumenical dialogue in search of common ground). It was the direct result of his two years as a conflicted, intellectual LDS missionary.*

## CONFESSIONS OF AN AGING, HYPOCRITICAL EX-MISSIONARY

By Wayne C. Booth

UNTIL I WAS FAR INTO MY TEENS, I WAS AN utterly unquestioning Mormon. My parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles were all visibly, audibly, aggressively devout—all except one uncle, a smoker, a "black sheep." For our family, non-Mormons were beyond the pale—to be tolerated, of course, even treated kindly if they behaved themselves, viewed perhaps as potential converts, but never courted or married, and never even visited socially. They were certainly not destined, like us, to enter the celestial kingdom. We knew that in the next life those lost souls would not even be allowed to come near us, as we all continued our eternal progression, pursuing knowledge and righteousness—concepts that when defined correctly turned out to be the same thing.

What I remember as most important to me was that in heaven the non-Mormon or non-devout males down there in the lower kingdoms would have no hope for what I had a strong hope for, if I kept my nose clean: becoming the god of another world, accompanied by a pious female helpmate. Meanwhile, here and now, non-Mormons were so far beneath us that it was dangerous even to get near them. I remember feeling scared to walk too close to the one non-Mormon church in my home town, American Fork, Utah. I would always cross the road and walk on the other side, to avoid contamination, and I was thankful that we lived in another ward, far from that wicked place.

In short, until my first questioning began at about fourteen, I was a 100 percent devotee of what might be called an exclu-

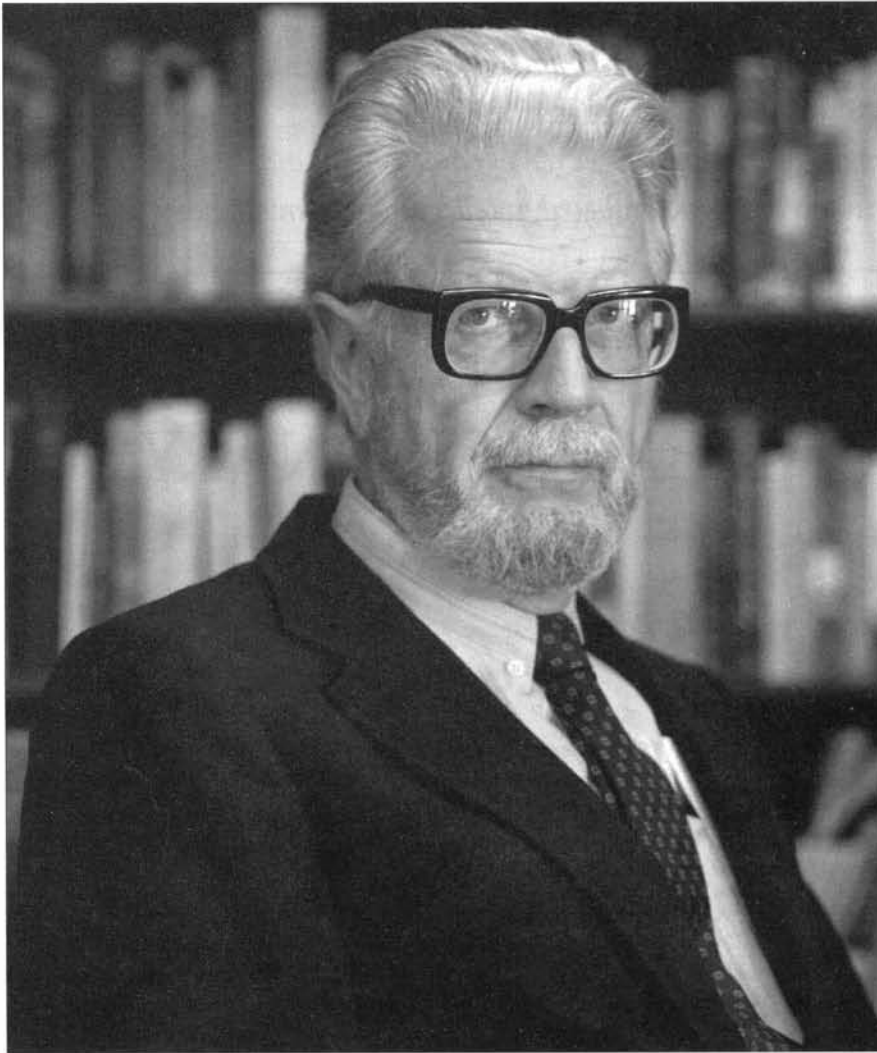
sivist, or particularist, anti-ecumenical version of Mormonism. That boy, the very young Wayne Booth, would perhaps these days be called by non-Mormons a fundamentalist (the word wasn't in our vocabulary, I'm quite sure). Born and reared in the pre-Darwinian nineteenth century, as you might say, he was for about fifteen years unaware of what had been happening to western thought from long before he was born.

Where am I now? Well, I'm still a "Mormon," but one who puts quotation marks around most of my religious commitments—the marks always translated not as "disbelief" but as "Allow me my own definitions." The pious young believer and I have engaged in a variety of dialogues for going on seven decades. As my beliefs and unbeliefs have shifted about, the debates have, of course, changed ground. At times I've treated the boy as a stupid oaf, and he's treated me as a lost soul. Sometimes he has been so shocked by my ideas, and even more by how low I rank coffee or wine drinking on the scale of sins, that he has simply and angrily cast me off, even as I have lamented his naive commitment to silly superstitions and destructive prejudices.

Now, though, as he and I face the many conflicting religious and anti-religious conflicts flooding our world, the distance between us seems to me far less, and the need to get together, in spite of his remaining conviction that that is impossible, seems ever greater. After all, I tell him, many of my admired religious friends now talk about an apocalyptic ending fully as confidently as he does. And some of them even have in mind, as he does, a second coming: if we can just probe space far enough and vigorously enough, we'll find some planet to escape to when this one collapses. Isn't it time, I now ask my young self, to probe beneath the superficial "verbal" differences to the true grounds of our strongest convictions? Isn't our real assignment, as we approach the new millennium, to

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Wayne Booth, the “old metaphorist” whose “faith” involves a genuine dialogue with the “young literalist” he used to be.

**N**othing we ever work at is more important than the drive not just to maintain peace with rivals but to understand them: to learn to think with them while assisting them to think with us in return.

discover what we share and then decide, probing our differences, just what can be cast aside?

He's a bit more open these days to that suggestion, but for many decades he viewed my profession of commitment to various “liberal” versions and virtues of Mormonism as simply a hypocritical disguise for genuine betrayal:

You're betraying Grandma and Grandpa Booth and Grandma and Grandpa Clayson and Great Grandfather and Great Grandmother Hawkins and all the Chipman pioneers. You're casting aside the very

testimonies that I have borne in fast meeting at least ten times already. You'll make it so we'll not be allowed to talk with any of the family in the next world. Even though you list yourself as a Mormon in *Who's Who*, you're not a Mormon any more! You don't even believe that Mormons have the Only True Church. You say you believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ and in Joseph Smith as a true prophet, but I know that you mean all that as something covered by a word I just learned in school: it's *metaphor* for you, not literal truth. You are just plain hypocritical.

And off he rides on his bicycle to go to a Boy Scout meeting, or to collect fast day donations, or to remind the other boys in his deacon's quorum that they must attend both meetings Sunday or the other quorum will win the contest for best attendance.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes I can manage, though, to entice him into a real discussion about what beliefs we still share. My claim in those discussions is that he and I still share the most important Mormon truths, the ones that are most *truly* “religious.” That radical claim continues to disturb him: “I don't see how you can make that claim, and I don't see how we can even discuss it. When you arrogantly reject what I *know* to be true, I just don't want to talk with you.” But I go on arguing—as I shall argue here—that beneath our differences, he and I still share common ground that is far more important than our differences.

#### LEARNING RHETOROLOGY

*Finding common ground even with enemies and remaining open to conversion.*

**A**S I've talked not just with that young fundamentalist but with various “enemies” and other “selves” over the years, I've been learning the kind of rhetorical practice that these days I risk labeling with a neologism, “rhetorology”: not rhetorical persuasion but rather a systematic, ecumenical probing of the essentials shared by rival rhetorics in any dispute—whether about religion or about other important matters. Though rhetorology shares many features with other “dialogical” efforts, what it perhaps most resembles is political diplomacy. But unlike skillful diplomats, rhetorologists do not just try to discover the rival basic commitments and then “bargain.” Nor do they just tolerate, in a spirit of benign relativism. Instead, they search together for true grounds then labor to decide how those grounds dictate a

change of mind about more superficial beliefs. Any genuine rhetorologist entering any fray is committed to the possibility of conversion to the "enemy" camp.

For decades I've been especially interested in the quarrels between those who specifically label themselves as religious (and who dismiss all atheists as inherently benighted) and many of those who call themselves atheists or unbelievers (and who dismiss all religious talk as nothing more than superstition). As I have struggled to write a book on that subject,<sup>2</sup> my imagined conversations with the lively, probing young believer I once was have come to seem more and more important.

For me, the pursuit of such a rhetorology has become a vocation that could be called religious, a kind of "faith" in, or unshakeable conviction of, the ultimate value of pursuing understanding and improved dialogue about shared fundamental values. The validity of such a faith could never be proved with hard logic or scientific evidence. It is as much a *faith* as any overt commitment to a church, but in my rhetorical terms it is both a religious and a *rational* faith: one that can be genuinely supported by careful argument of "the right kind," even though it can easily be described as naive or flatly absurd, according to some narrow notions of rational proof. There are obviously no scientific or strictly *logical* proofs for the importance of ecumenical, pluralistic probing. But I can find no *good* reasons to doubt its service to genuine religion.

Skeptics concerning this special kind of religious pursuit are found in every field and in most religious groups. And they always find good evidence for their skepticism. Our world is full of evidence showing that attempts at dialogue between contrasting faiths fail more often than they succeed; think of the failed conversations now going on among—or flatly denied by—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews. Indeed many philosophers and politicians and defenders of religion will claim that there can be no genuine discussion about religion between a pluralist like me and that fourteen-year-old religious dogmatist; religious dispute is in-

herently the kind that gets nowhere. As the self-proclaimed "atheist" Richard Rorty put it not long ago, religion should be "privatized"—it should be "kept out of the public square." It is bad taste to "bring religion into discussions of public policy," because all overtly "religious" groundings are irrational, refuted by the "Enlightenment" that he claims still to embrace.<sup>3</sup> In short, I'm sure that for him the "faith" undergirding the article I'm writing here is absurd.

Why should anyone persist in such a faith, looking back on a lifetime and out at a world, both of which seem to exhibit more failures than successes in the search for common spiritual ground? Within the Latter-day Saint community, one seems to see more and more drawing of sharp, impermeable lines, less and less embrace of the notion that religious devotion expresses itself best when "believers" get together and think through the grounds of their belief. Of course there's no way of proving that the lines are sharper now than when I was young. But it is clear that throughout my lifetime most Mormons would be skeptical about my claim that the young literalist and this old metaphorist belong, in the deepest sense,



As a young missionary, Elder Booth wrestled in his journal with the world views competing with his Mormon orthodoxy.

**U**nlike some friends who could not discern middle ground and leapt off into being non- or anti-Mormons, my search for shared ground removed all reasons for a break with Mormonism.

to the same church.

Such a claim might well lead in hundreds of directions. For the rest of this article, I'll pursue just one of them, with the question:

Where did I pick up a faith as difficult to defend as the faith in what I'm calling rhetorology—not just ecumenicism but the pursuit of ecumenical dialogue?

Only recently have I begun to suspect that it was the direct result of my two years as a confused, probing, often-troubled Mormon missionary.

#### MUSING ON MY MISSION

*Though a doubter, I found myself a missionary wanting to believe in the validity of my service.*

AFTER five or six years of reading and questioning and privately conferring with pious but unorthodox teachers,<sup>4</sup> as well as heated debates with orthodox and unforgiving authorities, the twenty-year-old Wayne Booth, argumentative and increasingly skeptical about many Mormon claims, and even more troubled by the behavior of many "Saints," surprised a lot of people by accepting a mission call. As he put it to skeptical friends at BYU, but never to the Church authorities, he was not going out to make converts, not to "get people dunked into the baptismal water," but "to do good in the world" and "to start liberalizing the Church from within." Did that feel hypocritical? Yes indeed—at least some of the time.

The key moment of decision went like this (reconstructed nearly thirty years later, in 1969, as I wrestled with my religious doubts and convictions in the light of my eighteen-year-old son's accidental death):

*Scene: The northwest corner of the Brigham Young University farmland, where the head sluice gates lie—sluice gates that I manipulate as I irrigate the farm through the long summer hours, reading my pocket Plato as I wait at the end of the furrows for the water to arrive. This evening, Professor M. Wilford Poulson has happened by, seen me pulling up a headgate, and stopped his car nearby. After finishing my simple task, I go to his car, place one rubber-booted foot on his fender, and we start talking. We talk and talk—talk on through the beautiful sunset, on into the twilight, slapping mosquitoes, talking, talking mainly about the Church and my doubts.*

POULSON: Don't throw out the baby with the bath water. You keep leaping ahead into areas you know nothing about. The fact that some Church leaders are dishonest or unjust doesn't mean that the Church is valueless. Every institution, including every church, has some immoral leaders. Surely you're not going to relapse into the position that because the Church claims to be divinely led, and its leaders are clearly not divine, it must be valueless, when judged in human terms.

WAYNE: No, but I don't see any reason to . . .

POULSON: You shouldn't be looking for reasons *to*. You should be looking only for reasons *not to*. Here you are, raised in a marvelously vital tradition, surrounded by an

astonishing number of good, intelligent people who have found a way to organize their lives effectively. You come along and ask them for reasons *to* do what they are doing! What you should ask for, before giving up anything they offer you, is reasons *not to* go along.

WAYNE: But I just can't *stand* even sitting in Church without speaking up when somebody talks nonsense. Last Sunday they were talking about personal devils, and some of them really believed that stuff.

POULSON: Well, you know what I've always said when some authority grills me on that one: "Of course I believe in personal devils. All my devils are personal." It's so unimportant whether you call it devils, or personal quests, or temptation, or schizophrenia. . .

*The fifty-five-year-old widower, hated by many students for his nagging discipline in the classroom, mistrusted by the Church and university authorities, owner of "the best collection of books on Mormon history" (he has previously invited me into his basement to have a look at his collection of "forbidden" sources) talks on into the dark, feeling lucky (I have no doubt) to have with him one of those rare students who really loves discussing deep questions for hours on end.*

*Of course I cannot see the boy; I only feel myself standing there, chilling a bit in my wet socks, tired after twenty hours of irrigating (not hard labor, admittedly, but still—), changing from one foot to the other—and exhilarated beyond description: this is what life can be, this is one of the great times—I'll stay here forever if he'll only go on talking.*

POULSON: What you should be doing, instead of trying to undermine other people's belief, is discovering beliefs that you yourself can live by. And you'll find most of them being taught right in the Church, by the people you're attacking. That's why I keep saying, "Show me a better Church." I'm not determined to stay with this one, if you'll find me another one that does as much good and that has fewer corrupt leaders, a better attitude on race, or what not.

WAYNE: But that's not good enough. Don't we have the right to hope for an institution that is at least honest with itself? I long for a cause that I can give myself to as fully as the believers—my father and mother, my grandparents—could give in earlier times.

POULSON: Well, I'm sure you can find it, if you want to badly enough. Because all you have to do is just put your mind to rest and let your emotions take over. Almost any church can easily become *that* to you, if you want it to badly enough. The Mormons have plenty of members like that; all causes do. What they lack is devoted men [I'm pretty sure he did not add women] who still are willing to *think*, not just be carried away with sentimentality. What they really need is a corps of missionaries who know everything that's wrong about the Church—and who don't care, because they know that it can be an instrument for good in their hands.

*In the dark, now, the moon not quite ready to rise, the stars bright as they never seem to be in 1969, the "old" man's gray*

hair is faintly visible inside the car; the deep thoughtful voice pours out into the night. His dirty fingernails are now invisible, and there is nothing but prophetic voice and silver glow.

WAYNE: Do you mean to suggest that I should go on a mission?

POULSON: Why not? If you could work not to get the people under the water in the greatest possible number but to take them where you find them and help them to grow—why not? Can you think of a better way to spend two years than setting out to help other people—with no concern about your own welfare or future? That's what the missionary system is, at its best. Oh, yes, I admit that it seldom works at its best. Most of the boys are so badly prepared, at nineteen or twenty, that they couldn't even do a good job in the narrow definition of making converts. But you might, if you worked hard, if you thought hard, and if you could keep from worrying too much about your own reputation—you might make a real difference for a lot of people. Just take for example the whole question of charity toward backsliders—who has *that* in charge, in our present set-up? None of the other missionaries will be working on *that*, and you might. Why not?

*So at ten o'clock they break up—and a few days afterwards Wayne Clayson Booth accepts the call.*

Now, here in the late nineties, it's clear that young Booth thus landed himself in rhetorical waters far more turbulent than he could ever have predicted: even Poulson, who had served as a missionary before doing the historical research that for him dissolved the gold plates, could not have predicted what this "second-generation Mormon liberal" would encounter.



Elder Booth (right) and his missionary companion, Elder Marion D. Hanks. Booth went on a mission to "liberalize Mormonism from within" and ended up framing a life-long interior dialogue, the dynamic of which is religion for him.

**T**he point of rhetorical dialogue is not relativistic tolerance but genuine progress toward truth.

rhetoric with *mine*, their surface codes with what I am sure are shared beliefs that are more important than all those conflicting literal claims?"

Elder Booth got to be pretty good at some amateur versions of rhetorology, sometimes in ways that his younger self (still surviving as conscience) damned as hypocritical. He somehow didn't get far on liberalizing the whole Church from within, but he did learn how to pray in public in a language that accommodated the literalists without violating his own meditations. He learned how to give sermons that woke some people up, undermined their clichés, and led them to dwell on the central virtues and limits of Mormonism, without leading (most of the time) to angry attacks against him for unortho-

From day one, the young Booth had to deal with shock concerning differences between what he believed and what "every missionary believes." His experience in the temple ceremony was so distressing that he almost gave up and went home, and he recorded in great detail the bloodthirsty oaths and other absurdities that were much more prominent in the ceremony then than now; Poulson and others had warned him that he would be shocked, but they had understated it.

And then he found himself tracting, door to door, struggling to reconcile what the manuals said he should teach with what he believed to be the best spiritual food for himself, for his companions, and for prospects who turned up. Now living daily with companions and supervisors who considered what he called "the superstitions" to be more important than love or charity or any of the other virtues, he found himself inevitably pursuing a practice that he would no doubt have cringed to hear called "rhetorology." He became not a mere practitioner of persuasion (a "rhetor" trying to win converts to his views), and not the mere student of how people persuade (a "rhetorician"), but a rhetorologist: "How can I reconcile *their*

doxy. He learned how to learn from the orthodox what was really valuable in their orthodoxy. He did so well at it that the liberal mission president, Leo J. Muir, absorbed in Egyptian numerology rather than rhetorology, chose him as mission secretary at headquarters in Chicago. He even felt some sense of triumph, as he returned home, in January of 1944, at last facing the draft. How I wish I had a transcript of the “celebratory” talk he gave at his homecoming sacrament meeting.

#### NOT OF ONE MIND

*How could I reconcile my liberal skepticism  
with my calling as a missionary?*

**T**HAT description of what he learned about dealing with rival rhetorics is much simpler and more cheerful than the picture I find in his journals of the time, full as they are of vast swings from up to down and back again. Sometimes he is in despair. Sometimes he finds himself cursing under his breath when listening to prayers that he considers not just stupid but wicked. Only rarely does he write openly, in the daily accounts, of the rhetorical problems he faces as he deals with the surrounding orthodoxy.

He slogs it out for two solid years, much of the time wrestling in his journal over the question of just which remaining “religious” ideas, if any, he can embrace. Like the history of many probers through their youth, his account reveals great swings from doubt to belief and back again, sometimes sounding absurd to me now, sometimes a bit pathetic, sometimes fairly impressive, depending partly on my mood as I re-read.

Often the journal reveals conflicts between the gods of scientific truth and the rival gods of moral and political service: “If you care about the truth of things,” I find him implying again and again, “you ought to quit this mission.” “If you care about human welfare, now or in the future, if you care about helping people, you should continue.”<sup>5</sup>

Most striking to me now are the ways in which Elder Booth labors to reconcile diverse views of religion and science in his missionary journal. When he reads Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, for example, a book then touted by “liberal believers,” his response is that of a would-be believer rescued from the seas of doubt:

*September 5, 1942*

Bergson is magnificent, especially where he is obviously wrong or only guessing. Bergson is “righter” than most philosophers. Bergson is a man after my own heart . . .

[He says that] evolution does not come about through natural selection but through the existence of an original vital impetus—*élan vital*—which is consciousness or “life” pushing upward against materiality (which naturally is descending). Through intuition and not through intellect we can discover this *élan vital*. There is no limit in time to the impetus; it may even transcend death. It is a becoming—as is all

movement—and the aim of philosophy should be to turn inward toward this becoming in order to apprehend, “in order to follow its present results.”

The “scientist” in him—he had enrolled at BYU intending to become a chemist—of course raises doubts: Bergson “carries himself away in his enthusiasm” he writes, “and uses specious reasoning instead of real proof.” But what is palpable is the relief Booth feels at having found a *reasonable* argument for a new version of religious commitment. “One of my reasons for liking Bergson is the beautiful way in which he suits my recent ‘conversion’ to spirituality, my reversion from materialism.” As he goes on reading Bergson and “mystics” such as Aldous Huxley and religious psychologists such as Carl Jung, his joy is palpable as he experiences a “feeling of oneness and sympathy for all life and especially all human life, the feeling of a creative and impelling force greater than oneself.” Elder Booth reports his pride in being able to do so without violating the tiny bits of “irreligious” or “scientific” knowledge that he thinks he has. But the threats of “hard reason” are never far removed:

Increased knowledge will surely supplant or modify much of Bergson’s metaphysics; his jet of life or energy or whatever it was must be little more than pure fancy. Quite probably his big idea of the consciousness and its instrumentality on matter is faulty. But that consciousness *now* transcends matter and can transcend it more in the future will not be refuted—I hope.

In entry after entry, I find Elder Booth struggling to reduce the dissonance between “religious belief” and “rationally defensible belief.” Armed with Bergson, and Plato, and (later) Jung (who “says that he has never known a psychological problem that was not essentially a religious problem”), Elder Booth can sometimes, with a clear conscience, “liberalize” whatever seems ready to be liberalized as it comes his way.<sup>6</sup>

*September 8, 1942*

Last night Clive Bradford [fellow missionary] and I had a long talk about the church, philosophy, the war, and the missionary system. Brad is an intelligent fellow, original in his thinking. . . . I’ve had him reading Hocking and Will Durant and James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

That’s the tone of a young would-be wise man, spreading his mature harmonics to the world. The best critic of such pomposities was his favorite mission companion, Marion Duff Hanks. “Duff” provided brilliant challenges to most of his ideas, radical and conservative, and later provided the best possible model of what it means to be a totally devoted and active yet “liberal” Mormon. (As everyone says who knows Duff well, “He should have been made one of the Twelve.”)

Meanwhile, as the idiosyncratic mission drags on, the self-divided missionary takes refuge many hours each week in literature and music, sometimes with conscious reference to religious problems but often simply lost in the joys of art.

But almost every day he wrestles with religious questions. He says that he has discovered that every person is “a walking bundle of ineffability, a bit like God himself,” by which he ap-

parently means that the existential richness of each person finally escapes any attempt at description: forget about conceptual problems, essentially irresolvable, and revel in the riches God's world offers you. He reads *Ulysses*—can you picture it, reader, that young missionary, moving from orthodox testimony meetings to James Joyce's night-town scenes and back to the meetings? — the "most clever, most intellectual, most sophisticated book I've ever read!"

Of course, by my definition of intellectual and sophistication I exclude practically everyone before the nineteenth century, though in reality they may require more downright intelligence — the great ones — than any of the moderns.

And then he goes on wrestling with the Church he had hoped to rescue. As his first long year draws to a close, he gets the idea of organizing the liberals:

If all the so-called Mormon liberals . . . could organize . . . some beneficial changes could be wrought (might even be just plain made, without having to be wrought, but I'm sure it would be much more effective if they were wrought).

But then, in a long, fascinating paragraph, most of which I'll spare you, he describes the differences among the liberals and concludes that

the group who think as I do probably numbers no more than twenty at the most (and of course this is the *right* way, and all the others will eventually come to our position: of course!). Yes, we are a hodge-podge [the larger group of "liberals"] of mal-contents, and we'll probably never get together.

By the middle of Elder Booth's first year, the original reasons



Elder Booth (second from left) with Mission President and Sister Leo J. Muir and the office staff. President Muir allowed Elder Booth to take classes at the University of Chicago.

**T**he young man was discovering the pluralist religion that sparks my life now: the passion for furthering multiple, always partial understandings of a world, a cosmos, a God that/who somehow *deserves* to be understood and *commands* that we understand "It" and live by Its standards—even while It remains beyond any formula.

for becoming a missionary have grown rather dim. But the steady battle for intellectual freedom goes on, unofficial, never clearly formulated. In late December, eleven months in, "putting off the critique of *Ulysses*," the boy decides to "tabulate and mull over my various 'interests,'" and he proceeds to do so in three, single-spaced typed pages. After some preliminary efforts at humor (one page), he finally begins what from the perspective here could almost be described as a dialogue among three rival gods: Truth (reality), Goodness (human progress, individual and social), and Beauty (the religion of art then dominating the lives of many he most admired):

My primary interest . . . is to get closer to reality—or, I could say, "I am interested in Philosophy." I could profitably spend my whole time giving myself a rigorous philosophical education, working out a stable personal philosophical (al, al, al) position, getting at

the truth of this mysticism business. This is partly intellectual curiosity, but more it is something akin to aesthetic yearnings. I want something—the right, real thing—to replace the religion-philosophy of my childhood. I think that the mystics and the humanists and the scientific materialists all have vital things still to say to me, and I wish I could be with them constantly. . . .

Among my [deepest interests] is my passion (please let me call it that, and don't laugh) for great fiction and poetry. For instance, I could spend my whole time reading novels and training myself to write them—or at least to criticize them intelligently. . . .

Also in the "quest for reality" category is "science," the much abused and much misunderstood bane and joy of all modern thinkers. Really my first intellectual love, it still looms large in my horizon. I leave it alone—when you spend time reading this book you just can't be reading that book—far more than I should, because certainly with all my mystical leanings I must keep a firm grip on the genuine truth which science discovers.

Less ethereal, less theoretical, is my interest in politics. I'm subject to spasms of political conscience . . . the feeling that I should go actively into some liberal movement. . . .

And then, after adding music and art to these "passions," he makes a slight bow to his missionary work:

Missionary work—I neglect it horribly, always able to justify myself by saying, "Well, I'm really not ready for mature missionary work yet; what do I know? What can I teach?" . . .

And so the debates among the rival gods go on, each aspiring to replace or at least subdue features of the god he had once embraced without question. Sometimes he sounds like an arrogant prophet of the Enlightenment, with no self-doubt whatever, but more often it's a dance back and forth, up and down:

*January 4, 1943* [one year to go, after several pages on music, art, and literature]:

T. Y. [his cousin then in the army] and I are still arguing somewhat futilely about the "gospel." I find myself totally unable to convince him that when he persists in believing every detail of the J. S. [Joseph Smith] story, he is being gullible and intellectually immature. I cannot muster in sufficient force the long string of "reasons" for my present opinions to convince him. . . . His difficulty is that he thinks he has passed through the doubting period, that he has reached the final, firm ground of belief, and that I am where he was when he doubted. That is totally untrue. At the time he doubted it was merely youthful "questioning," curiosity, "show-me-ness"—the same kind I experienced at about the same time. He cannot see that the unfirm ground on which I now tread is an

entirely different intellectual bog from the one he once "wallowed" in. He says to me: "What is your concept of God?" I can't give it to him clearly. He says, "What kind of future life do you envision if the Mormon position is unacceptable for you?" I can't answer. He wonders why I doubt miracles. I can't give him acceptable reasons. He believes in a personal God. He is therefore justified in allowing that God to do miracles. One of those miracles could logically be the . . . [establishment of the Church]. All of my pointing-out of irrationalities, or inconsistencies, does no good. In the first place, he is a clever talker and can find explanations less far-fetched than the usual kind used for apologetics. In the second place, he can accuse me of trying to make religion rational which it is not (and I must admit that my kind of religion is more irrational than his). And so we go the pointless rounds, he in Australia, I in Chicago. It is good clean sport, and hurts neither of us. Although he wants to convince me more than I want to convince him, since according to his doctrine I am deliberately retarding myself, still he does not get dogmatic with me . . . and he is a great relief from the regular arguments I get on religion.

*January 29, 1943*

. . . the *Partisan Review* arrived . . . a section of three articles, "The New Failure of Nerve," by J. Dewey and two other almost-as-acute joes, made me realize even more fully than I've done before that I can't accept anyone's philosophy but my own. Their devastating comments in criticism of the so-called swing to religion were acceptable and—devastating. But their criticism of Neibuhr and Hocking . . . was more hard to take. But I had to admit the justice of many of the things they said, especially since I had said some of the same things myself.

Things they object to: (a) Attempts to discard the scientific method or to discredit it in social and political situations. (b) Arguments about "original sin"—whether literal or symbolical. Believing, they say, that man is irrevocably [sic] limited because [he is] not God, inevitably discourages attempts to eliminate the limits which *can* be eliminated. (c) The idea that since man's absolutes are usually if not always fallible, a divine absolute should be cooked-up. (They of course completely reject the idea of God. But if one accepts the Mormon theology—eternal progression of each man until he himself attains godhood—this one objection to God is done away with.)

As is quite general with me lately, I am unable to come to a decision, nor can I even accept a probability. I rather lean toward the rationalists, while still seeing that much of their "certitudes" are mythical, as Santayana would admit that they are. . . .



And then, only two days later:

Santayana, with all his naturalism, says more favorable things about religion — even dogmatic religion—than I would be able to. What is worse, he convinces me of the justice of his comments, thus making me apologetic for all the time I've spent condemning my religion and my people.

How to know where to draw lines, that is the goal of the Life of Reason, and because S. has never had to break away from a conventional belief on his own initiative, he doesn't realize the difficulties involved in drawing lines; he acts as though any halfway sensible person would be able to work out his compromises gracefully and quietly, without fanfare even in a diary.

Naturally, Elder Booth's guilt about his hypocritical missionary work frequently almost chokes him:

March 16, 1943

In trying to detect any particular theme running through my dreams each night, I find only one: I am a fake and in danger of being found out. One night I am back at my irrigation, doing my usual half-hearted job, not knowing where to go next nor when the water will get out of control, cheating the university (which, in reality, I did [I had sometimes charged them for more hours than I spent, even as they cheated me by paying only twenty-five cents an hour]); next night I am claiming five pictures in an art gallery as my own, when in reality they are not. I stalk through my dream trying to avoid questions about my methods of work, knowing I cannot answer them intelligently. I even forget which are "mine" and am in fear that someone will ask me, and so on. Another night I am a crook going to high school, and I get discovered and have to shoot my way out. . . .

April 6, 1943

One possibility [in explaining these dreams, considered, rather belatedly, after trying out some others]



Elder Booth (left) with missionaries and a family.

**M**y hypocritical missionary years taught me the inherent value of "hypocrisy upward" and how it helps us practice being "characters" superior to our ordinary selves.

is the essential hypocrisy of my present "mission" . . .

PREACHING THE PLURALIST RELIGION  
*Having come to terms with a pluralistic universe,  
I confront the reality of war.*

**W**HAT I find most revealing about this missionary record is the way in which all of that inner turmoil slowly begins, as the two years draw to a close, to resolve itself into more aggressive attempts at conscious "rhetorology." One could say that without quite knowing it, the young man was discovering the pluralist religion that sparks my life now: the passion for furthering multiple, always partial understandings of a world, a cosmos, a God, that/who somehow *deserves* to be understood and *commands* that we both try to understand "It" and live according to Its standards—even while It remains beyond any one formula. The journal entries are still predominantly about other matters—mainly Booth's own spiritual struggles. But there are many clues about his growing passion for effective dialogue—for the struggle to pursue the "overstanding" that can sometimes be found *under* various stands:

October 2, 1943

I neglected to mention, I believe, the speech I gave at the Northshore Ward last week. I was in my old

stride, at my best: perfectly at ease and composed, I yet had them intensely interested all the way—one can tell such things—and I *think* that I really made them think. My subject was, “Some of the faults which prevent Mormons from making what they could of themselves.” (It was never thus expressed, but that’s what it was). I gave it to them straight, and I believe there was only one member who did not like it; and even he seemed interested. I am a little disappointed with myself for not having given more such good accounts of myself while on my mission. . . .

I hardly ever mention my mission and my opinion of it here [in the journal]. That is, I suppose, partly because I am generally quite discouraged about the little I have accomplished. I enjoy myself around my Mormon associates more now than ever before. I think the Mormon people are good people, and I think that I am what I am, including the few good parts, largely as a result of the Mormon environment. Yet I have been discouraged by the difficulties in the way of intellectual improvement among my people. The Mormon ideology is so firmly rooted in superstition that it seems impossible ever to separate the two: despite all my apologetics, one is simply not a Mormon unless one believes in the literal divinity of the Book of Mormon, any more than one is a Christian unless one believes in the literal Christ Jesus. . . .

In general I would say that I am glad I came on the mission, though it has been far different from anything I expected. . . . [But then] the last year or so of any active life always seem very valuable in retrospect.

I still have in mind doing a book about and for Mormons, analyzing our faults, proposing future attitudes, clearing away dead beliefs. . . .

My big problem now is: shall I continue with my people as a hypocrite, shall I openly express my doubts and take my chances with my group, or shall I completely break away . . . ? As I see it now, the last named is completely impossible: I love too many Mormons . . .

November 12, 1943

Went down to a kind of miserable defeat tonight in trying to give an “original” Thanksgiving talk to the MIA of Logan Square Ward [I tried to get them to *think* about real thanksgiving]. . . . I’m sure it fell completely flat, partly because of poor treatment [I hadn’t thought it through hard enough], partly because of the people’s sentimental desire to stay within the set form of Thanksgiving thought.

With the mission that everyone else considered highly successful drawing to a close, he goes on attending concerts and visiting art galleries. Soon he begins taking courses part-time at the University of Chicago (completely counter to mission rules, but that liberal president, Leo J. Muir, has no objec-

tions). And he goes on reading and reading and reading. He reads Fawn Brodie’s life of Joseph Smith, alternating between total credulity and strong doubts. He falls in love with Blake’s “London,” memorizes it, and quotes it entirely in the journal, commenting on the mind-forged manacles that he feels still binding him:

In every cry of every man,  
In every Infant’s cry of fear  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.

January 7, 1943

“We are all conscript minds, but in different armies. And none of us are striving to be free, but each to make his own conscription universal.” Santayana is right; Blake is right. Yet there are some who work free of at least most of the manacles—some who become conscientious objectors in the conscription of the mind. [Block that metaphor!] If I didn’t think that I had, in part, cast off some of the manacles, I would have less hope of ever achieving any degree of greatness of spirit. But the distance ahead is indicated by nothing more than by my own “complicity” in the Jewish matter [the news about the Nazi atrocities was getting clearer and clearer]. With all my sincere horror and sympathy, with all my subscriptions to Refugee societies and my talking and debate, with all my reiterated concern about a society that allows mass brutality and does nothing until attacked, I find myself guilty, as I have found myself guilty a hundred times before, on the score of personal selfishness of the sort that has caused the war, personal desire for acclaim of the sort that breeds politicians and Hitlers, intolerance of the sort that persecutes Jews. . . .

Musing in this way leads one easily—unless one is careful—into nonsense about original sin. . . . Very few can ever maintain a true central position: man is neither good nor bad; he is both good and bad. He is eternally damned and he has eternal possibilities of “salvation.” Mankind as a whole will not go down to bestiality tomorrow, to please [Albert Jay] Nock or [Alfred] Kazin. . . . Nor will mankind achieve tomorrow any sort of genuinely Brave New World, with everyone being super-human, nor even with social ills eliminated, not even with war eliminated (I’m afraid). But I know empirically that men can improve (I have actually improved, myself). They can learn; they can sublimate their selfish desires (to use a corny phrase). They can, in short, progress, whether they have done so or not in the past.

And with this, the young unbeliever who yet believed in “progress,” in “the validity of the scientific method” and the continuing triumphs of science, in “the possibility of development of a beautiful spirit of man,” in “free will” (though some versions of “science” threaten this one especially strongly), in

the moral truth that “it is always in all cultures wrong to hurt others,” in the inherent value of a Mormon upbringing—that young man, radically confused not just about the problem of original sin but about almost everything (as I see it in 1998, in my utterly unconfused state of mind)—that young man completed his assigned two years as a designated “clergyman” and was then belatedly drafted into World War II.

For two long years, then, Elder Booth had been learning—without knowing what he was learning—the arts of rhetorology. As some of the skeptical Mormons he knew gave up their skepticism and returned to orthodoxy, and others pushed it further and broke with the Church, he chose, as I still choose, to pursue the ground shared by both the orthodox and the diverse brands of the unorthodox. (As M. Wilford Poulson had taught him to say, “Every Mormon trusts his own unorthodoxy.”) Just as I “pray” daily to “God” with full “devotion,” hoping for “salvation” (grant me my special definitions all the way), so I am now still a “devoted” “Latter-day Saint.”

That confession meets some difficulties when I add that I also believe in (my version of) Judaism, Catholicism, and Quakerism, not to mention (my even more ignorant versions of) Buddhism and Hinduism, and the three disguised “secular,” even “atheistic,” religions I am trying to write about in that book on the rhetorics of official and disguised religions.

#### COMING HOME TO COMMON GROUND

*Why I feel grateful for two years of hypocritical strivings.*

WHY did the young wanderer not feel guilty—except sometimes—about the hypocrisy implied by the vigorous “accommodation to the audience” required to survive as a Mormon missionary?<sup>7</sup> Why do I not feel guilty now—except sometimes—about the innumerable other accommodations to the audience that my rhetorological inquiries have required? Why did I not then and do not now feel like a mere waffler? Why, in short, do I now feel grateful for those two years of hypocritical strivings—to say nothing of the decades of hypocritical to-and-froing that followed?

Three main reasons have been implicit throughout here.

First, those years converted me to my lifetime “religion of rhetorology,” though even the word “rhetoric” never occurred at the time. I was learning, daily, just how deceptive our habitual dichotomies can be: believers/unbelievers; religious/atheistic; good/evil; saved/damned. And I was learning some of the crucial techniques for breaking into and dissolving such misleading dichotomies.

It was not a matter of theoretical inquiry; it was a daily practice that developed habits of probing what I later learned to call *topoi*, or “topics,” in the Aristotelian sense of shared *places* or groundings that underlie surface disputes. It was only when I was required in graduate school to dig into Aristotle’s treatment of topics that my practice of good and bad versions of hypocrisy became a subject for conscious intellectual inquiry. I can remember, working toward an MA four-hour examination on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, suddenly realizing, “Oh, *that’s* what I’ve been up to.” The old dismissive term “commonplaces” sud-

denly became crucial, as Aristotle distinguished the “common topics” (common-places—loosely defined spaces that all people share) and “special topics” (spaces that only practitioners in a given “specialty” share).

Consider some examples of “common,” or shared, topics, and special topics. All readers of SUNSTONE share many topics (common-places—call them universals if you prefer) with Catholics and Muslims and atheists and indeed almost everybody: for example, “To get more of whatever is really good is better than to get less of it,” but on the other hand, and in potential conflict, “It is wrong to harm a close friend, even if to do so will get you more of something you want”). More narrowly, Mormon readers of SUNSTONE share with one another and with readers of the *Ensign* certain somewhat more special topics: for example, “In our culture it’s better to be able to read and think about religious questions than not to be able to,” and “Some ways of reading are better than other ways,” and “To read about Mormonism is more important than reading about baseball scores,” and “To involve oneself with religion and religious questions is an essential part of any good life.” Any disagreements so far?

Finally, most readers of SUNSTONE share certain even more specialized topics not shared with many other sub-cultures: for example, “You’re likely to be a better Mormon, and a better person, if you think deeply about your beliefs and exercise free agency than if you accept blindly, without thought, whatever this or that authority says,” and “Too many important questions don’t get treated in official Mormon publications.”

Being my kind of missionary didn’t teach me to think quite like that (of common-places), but it built the habits that made such thinking finally indispensable. And it taught me, implicitly, the connection between those habits and the religious command to love our fellow creatures. I was learning to “worship” or “serve” that deepest of all human values that I celebrate here: genuine understanding, sympathetic serious listening, the “loving” act of entering the spiritual domain of other human beings—those who these days tend to be labeled “the Other.” Nothing we ever work at, the young man was discovering, is more important than the drive not just to maintain peace with rivals or enemies or misguided friends, not just to tolerate them generously, not just to condescend to them with a benign smile, but to understand them: to learn to think with them while assisting them to think with us in return. That became his definition of love, love not just as a belief but as an intellectual spiritual practice. In effect, that became his definition of God’s missionary assignment.

Second, in teaching rhetorology as a loving practice, those years saved me from a frequently powerful impulse to cast off the Church—or to get the authorities to cast me off. Unlike some friends who could discern no middle ground and consequently leapt off into being not just “jack-Mormons” but non- or even anti-Mormons, I found that my search for shared ground removed all reasons for a break: increasingly I discovered that most of what I most deeply believed was derived from Mormon teachings: “Do what is right, let the consequence follow,” “Have I done any good in the world today? If

not I have failed indeed," "All is well, all is well." Though ensuing decades yielded many moments of radical doubt about various notions of God and various choices made by Mormon authorities, I never came to doubt that Mormonism is *one* of the "true religions."<sup>8</sup>

Third—and perhaps most important as we think about the various forms of hypocrisy thriving within the Church today—my hypocritical years taught me the inherent value of one kind of hypocrisy, what I have elsewhere called "hypocrisy upward."<sup>9</sup> The word hypocrisy originally meant "playing a role on the stage," and it is clear that all of us at least some of the time are playing out roles we think appear superior to what we "really" are. Every parent tries to play a role that he or she knows is to some degree doctored, purified for the child's consumption. Every teacher knows that the "self" who stands before the class is an utterly different and (usually) superior person as compared with the one who the night before swore over her income tax returns or slapped his five-year-old daughter. If we did not rise above our "everyday selves" in that way, hypocritically enacting superior selves, our culture would collapse much faster than even the most cynical see it as collapsing today.

While not defending such acting out when it is used to exploit others, should we not defend it when it helps us practice being "characters" superior to our ordinary selves, thus learning how to be such characters? When I hypocritically *act like* a person of saintly generosity, am I not learning how to be generous? When I hypocritically enact the role of someone who believes in a belief I question, am I not likely to discover that thinking in that previously detested way actually makes sense?

Everyone who succeeds in any practice experiences such *hypocrisy upward* somewhere along the line.

—You know you're not a good public speaker, but when assigned to give a talk you pretend to be the best speaker you have heard—and you then give a better talk than you thought you could.

—You know that you do not possess the full range of virtues required for a given church position, but you accept the calling, act out those virtues, and soon discover that you are actually developing at least some of them: by pretending to be another, better person, you have become another, better one.

—You know that you are not a perfect surgeon, but you put on airs that show that you aspire to be.

What my practice of rhetorology as a missionary taught me was that if I pretended to listen sympathetically to beliefs I detested, I would sometimes discover that they were better beliefs than those I had held when entering the discussion. And even when that did not happen, my "hypocrisy upward," or "outward," did at least broaden and deepen my own grasp of the world and of how we limited creatures can deal with its mysteries.

I hope it is clear that nothing I've said suggests that *all* "religious" or "Mormon" "views," open or disguised, are in my view equally defensible; the point of rhetorological dialogue is not

relativistic tolerance but genuine progress toward truth. Some religious commitments save; some destroy. Some "hypocritical" efforts to listen can reveal beliefs even worse than they appeared at the beginning. To "take in" or "act out" the "other" with full empathy, learning to *think with* the other, is no surefire route either to self-improvement or to brightening some one corner of the world's darkness. And when rhetorical probing is used to exploit the other, as Tartuffe's brilliant imitations of piety are used, the practice cannot be called rhetorology but chicanery.

But surely our world would be a better one if more of our brothers and sisters more of the time would practice not the kind of lying, self-aggrandizing hypocrisy so prevalent around us but hypocrisy upward: the aspiration, through *taking on* roles or *taking in* "the other," that produces genuine understanding. Would not the Church itself be radically improved if more of us—not just lowly active members and peripheral hangers-on but the highest authorities, too—would really listen lovingly to "the enemy" long enough and closely enough to discover what is really *there*? ☞

## NOTES

1. My friend Garth Myers was president of the other quorum, and each Sunday morning an hour or so before church time we'd ride around the Second Ward on our bicycles, knocking on doors to round up the deacons needed to ensure victory by Quorum 1 or Quorum 2.

2. Still in unwieldy, unpublished manuscript form.

3. Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation Stopper," *Common Knowledge*, (spring 1994): 1–6. There are hints in Rorty's article of the possibility for finding some common ground between his views and the views of non-atheists, *provided* that the believers abandon the notion that their moral beliefs have any connection to religious conviction.

4. Most prominent among them: M. Wilford Poulson, professor of psychology, P. A. Christensen and Karl Young, professors of English, and A. C. Lambert, whose "field" I cannot even remember but who gave one of the best courses I had at the "Y": an introduction, in a required religion course, to the shocking sequence of changes that had been introduced into the Doctrine and Covenants through its first century. There were of course other unorthodox professors I can remember less clearly: a professor of biology and a professor of geology who openly professed belief in evolution; a historian who raised questions about some myths of Mormon origins; a member of the religion department who centered his required religion courses on the works of great, non-Mormon philosophers.

5. Oh yes, indeed: he has thought a lot about just how strong an effect the draft-threat had on his sticking with the full two years. One part of himself—the hypocritical part?—is convinced that it had nothing to do with it: he stuck it out from pure motives of service to the world. Another self knows that the motives were indeed mixed.

6. He was sometimes aided by reading reported struggles of other earlier probing Mormons, such as W. H. Chamberlin.

7. From Aristotle on through Quintilian and into modern times, rhetorical theorists have discussed—almost always superficially—just how much "accommodation to the audience" is ethical. The short answer is: accommodate your *means*, but hold fast to your convictions and purposes. But every rhetor knows how hard it is to draw a clear line between accommodation and selling out. As I view him now, he crossed the line rarely—but he did cross it.

8. Why, then, have I been not an active but a "peripheral" Mormon? A complicated, puzzling question. I must confess that one reason for "inactivity" is that I have found that too little of the current *official* activity has fed my own spiritual quests; too much of it is designed to induce blind, dull obedience.

9. *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 253–56; 258–59.