

11 | The Truth Seeker

After three years in the European Mission, Joseph and Millie set sail for the United States onboard the SS *Manhattan* in September 1936.¹ Back in Utah, life slowly settled into a more regular routine, with Merrill working long hours at the Church Administration Building and then spending quiet evenings at home with Millie. Merrill's orthodoxy and support of Church teachings was never in doubt, but his time in the European Mission cemented the tenets of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints firmly into his soul. Though he never adopted the folksier quality of some of his contemporaries, he showed a pronounced change in the way he spoke about his beliefs; his teaching was much more evangelical in tone after his return from Europe. In his first recorded address in a Church conference following his return, he declared, "We are living in a rapidly changing world. The old is giving way to the new. . . . I would like to believe that all of us deeply cherish our heritage of truth and stand immovable for the fundamental principles and doctrines that have characterized our Church from the beginning."² His immersion in Church work in Europe brought Merrill fully into his role as a defender of the

faith, but his identity as a scientist and politician still remained a vital part of his person.

Political Shifts

Merrill's experiences in Europe greatly changed his views about government. An ardent progressive Democrat in his youth, he now became wary of the encroaching growth of governments around the world in the wake of the economic catastrophes of the Great Depression. While in Europe he avoided criticizing local governments, knowing the possibility of retributions visited on local members. Almost immediately after his return home, however, Merrill spoke out against the rising tide of fascism in Europe. "The dictatorships of Europe were born of the distresses of the people," he told one Church audience. "Orderly government in these countries was secured at the price of individual liberty. There the state is everything, the individual only the tiniest cog in the gigantic machine."³

Merrill feared the possibility of similar circumstances in the United States given the ongoing distresses of the Great Depression, even going so far as to publicly criticize the policies of his own beloved Democratic Party. After the Supreme Court overturned a number of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's measures associated with the New Deal in 1937, Roosevelt attempted to pack the high court by filling it with justices friendly to his policies. Had FDR's plan been successful, he may have added up to six new justices to the Supreme Court, fundamentally changing one branch of the federal government.⁴ In the midst of this controversy, Merrill delivered a speech on KSL, the local Church-owned radio station, strongly condemning Roosevelt's plan. It was not unprecedented for Latter-day Saint Apostles to speak out on political issues during this period, though in tone Merrill spoke as if delivering his opinion as a citizen and not as a spokesman for the Church. At the same time, he must have been aware of the weight associated with the views of any high leader of the Church.

Nevertheless, Merrill minced no words in his disapproval of FDR's actions. He asked, "Has it ever before been proposed to add six new

justices in one fell swoop?” He disparaged the arguments in favor of the move, accusing supporters of acting “like a small boy caught in a fault who justifies himself by telling on some other guilty lad.” He even called upon his fellow Democrats to oppose FDR, saying, “Even though he is our president he is not infallible. . . . Shall we not be loyal to our principles and ideals, even though it pains us to do it?”⁵ In response, Merrill was all but branded an apostate by the Democratic Party in Utah. One of the party’s elder statesmen, Henry D. Moyle, wrote a scathing letter to Merrill accusing him of “flagrant unfairness and injustice.” In the letter, over twenty pages in length, Moyle attempted to maintain a friendly tone, but he struggled to contain himself, telling Merrill, “It is very singular how men even of your equilibrium and intelligence can become so disturbed over highly beneficial but innovating legislation.”⁶ As the controversy progressed, most Americans aligned their views with Merrill’s, opposing Roosevelt’s efforts as a power grab designed to control the Supreme Court, and the move eventually failed.⁷ For our purposes, the episode serves to illustrate Merrill’s ideological shift away from the Democratic Party to a more independent position.

As an advocate of the scholarly pursuit of religious studies, Merrill became more doctrinally conservative as well. The young scholars he sponsored to the Divinity School at the University of Chicago in the early 1930s began making waves in Latter-day Saint circles. As these intellectual discussions within the Church blossomed, many Church leaders became concerned over the direction of Church education. J. Reuben Clark Jr., the Second Counselor in the First Presidency, gave a stern rebuke to the religion teachers in Church employment in 1938, telling them, “The first requisite of a teacher for teaching these principles is a personal testimony of their truth. No amount of learning, no amount of study, and no number of scholastic degrees, can take the place of this testimony, which is the *sine qua non* of the teacher in our Church.”⁸

In 1939 Merrill and John A. Widtsoe worked with Franklin L. West, the Church commissioner of education, and Brigham Young University president Franklin S. Harris to establish a new Division of Religion at BYU. During this time, President Clark held multiple conversations

with Merrill and Widtsoe about the direction of Church education. After a prayer meeting in the Salt Lake Temple in March 1940, Clark took Merrill and Widtsoe aside to speak privately. His notes of the meeting record, “Told them all the presidency want is the gospel.”⁹

Merrill in turn expressed his support of Clark’s efforts to ensure greater orthodoxy among the Church’s religion teachers, writing, “I am in full harmony with the efforts now being made, and I hope will be perfected, that will keep our classrooms free in our Church school system of those whose faith in the divinity of this work is not sincere and genuine.” Merrill expressed his concern “that in recent years the University has retained . . . teachers who have seemed to be unwilling to accept wholeheartedly the essential teachings of Mormonism, the acceptance being indicated by performance.” At the same time, he was willing to offer a mea culpa to those who had been unfairly scrutinized for past behavior, continuing, “Of course, if the faith is genuine, all of us feel more or less lenient for conduct of the past, if there shall be a wholehearted desire to make amends for failures as indicated by conduct from now on. Enough said.”¹⁰

“A Calamity of Death”

While he hardened in his opinions on some matters, Merrill faced a number of severe trials during this time that brought tender feelings to the surface. His marriage to Millie, beset with challenges in the early years, eventually grew into a loving and supportive union. Their mission to Europe appears to have brought them closer together than ever before. Merrill took care to dutifully note the anniversary of his marriage to his first wife, Annie Laura Hyde, in his journal, but he also wrote with more frequency and affection about Millie and their time together.¹¹

His domestic tranquility was shattered in September 1941 with Millie’s sudden death. She was found lifeless in their home by a local deliveryman only a few hours after she had visited Merrill in his office at the Church Administration Building.¹² Merrill’s house quickly filled with friends and neighbors offering assistance. He recorded the events

in his journal with a shaky hand, concluding on the forlorn note, “For the 2nd time I am left alone.”¹³

The next few days were filled with funeral arrangements. Merrill kept a brave face in public, though privately he was in turmoil, recording in his journal his inner dialogue over losing Millie: “I gave free vent to my feelings in two hours of copious tears. How could I do without her? How could I? But the answer came back: What can you do about it? It can’t be helped. Control yourself.” He read over a verse in the Doctrine and Covenants: “In nothing doth man offend God, or against none is his wrath kindled, save those who confess not his hand in all things.”¹⁴ Merrill continued, “I will not offend God, I concluded.”¹⁵

Millie’s death occurred just a few days before a general conference, for which Merrill was scheduled to speak. He rose to the pulpit only two days after her burial, his tone calm but reflective. He began by mentioning the scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants he had read a few days before. He then added, “That teaching came strongly to my mind when we followed the casket of the mother of our seven children to the hillside. It again came to my mind nearly two years later when the body of our oldest son, a fine, upstanding, clean young man, was being lowered into the grave. There came over me at that time, as I witnessed that lowering, one of the most satisfying feelings I ever had, and these words, “The boy is absolutely secure.”” He did not mention Millie’s death directly in the address. Perhaps the wound was too tender to discuss openly. He only obliquely referenced his recent loss, saying, “More recently the same thought has come to me. I stood the test before. I want to tell you that with the Lord’s help as I have received it in the past, I shall stand it again.”¹⁶

The loss of Millie entailed new living arrangements at home. Merrill’s youngest daughter, Laura, moved into his house to serve as a caretaker. Laura, the namesake of his beloved first wife, gave up a budding career in the fashion industry. When Millie passed away, Laura was living in New York City working as an analyst for the Montgomery Ward Bureau of Standards and as a buyer for ZCMI, the Church-owned department store. At the age of twenty-six, she already held a bachelor’s degree from the University of Utah and a master’s degree

from New York University. The only unmarried Merrill child, Laura was described by her siblings as bright, talented, and busy.¹⁷ After Millie's death, Merrill never remarried, and Laura became his frequent companion in his apostolic duties.¹⁸ Her return to Utah to care for her father entailed considerable sacrifice, though all of the Merrill children came together to care for their aging patriarch. After Millie's death, mentions in Merrill's journal of his children and their families came at a greater frequency.

Having a daughter at home likely eased the pain of his loss, though Merrill's time at home became less frequent. He had always been a workaholic, and in his journal he records spending long hours at the Church Administration Building, typically from early in the morning until around six o'clock at night.¹⁹ In addition to his long hours at Church headquarters, Merrill spent nearly every weekend traveling to Church meetings around the United States. In 1943 alone, his journal records his attendance at meetings in seventeen states, from California to Massachusetts. Most of his travels took him to rural communities throughout the Intermountain West, though he also visited Latter-day Saint congregations and missionaries in larger cities, such as Sacramento, Boston, and Chicago. In February of 1943 alone, he began the month at a meeting in Los Angeles, on 5 February, and ended the month by visiting a congregation in New York City.²⁰ Except for local visits, Merrill traveled on the train, often spending days traveling between locations. A typical journal entry from this time reads, "Spent the time from Portland to Salt Lake reading papers, a book—The Apostle Paul, a novel, & dozing."²¹

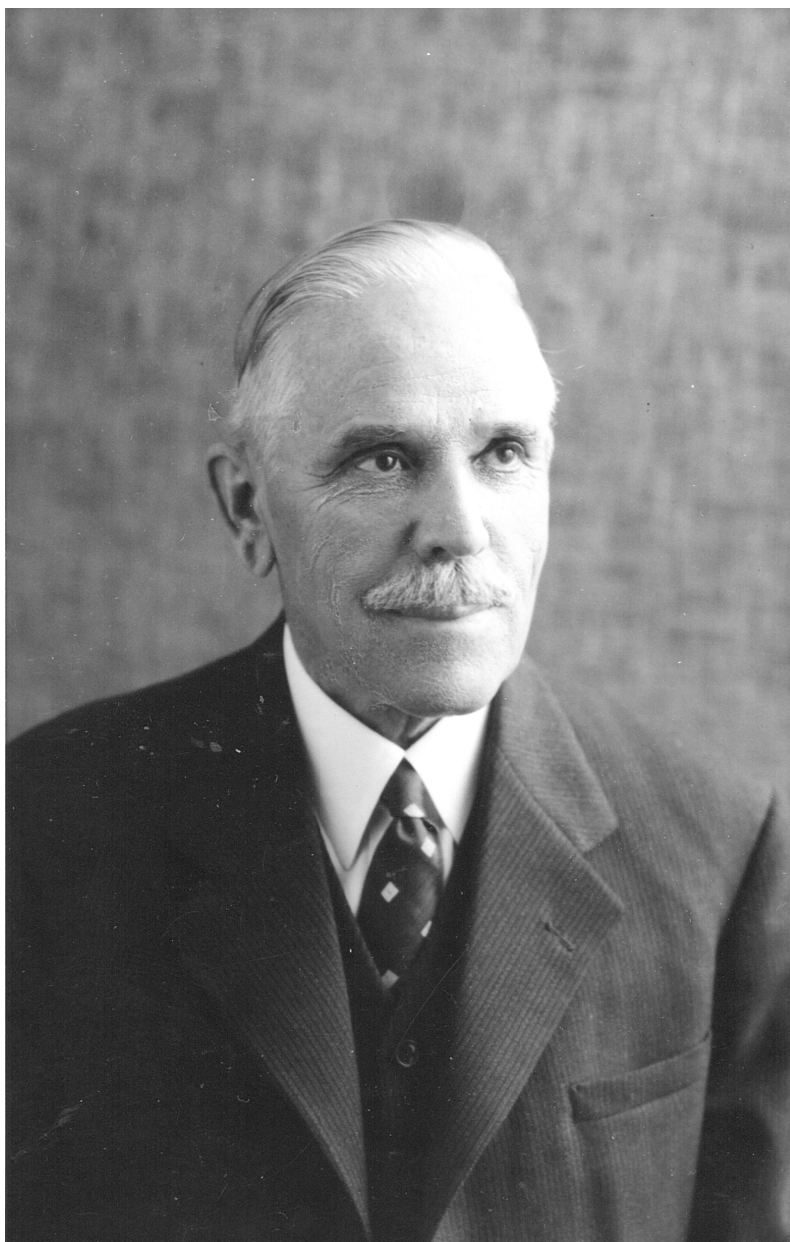
Troubling Times

Merrill's travels occurred against the backdrop of a world falling into chaos and war. Just over two months after Millie's death, the attack on Pearl Harbor drew the United States into World War II. Merrill followed the war closely, recording significant events in his journal.²² His work kept him busy, but his melancholy sometimes bubbled to the surface. On the first anniversary of Millie's death, he wrote, "I have missed

those quiet pleasant evenings she and I had in our little convenient home. I expect to carry on as calmly as health permits. I hope that I too can go without any suffering. There is not much more for me to do.”²³

Events closer to home proved to be even more troubling to Merrill than the great battles in Europe and the Pacific. Merrill was stunned in November of 1943 when he was called to a meeting of the Twelve to place Richard R. Lyman on trial for adultery.²⁴ Lyman was one of Merrill’s closest friends, with a relationship stretching back to the 1890s. Over the course of their lifetimes, the two followed parallel paths, working together at the University of Utah, serving together in Church callings, and finally joining each other in the apostolic service. When Merrill was ordained an Apostle in 1933, Lyman wrote the official introductory biography, declaring, “Classmates at the University of Michigan forty years ago this very fall, and later having our offices side by side in the University of Utah for twenty-six years, few men have been more intimately associated during what is now rather a long lifetime than Joseph Francis Merrill and the writer of this sketch.”²⁵ During his return from graduate school, when Merrill was contemplating a less-than-active role in the affairs of the Church, Lyman pulled him in as a counselor serving under his charge.²⁶

Those who observed the two men’s friendship from the outside noticed a certain deference in Merrill’s feelings toward Lyman. When Lyman arrived to replace Merrill as the president of the European Mission in 1937, T. Edgar Lyon said that Merrill was a “profound admirer” of Richard R. Lyman. Lyon continued, “He [Merrill] loved Lyman’s forwardness, his ability, he thought, to remember names. He found out later on that it wasn’t true. It was a gimmick he had. He admired his jovialness, he thought he was sincere, but he wasn’t.”²⁷ Where Merrill was shy and reserved, Lyman possessed a “large, frank, tolerant nature,” allowing him to make “a host of friends at home and abroad.”²⁸ In photographs, Lyman’s large frame towered over Merrill with his slight, reserved posture. To see Lyman on trial before the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve was a devastating experience for Merrill, who recorded the events in his journal under the heading “Awful!! Most deplorable.”²⁹



In 1936 Joseph F. Merrill gave this photograph to his daughter, Annie Ballantyne, along with a copy of the issues of the *Millennial Star* he produced. His hope was that the editorials might “help show my descendants what manner of man I am.” Courtesy of Annie Whitton.

Fellow Apostle Spencer W. Kimball wrote that Lyman “did not deny the accusation nor the confession. . . . He had little to say. . . . He was as pale as could be.”³⁰ The accusations, investigated by Apostles Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee, revealed a longstanding relationship between Lyman and a woman whom Lyman considered to be a plural wife. The affair continued for a number of



The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1944. Joseph F. Merrill is seated on the far right. Courtesy of Church History Library.

years before it was brought to light by an investigation headed by members of the Twelve.³¹ Merrill’s record of the meeting reads, “Bro Lyman confessed his wrong-doing thru several years. . . . As a result a motion carried unanimously that Richard R. Lyman be so hereby excommunicated from the Church. . . . Brother what a deplorable fall!!!”³² Kimball recorded, “It was a terrible ordeal. To see great strong men such as the members of this Quorum all in tears, some sobbing, all shocked, stunned by the impact was an unforgettable sight.”³³

A few days later, a notice appeared in the *Deseret News* announcing Lyman’s excommunication for “violation of the Christian law of chastity.”³⁴ Merrill cut out the notice and pasted it into his journal. Lyman’s fall did not end his friendship with Merrill. Lyman once remarked that “Joseph F. Merrill is a man who, if duty demanded it, would walk through fire.”³⁵ Merrill may have seen it as his duty to expel his friend from the ranks of Church leadership, but he also saw it as his duty to watch over his old friend after the unpleasant expulsion occurred. Merrill records periodic visits from Lyman to his home during the ensuing years, and the fallen Apostle was eventually rebaptized two years after Merrill’s death.³⁶

Now approaching his midseventies, Merrill began to feel the effects of age. At the end of 1943, he wrote a frank assessment of his capability to carry on the work, writing, “My health was good but my mental & physical powers were definitely on the wane.” He continued, “To know this I have only to compare what formerly I could do with what I am now able to do.” Merrill believed that “a member of the Q of T should be in full mental and physical vigor” and went so far as to suggest his retirement in a meeting of the quorum but was told by the other members not to press the issue. He noted his failing memory and the cramps in his legs but also noted, “I am very thankful to say that during my adult life to date I have not been confined to my bed. . . . All my life my health has been exceptionally good.” He attributed his longevity to living the health standards of the Church, writing, “I have always lived according to my understanding of the Word of Wisdom.” He also described another factor that he felt contributed to his good health: “Since I was 10 years old I worked all day, practically every workday for 10 hours per day.”³⁷ Merrill’s journal attests to the long hours he still spent at the office despite his advancing age. There is no evidence in his writings of senility, though other physical ailments began to creep in. His right hand shook so badly that his writing became very difficult to read. He compensated for this by using his left hand instead.³⁸

The Truth-Seeker and Mormonism

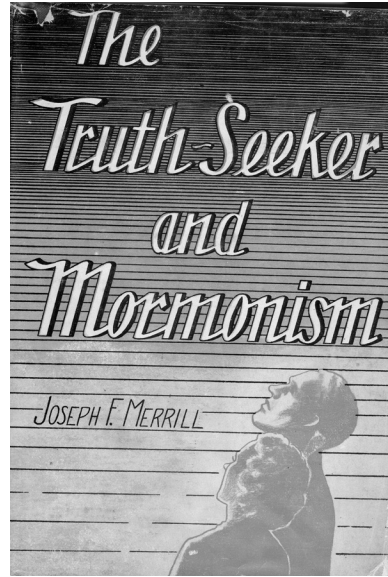
At the same time Joseph F. Merrill was lamenting his declining mental prowess, he was about to produce his most comprehensive opus. In May 1945 he was asked to produce a series of radio talks dedicated to the topic of science and religion for KSL, the Church-owned radio station. It was a last chance for Merrill to pursue one of his passions: seeking to reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable matters. Since the 1890s, when he found himself “between the devil and the deep blue sea” of the divide between Church members and nonmembers at the University of Utah, Merrill worked to bring together groups, concepts, and practices at odds with each other. At the university, he worked to

assuage the strife between Latter-day Saints and the other cohorts. In the creation of the seminary and institute programs, he worked to bring together the realms of secular and religious education, building a bridge over the wall separating church and state. His challenge now was to connect the worlds of faith and reason.

The Church hierarchy of this era was unique in its embrace of science. While religious fundamentalists and modernists hammered away at each other in the cultural wards of the early twentieth century, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, seen as a backward sect by almost all parties, experienced a relatively small and muted number of conflicts related to science and religion. During this time, at least four members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—James E. Talmage, Richard R. Lyman, John A. Widtsoe, and Merrill himself—had prominent academic backgrounds. This is not to say there was no conflict. James E. Talmage, a geologist, and Joseph Fielding Smith, the Quorum's leading scribe, came into conflict during the early 1930s over views relating to the age of the earth and the origins of man.³⁹ Around the same time, B. H. Roberts produced some controversial material relating to the origins of man.⁴⁰ John A. Widtsoe wrote a regular column for the Church in which he often discussed the relationship of science and the gospel. Widtsoe generally walked a middle road on these questions. Asked about evolution, he wrote, "The *theory* or *theories* of evolution are man's explanations of the multitude of changes observed in nature. Such theories may or may not be correct."⁴¹ Widtsoe also produced *Joseph Smith as Scientist* in 1920, a brief treatise comparing the findings of modern science to the revelations given to Joseph Smith. In the work, Widtsoe compares the teachings of the Church to scientific ideas about astronomy, evolution, geological time, and a host of other topics.⁴²

What is striking about Merrill compared to his contemporaries is how little he was interested in apologetics. Merrill often taught on the topic of science and religion, but when confronted with the thornier issues of the age of the earth, the origins of man, or questions of biblical literalism, he chose to avoid the subject.

When pressed by a young man on these issues, Merrill responded in a letter outlining some of his views on these topics. Concerning the origin of man, he wrote, “The Church teaches that the entire human family lived in a premortal realm as individual conscious spirit entities, in form like the material body later acquired in mortality. . . . Therefore, God made us in his own image but when he did it and how long it took him to do it the Church does not know. But the Church emphasizes that God did it and any teachings, scientific or otherwise, that denies this truth is just ‘off the beam.’” He continued, “Now as to the time consumed in the development of the earth as a fit abode for man in mortality, again I always say the Church does not know. Members of the Church have various beliefs relative to the matter. Some believe the earth was created in six days or twenty-four hours, sixty minutes and sixty seconds. . . . But the Church does not know for God has not revealed it directly to the Church through its head, the president.” When it came to origins of life, Merrill explained, “As to the theory of organized evolution the Church has nothing to say except that the doctrines of the premortal world, of Adam and Eve, etc. are fundamental to Church theology.” Questioned on biblical miracles, Merrill wrote, “The Church knows nothing more than is written in the Bible and therefore until additional revelation is given the Church accepts the story of Jonah and the Whale, etc., as written.” He added, “When anyone teaches ‘that the story of Adam and Eve is just another story,’



Cover of *The Truth Seeker and Mormonism*, a collection of radio addresses in which Joseph F. Merrill shared how he reconciled his faith in God with his scientific knowledge. Courtesy of the author.

etc., well, he is 'off the beam' too." Having addressed the questions directly, he also added, "The Church is very sympathetic to research workers and scientific investigators. We owe our wonderful mechanical modern civilization to the research of the scientists and the genius of the inventor and the engineer."⁴³

This exchange should not give the impression that Merrill was uninterested or combative when questions of science and religion presented themselves. Quite the contrary, Merrill was deeply interested in the relationship of the two. But where most of the contentions of his time stemmed from examining the age of the earth, the fossil record, and so forth, Merrill preferred to look upward and outward at the surrounding universe and its wonders as evidence of God's hand in creation.⁴⁴

The Truth-Seeker and Mormonism, the compilation of Merrill's 1945 radio addresses, represents the culmination of his attempts to reconcile science and religion. In large measure it was an updated version of a series of radio addresses he gave over a decade earlier under the heading "Is Faith Reasonable?" In these addresses he was equally skeptical of dogmatic representatives of both science and religion. He roundly criticized the "shallow, so-called intellectuals who affect to believe that it is unmanly to profess a religious faith," but he also noted that many believers did not "regard these [scientific] questions as important." He did not criticize these faithful adherents, remarking, "They believe, nothing doubting. With them 'faith' is second nature . . . they have never struggled with 'doubt,'" but he also commented, "These people constitute only a small minority. It is different with most students."⁴⁵

In his 1945 lecture series, directed to "friendly non-members as well as uninformed people in the Church," Merrill set aside his earlier accounts of the conflict between science and faith. He focused particularly on "college students and others who have difficulty reconciling the teachings of science and religion," hoping to convince such searchers that "science and religion support each other in a fuller revelation of the truths of the material and spiritual universe in which we live."⁴⁶ In one of his early lectures, he addressed his motives: "The vast majority of

people inherit religious tendencies, that is, a belief or feeling that there is a God, a creator, and that life persists beyond the grave. . . . Sooner or later the great majority of truth-seekers, whether they are reared in a religious home or not, require something more than mere *feeling*. . . . Their intellects will need to be convinced. Religious convictions must therefore have the support of the mind as well as the heart.”⁴⁷

Merrill’s real objective in his 1945 lectures was *not* to reconcile the perceived conflicts between science and religion. This was a theme in his earlier writings, but now his goal was to teach something more positive and profound: How does one seek truth? Merrill argued that faith and reason are necessary in *both* science and religion, though the tool used in either field might be different. Merrill discussed the Latter-day Saint faith’s unique doctrines, but in the context of a quest for truth. His talks in this setting more closely resembled the classroom lectures he delivered at the university than the sermons he delivered in Church settings. For example, in *The Truth-Seeker and Mormonism*, he quotes 102 authors, and only ten are Latter-day Saints. He cites 109 articles in the book, 98 from non-Latter-day Saint authors and eleven from Latter-day Saint sources. Merrill quotes over fifty scriptures in these talks, favoring the Bible over scriptures specific to Latter-day Saints.⁴⁸ In the lectures, he moves smoothly from the traditional scientific topics to questions of faith to the peculiar doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with stunning ease.

Merrill was comfortable using the tools of science and faith interchangeably because he felt that faith was an integral part of a scientist’s work. He dismissed claims of a conflict between the two in one of the early lectures: “What has astronomy or science to do with religion, some of you may ask? I believe these teachings [of science] have very much to do with the development or destruction of religious faith, depending on attitudes and points of view. . . . ‘The conflict between science and religion’ was a familiar expression a few years ago—not so common now. Rightly viewed and interpreted, do you think there can be any conflict between facts of science and the truths of religion? Assuredly there can be no conflict between two truths.” Philosophically, there was no conflict in Merrill’s mind, but he did acknowledge conflict between

the extreme ends of the philosophical spectrum: “Certainly there have been severe conflicts between interpretations of facts of science and some teachings of religionists. . . . No truth-seeker, no Mormon, need be seriously disturbed by these conflicts. They are usually due to misinterpretations and intolerance. I believe the facts of science, rightly looked at and understood, are helpful to the development of a sound religious faith.”⁴⁹

Merrill’s first lectures focus on the wonders and the limitations of science. His explanations are designed to reach out to the uninitiated. In the ensuing decades, the scientific concepts Merrill wrote about went in new directions, but for the most part, his teachings remain sound. He set aside his tendency to debate and instead took the reader on a tour of the universe, demonstrating the wonders of science and his love for the acknowledged fallibility of science. He wrote, “I may remark in passing that the scientist is a very much more humble and tolerant man today than he was fifty years ago. College students may be surprised at this statement but nevertheless it is true, as I know from experience. To use a common expression, he is much less cocky.” He added, “Some ministers of religion have also come down off their high horses.”⁵⁰

Merrill pointed out the vast size of the universe: “Astronomy teaches there is no end to space, no comprehensible limit to the many billions of stars scattered about at distances that defy the imagination. How vast, how vast is the universe! How and when did it come into existence? Do we worry about these questions? We do not for we cannot know. We take these things for granted. But by all the known laws of mind and reason there is not the remotest possibility that the universe came by chance.”⁵¹ Merrill moved quickly from the vast expanse of the universe to the incomprehensibly small. He remarked, “When I was in college . . . the chemist taught that a ponderable substance, a piece of common salt for example, could be divided into smaller and smaller pieces, and this process of division could be continued, in imagination at least, until an inconceivably small particle would be reached, which if divided again, would cease to be salt, and in the place of which two different particles would be obtained, one called sodium and the other

chlorine.” He continued, “Now it is to these atoms I wish to call your attention. We were taught that they were indivisible . . . particles incapable of division into anything else. But during the last thirty years how different the teachings! . . . Atoms are in structure similar to a miniature solar system having a nucleus or center about which particles revolve as the planets revolved around the sun.” Pointing to the infinite even in the miniscule, he explained, “Listen to this: In a thimbleful of air (one cubic centimeter) we are told there are more than ten million million molecules (10 followed by 18 ciphers, 10,000,000,000,000,000,000) each one relatively porous, each one made of two or more atoms, each of which, as stated above, is ‘filled with empty space.’”⁵²

Arriving at his point, he asked, “Why do I speak of these things? . . . My purpose is to get you to understand that we live in a wonderful and mystical universe, packed with amazing phenomena which astonish us at every turn. . . . In the face of such a situation how can we be anything other than sincerely humble?”⁵³ Merrill continued on through several lectures, all relating scientific findings about the nature of the universe, before he reached his point: “I relate all this to you in support of my statement that the demands that science makes upon our faith are certainly no less great than those made by religion.”⁵⁴ He continued, “The world and the universe, as shown to us by scientists, teem with wonders and miracles, meaning by the word *miracle* an amazing phenomenon that is difficult or impossible for us to understand because of a lack of knowledge. So in these respects, the claims of religion are certainly no more difficult to accept than the claims of science.”⁵⁵ Where most religionists of his day chided scientists for driving people away from religion, Merrill held them up as an example to the believers! Specifically, Merrill believed that the humility shown by scientists should be demonstrated by sincere seekers of truth in any field of endeavor, including religion. He wrote, “Faced with a multitude of facts so far unexplained and some of them may be unexplainable, the real scientist, is more humble today than ever before, but his faith has not waned. Cannot this be an example to the truth-seeker and to workers in the field of religion?”⁵⁶

Can Humans Discover God?

Calling for a healthy dose of humility among the scientific and faith communities, Merrill next described religious seeking as a kind of science itself. He stated, “Each science, each field of investigation and study, has its own tools and methods. The equipment and methods of the physics laboratory are not efficient tools and methods of the biological laboratory. The historian must have different equipment for research than the chemist. So, logically, the physicist, or the biologist, or the astronomer could not expect to find his methods applicable to an entirely different realm, as the spiritual, for example.”⁵⁷ Scientists, Merrill argued, had “already discovered in the realm of nature . . . an unfailing indication that there lives in the universe an all-knowing, all-powerful Creator. Does not reason stand aghast at the thought that all this came by chance?”⁵⁸

Merrill believed science was an effective tool for showing the majesty of the universe but was limited in proving certain intangibles, such as the immortality of the soul. How to prove these things? “The answer is simple and perhaps obvious to you,” he reasoned. “We can discover [God] by use of methods that he himself has given us.” He continued, “He is a being who lives in a spiritual realm. Giving careful consideration to the matter it seems reasonable, does it not?”⁵⁹

Before explaining how to find God, however, Merrill paused to address the arguments of nonbelievers. “Though there are ways . . . of finding out God, we must admit that these, to many people, are not always easy; in fact they are perhaps never easy to the average man. And this may account for the fact that since some men do not go to the trouble of discovering him they go to the other extreme and deny his existence. And there are others who through indifference become infidels, skeptics, or agnostics.”⁶⁰ Merrill questioned the lack of effort by some of these people, asserting, “Is there rhyme or reason in the assertion of the atheist that other men do not know that God lives? In the light of human experience would it not be as reasonable for him who is born blind to declare that there is no light as for the spiritually blind to declare there is no God?”⁶¹

Addressing atheistic arguments grounded in science more directly, Merrill argued, “Some pessimists looking out over the physical work profess to believe that there is no Christian God, otherwise nature would be kind to man rather than hostile, as they seem to be. For they assert man lives in a world in which he is beset on every hand with natural enemies. . . . Has nature provided man with no friends?” Merrill instead argued, “Nature is orderly—operates in obedience to law. Having discovered this fact man in countless cases brought the forces of nature in subjection to his will, making them minister to his needs and do the heavy work of the world.” Even in the case of natural disasters, “man now predicts the coming of storms, hurricanes, and killing frosts because nature is orderly.”⁶² In another lecture he stated, “There is nothing freaky or capricious in the happenings of nature. Cause and effect are always present.”⁶³

At the same time, Merrill did not equivocate about the harsh nature of man’s world. Instead, he saw purpose in it. “Of course nature does not make a molly-coddle of her noblest creation—man, . . . and nature has not provided that man shall grow physically, mentally, or spiritually . . . except through exercise, through struggle, through conflict with destructive forces. So man is given his challenging opportunities.”⁶⁴

Merrill saw in the creation of new ideas and concepts a fusion of the temporal and the spiritual. Quoting Joseph Smith, he wrote, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.”⁶⁵ “Great discoveries,” Merrill declared, “are made by transcending the realm of the material, by light that comes from the spiritual.” He illustrated this by quoting an interview with Albert Einstein, who said, “A hundred times you run, as it were, with your head against a wall, in order to lay your hands upon and to define and fit into a system that, from a merely undefinable premonition, you sense in vain. And then suddenly, perhaps like a stroke of lightning, the saving thought will come to you and the indescribably laborious task of building up and expanding the system can begin. That process is no different from that which the artist arrives at his conceptions.”⁶⁶ Inspiration, Merrill

reasoned, was the worldly term for revelation, and revelation opened the key to knowing the truth of intangible things.

Science, Religion, and Immortality

Chief among the intangibles, in Merrill's mind, was immortality. With the complexity of the universe as sufficient proof for the existence of a God, Merrill argued that the personality of God was discovered by applying the scientific method to the teachings of Christianity. "We are entering into the realm of spiritual things," he noted. "We can still be scientific in method while investigating spiritual matters." He equated the scientific method with the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine."⁶⁷ "A positive statement this," Merrill mused on the scripture. "It was made not only unto the few who heard it at the time, but unto all men in all time. . . . This method indicated is simple, it is direct and its results are attested by ample trustworthy testimony."⁶⁸

Discovering God's nature, Merrill taught, provided hope even for the atheists he so roundly criticized in his addresses: "God is good; he is merciful and just. . . . We may go to a doubter's grave, yea even to the grave of an atheist. But unless our hands have dripped with the blood of the innocent we are not lost. . . . My point is that the opportunity of discovering God is not confined to this life alone." Merrill acknowledged this point as his first presentation of beliefs particular to Latter-day Saints, slyly pointing out the more reasonable nature of Mormon doctrine: "In expressing this view I am perhaps for the first time in this series of talks stating a characteristic Mormon view. But doesn't it occur to you that it is a reasonable view? You know I would have great difficulty in believing God is just if the only opportunity of winning his favor, of being saved in a state of happiness, were confined to mortal life."⁶⁹

Merrill even went so far as to gently chide other Christians for advocating a bland view of the afterlife. He recalled, "In June, 1897, I had the pleasure of attending the commencement exercises of the University of Chicago, conducted by President Wm. R. Harper. In the

course of his address, President Harper remarked that he did not want to go to the heaven, pictured by some Christians, where he would sit with a crown on his head around the throne of grace and forever sing praises to his Redeemer.” In Merrill’s recollection, Harper said, “I want to go where I can continue my studies and my work.” Sitting in the crowd, Merrill remembered thinking, “Brother, you want to go the Mormon heaven—the one indicated by the doctrine of eternal progression.”⁷⁰

God and Human Troubles

Merrill’s lectures were delivered against the backdrop of the end of the bloodiest war in the history of mankind. He directly acknowledged this and used the war as a tool to confront one of the thorniest questions surrounding religious belief: “I have found people in America whose faith in a living Heavenly Father has greatly weakened or vanished because of the terrible global war out of which we have just emerged. Of course all such people imply or charge that God is responsible for war. Hence if he exists at all he must be cold and cruel, otherwise, having power he would not permit war and other calamities.”⁷¹ Merrill noted the difficulty all Christians faced in answering the question, then provided the Latter-day Saint view: “Now, why is God not responsible for wars, many people ask? The answer is short; it is because everyone born into mortality is given his free agency by his Heavenly Father. . . . If he has all power as Christians believe, could he not prevent wars? Certainly he could, but only by denying men their freedom of choice—the right to do as they please.”⁷² Merrill summarized *Mein Kampf* to explain the philosophy of Hitler and the other totalitarian leaders of the war, pointing out their opposition to basic Christian doctrines. He added, “Wars and crimes of every type and ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ come because of man’s perversity, not because God wills them.”⁷³

Next to the existence of God, Merrill reasoned, men must recognize “the existence of an evil power in the world, localized in Satan, the devil.” But even the devil, Lucifer, was a product of God’s reverence for his children’s agency. He then concluded, “In the light of what I have

said can any of you blame God for our troubles? According to the law of cause and effect would it be right and just for God to intervene and save a malefactor from the consequences of his evil deeds?" He added, "The law of compensation must be satisfied before the penitent is fully restored. Is not this reasonable and just? Justice is one of the attributes we ascribe to God."⁷⁴

Characteristics of Latter-day Saint Beliefs

The first twenty of Merrill's lectures are devoted to scientific theological topics. The last seven devote themselves exclusively to Latter-day Saint beliefs. Merrill first related the story of Joseph Smith's early visions of God, Jesus Christ, and angels by reading Joseph Smith's 1838 account of his early life. He then added, "From any point of view these stories were both marvelous and deeply disturbing. According to the story, the Father and the Son are two separate, distinct beings in the physical image of which man was made. . . . Did Joseph's stories relate facts or fancies?"⁷⁵ He then laid out a logical course for Latter-day Saint beliefs, outlining the origins of the Book of Mormon and frankly declaring, "The Church will stand or fall as a divine institution depending on the validity of these claims."⁷⁶ He briefly related the story of the witnesses of the book and their fidelity to its claims.

Merrill's outline of the Latter-day Saint path to salvation reflects his deep optimism for the ultimate fate of mankind, an argument framed in the context of existence as a divine university. "Mormonism tells us why we are here. Progress comes as power won over surrounding forces. The conditions of the proposed life on earth seemed severe but they were really means to happiness, set up to assist us in our progressive path. It was to be an education of the best kind from within, of doing and achieving. Only as man stands upon his own feet, conquers himself and directs his own powers can he rise to great heights."⁷⁷

Elucidating the Mormon teaching of salvation for the dead, Merrill revealed in the expansiveness of the views of salvation laid out by Joseph Smith. "It is reasonable to believe that the vast majority of those spirits to whom the Gospel is preached will, in humility and gratitude,

accept the Savior and the temple ordinance work that has been done for them on earth,” he wrote. “Undoubtedly then, the celestial kingdom will finally be much more populous than earth conditions would warrant us in believing.”⁷⁸ Merrill also lauded the physical benefits of the Latter-day Saint health code, to be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Reason and Transcendence

Perhaps the most common word in Merrill’s lectures is *reasonable*. Even after more than a decade of apostolic service, Merrill was clearly more comfortable discussing topics against the background of science than theology. He saw belief in God as an eminently reasonable proposition. “An open-minded, prayerful examination of all the evidence—that furnished by nature, science, philosophy and especially by human experience—leads to a conviction, to an assurance that God exists, that Jesus Christ lives, and that souls are immortal,” he declared.

He also left room for the supernatural, the unreasonable, and the transcendent qualities of religious experience: “It is only fair for us to admit that reason has been re-enforced by earnest prayer and an intense desire to know the truth concerning these all-important matters. And so divine revelation to us personally has completed the knowledge that enables both the reason and the heart to join in testifying that God exists and we shall live beyond the grave.”⁷⁹

The Truth-Seeker and Mormonism ends on a deeply personal note. Having argued for a belief based in rationality for nearly three hundred pages, Merrill concludes by offering his own encounter with deity as an adolescent: “Near my nineteenth birthday, I prayed as usual, saying among other things, ‘Oh, Father wilt thou not hear me?’ Instantly something happened. As certainly as you now hear me I heard the word ‘yes’ spoken in a mild tone and simultaneously my whole body was thrilled with feelings of the most joyous elation I could imagine.”⁸⁰

When stacked up against the writings of his contemporaries, Joseph F. Merrill’s writings do not contain the flowing theology of James E. Talmage or the careful wordsmithing of John A. Widtsoe, and

therein lies his charm. His works are the musings of a scientist sincerely but somewhat awkwardly inserting himself into the guise of preacher. He is less polished than the other Latter-day Saint writers of his era—more blunt, less diplomatic. The beauty of his arguments comes from their raw nature. His lectures are not smoothly polished; they are more akin to hearing a brilliant man of science relate topics that are decidedly unscientific. Merrill transcended the squabbles between the dogmatics of both science and religion because science *was* his religion. In it he found comfort through the loss of loved ones, his declining health, and the darkness of the world around him. In it he found the way to comprehend the world around him and see a reasonable hope for a world beyond.

Notes

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3. Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, 4–6 April 1937, 42.
4. Gregory A. Caldeira, “Public Opinion and the U.S. Supreme Court: FDR’s Court-Packing Plan,” *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 4 (December 1987): 1139.
5. Joseph F. Merrill, “Dr. Merrill Fears Court Plan Would Mean Ruin of Constitutional Democracy” (KSL Radio address), Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
6. James A. Moyle to Joseph F. Merrill, 3 May 1937, in *Mormon Democrat: The Religious and Political Memoirs of James Henry Moyle*, ed. Gene A. Sessions (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Historical Department, 1975), 466, 478.
7. Caldeira, “Public Opinion and the U.S. Supreme Court,” 1147–50.
8. J. Reuben Clark, “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” in *J. Reuben Clark: Selected Papers on Religion, Education, and Youth*, ed. David H. Yarn Jr. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1984), 249.
9. J. Reuben Clark Office Journal, 21 March 1940, J. Reuben Clark Papers, MSS 303, box 9, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU.
10. Joseph F. Merrill to Christen Jensen, 28 May 1940, box 78, folder L–M, Franklin S. Harris Presidential Papers, BYU.
11. Joseph F. Merrill Journal, 9 June and 25 September 1941, box 2, folder 1, Joseph F. Merrill Papers, BYU.

12. Joseph F. Merrill Journal, 29 September 1941, Merrill Papers, BYU; *Descendants of Joseph F. Merrill and Annie Laura Hyde Merrill Published by His Children* (Salt Lake City: privately published, 1979), 14.
13. Merrill Journal, 29 September 1941, Merrill Papers, BYU.
14. Doctrine and Covenants 59:21.
15. Merrill Journal, 1 October 1941, Merrill Papers, BYU.
16. Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, 3–5 October 1941, 192–230.
17. *Descendants of Joseph F. Merrill*, 115–16.
18. Merrill Journal, 10 December 1941, Merrill Papers, BYU.
19. Merrill Journal, 18 March 1942, Merrill Papers, BYU.
20. Merrill Journal, 30 January; 5, 26, 27 February; 6, 14 March; 16, 25, 30 April; 9, 16, 22, 27, 30 May; 3, 7–16 June; 10 July; 29 August; 12–26 September; 30 October; 26 November; 11 December 1943, Merrill Papers, BYU.
21. Merrill Journal, 23 January 1945, Merrill Papers, BYU.
22. Merrill Journal, 11 December 1941, 7 July 1942, 31 December 1944, Merrill Papers, BYU.
23. Merrill Journal, 29 September 1942, Merrill Papers, BYU.
24. Merrill Journal, 12 November 1943, Merrill Papers, BYU.
25. “Dr. Joseph F. Merrill of the Council of the Twelve,” *Improvement Era*, November 1931, 9.
26. Joseph F. Merrill, “The Lord Overrules,” *Improvement Era*, July 1934, 413, 447.
27. T. Edgar Lyon, interview by Davis Bitton, 13 January 1975, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 108.
28. Alice Louise Reynolds, “Richard R. Lyman,” *Juvenile Instructor*, May 1918, 235–36.
29. Merrill Journal, 12 November 1943, Merrill Papers, BYU (emphasis in original).
30. Quoted in Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977), 209.
31. The most comprehensive account of Lyman’s excommunication is found in Gary James Bergera, “Transgression in the Latter-day Saint Community: The Cases of Albert Carrington, Richard R. Lyman, and Joseph F. Smith,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 173–207.
32. Merrill Journal, 12 November 1943, Merrill Papers, BYU.
33. Quoted in Kimball and Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 209.
34. *Deseret News*, 13 November 1943.
35. *Millennial Star*, 12 January 1933, 638.
36. Merrill Journal, 9 August 1943, 24 January 1945, Merrill Papers, BYU; Bergera, “Transgression in the Latter-day Saint Community,” 204.
37. Merrill Journal, 1943 Addendum, Merrill Papers, BYU.
38. Merrill Journal, 9 April 1944, Merrill Papers, BYU.

39. See Richard Sherlock, "We Can See No Advantage to a Continuation of the Discussion': The Roberts/Smith/Talmage Affair," *Dialogue* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 63–78.
40. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), 317–18.
41. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, arr. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 166 (emphasis in original).
42. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist: A Contribution to "Mormon" Philosophy* (Salt Lake City: Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, 1920).
43. Joseph F. Merrill to R. Royce Carter, 8 July 1947, Church History Library.
44. Joseph F. Merrill, *The Truth-Seeker and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1946), vii–viii.
45. Joseph F. Merrill, *Is Faith Reasonable?*² (KSL radio address), 4 April 1941, 3.
46. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, vii–iii.
47. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 7–8 (emphasis in original).
48. I am indebted to Hyde Merrill for this extensive analysis of the *Truth-Seeker and Mormonism*.
49. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 18.
50. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 21.
51. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 20.
52. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 21–24.
53. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 24.
54. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 41.
55. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 45; emphasis added.
56. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 43.
57. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 71.
58. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 72.
59. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 75.
60. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 75.
61. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 79.
62. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 87.
63. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 93.
64. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 91.
65. Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21.
66. Quoted in Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 98, the original quote comes from an interview published in the *Deseret News*, 22 November 1930.
67. John 7:17.
68. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 109–10.
69. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 114–15.
70. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 51, 137.
71. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 196.
72. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 198–99.

- 73. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 200.
- 74. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 201.
- 75. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 216.
- 76. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 218.
- 77. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 239.
- 78. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 246.
- 79. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 152.
- 80. Merrill, *Truth-Seeker*, 269.