

## Chapter 11

# “The Clown of the Professions”: Hugh Nibley and Scholarship

On 23 March 1955, a crowd gathered in the Orson Spencer Hall at the University of Utah campus to hear a debate between two men who were polar opposites within the Mormon community in everything except their intellectual gifts and rich Mormon heritage. Sterling McMurrin, professor of philosophy at the University of Utah and ardent skeptic, met Hugh Nibley, professor of religion and history from Brigham Young University and ardent defender of the Mormon faith. Their topic was: “Do History and Religion Conflict?” Sterling and Hugh unstintingly expressed their respect for each other. Sterling said he had “great admiration” for Hugh’s “superb intellectual talents and scholarly attainments” as well as for his “high degree of independence of thought and action,” while Hugh admired the fact that Sterling remained always charitable and “never lost his temper.”<sup>3</sup> Despite their profound respect for each other as individuals, however, they saw the world from completely different perspectives. For his entire life, Hugh was impatient with theology, which he saw as an attempt to replace revelation with philosophy, while McMurrin found Hugh’s work both anti-intellectual and antirationist. This debate was no exception.

During his part of the debate, Hugh was critical of historical endeavors, stating that historians face many obstacles in reconstructing the past. He cited as examples contradictions within the discipline as well as the all-too-human nature of the historian. Despite these obstacles, Hugh argued, history is often accepted with as little thought and every bit as dogmatically as religion: “History is as much what a man

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<sup>3</sup>Sterling McMurrin, Letter to Hugh Nibley, 30 January 1986, Sterling McMurrin Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City; Hugh Nibley, Interviewed by Boyd Petersen, 2 August 1997. I read an earlier version of this chapter at the Sunstone Symposium on 9 August 1997 in Salt Lake City.