

## II. Reorientation

### CYNTHIA BAILEY Interview

**WELCOMED:** Welcomed is interested in how people live their faith and moral commitments within a modern university. Some philosophical traditions, associated with thinkers like Kant and later Richard Rorty, have treated religion primarily as a private matter. Rorty once remarked that universities have a duty to transform students: “They arrive here from conservative, religious backgrounds, and we make them good, liberal secular citizens.” How does your own lived experience affirm, resist, complicate, or transcend that idea?

**Cynthia Bailey:** Religion is often described as a personal experience, something you keep separate from your public reasoning if you want to be recognized as an intellectual. But that view fails to capture how faith actually forms people. For me, religion has always been a lived ethic that shaped how I understood responsibility, obligation, and care for other people.

Even within a secular university like Stanford, I have had important role models who showed me that one’s deepest moral commitments need not be bracketed off. Colleagues in the Computer Science Department like Don Knuth, whose Christian commitments shape how he thinks about everything from integrity to mathematical analysis of text, and Eric Roberts, whose Quaker faith shapes how he approaches stewardship of the computing community, centering equity and justice, showed me that it is possible to be fully at home in rigorous academic life while also being guided by a thick moral tradition.

**WELCOMED:** What did faith look like in your own life growing up?

**Cynthia Bailey:** I grew up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “Mormon” is the familiar nickname that many people still use, though the Church now encourages use of its full name. My faith offered a rich moral world stretching from the mundane details of daily home life to the whole expanse of the universe. It also provided a community that cared for you, expected something from you, and prepared you for leadership and service roles. Faith shaped how we treated one another, how we organized care, and how we understood responsibility.

Growing up in the liberal and multicultural Bay Area, around San Jose and Cupertino, my world was both broad and inclusive, and deeply Church-saturated. As a young person, you had Sunday services, youth devotionals, early morning seminary before high school, and midweek church social activities, as well as a whole host of distinctive clothing, food, language, and other lifestyle practices. Rather than making me feel distant from my classmates, it made me feel like I fit right in. Not being allowed to wear clothing that showed my shoulders or drink Coca-Cola felt less weird when my friends from immigrant and culturally diverse households had their own collections of distinctive traditions and restrictions. One friend wore a dastar and another didn’t eat pork. We all had our things.

We had prom dinner at a friend's house instead of a nice restaurant, because it was Passover and his mom didn't want him eating restaurant food. He was the only Jew in the group but our whole group went along with it. All the parents pitched in to make it seem like a restaurant by dressing up as waiters, making fancy printed menus, and decorating the room to look like an Italian restaurant. It ended up being one of our happiest memories as a friend group.

**WELCOMED:** You come from a "handcart family." What did that inheritance mean to you?

**Cynthia Bailey:** In the nineteenth century, members of the Church migrated west to Utah after repeated expulsions and violence in other states, pulling their belongings across the plains by hand. One of my ancestors, remembered in family lore as "Wee Granny," was part of the Martin and Willie Handcart companies, a famously ill-fated pioneer group. The story goes that as she lay dying on the plains, she said, "Tell them I died facing Zion." Another, Evaline Brown Clark, gave birth to thirteen children, including two sets of twins, one set of which was born while her wagon party was stopped for the night at Chimney Rock, Nebraska. I thought about Evaline often when I had my own set of twins! Stories like that taught me devotion and endurance. But they also taught me to notice when a community's self-story leaves out its darker chapters.

**WELCOMED:** What do you mean by that?

**Cynthia Bailey:** I mean histories like the Mountain Meadows Massacre, which is part of LDS history but has often been minimized or avoided. About 250 people from a non-Mormon wagon train passing through southern Utah were killed. Men, women, and children were murdered, and the youngest surviving children were taken into the households of the perpetrators.

Evaline's husband, and the father of her thirteen children, John Wesley Clark, was involved in the massacre. So within one family history, there is both heroic pioneer devotion and devastating institutional violence.

That mattered to me because it complicated any simple story about religion as either wholly good or wholly harmful. Faith communities are capable of profound care and profound harm.

Growing up with that inheritance made me sensitive to the gap between what institutions teach and what they protect. I learned early that people fall short. Religious traditions know that. Repentance, humility, and growth are built into them. What troubled me was when institutions seemed to normalize that gap or ignore their own teachings in order to preserve power. That gave me a sharper sense of justice.

**WELCOMED:** Did that shape your feminism?

**Cynthia Bailey:** Very much so. When you are taught to care for others, to love your neighbor, and to seek justice, you become morally alert. When I encountered injustice, it felt jarring. I often felt indignant, but I also wanted to restore justice while still holding grace for others. My

feminism grew out of that moral formation. It comes from a restorative vision of faith, one grounded in the belief that every person is equal before God.

Growing up, I took faith seriously and trusted religious authority. But I also knew that belief did not require surrendering judgment. I was a true believer, but a questioning one. The Church taught me to seek spiritual confirmation for myself, and I did. At the same time, it often associated loyalty with agreement, and I had more questions than that framework could comfortably hold, especially about women.

**WELCOMED:** Did your family encourage that independence of mind?

**Cynthia Bailey:** In some ways, yes. I am the eldest of four daughters, and both of my parents shaped me. My father introduced me to coding when I was still in elementary school. My mother had studied microbiology and had wanted to become a marine biologist, but she was discouraged from doing so because it was not considered a suitable path for a woman. She became a phlebotomist at Stanford Hospital instead. My father gave me mathematics; my mother gave me nature.

Nature was also part of my religious upbringing. My mother organized nature excursions around the Bay Area nearly every weekend, and I came to feel that mountains, wilderness, and natural beauty were sacred spaces. In my tradition, temples matter deeply, but so do the mountains. Nature has always felt to me like a place of reverence, instruction, and transcendence.

**WELCOMED:** What forms of service shaped you most in church life?

**Cynthia Bailey:** We receive what are called callings, roles of service that rotate within the community. I had many over the years. I taught very young children in Sunday school, taught youth and adults, and spent a long time leading the children's music program. That may have been my favorite calling. I loved the directness of the children's music text: Jesus loves you, be kind to your family, be kind to animals, be kind to other children. The moral vocabulary was simple, practical, and rooted in care.

That communal life shaped me deeply. It also shaped the way I parented. I married a fellow Church member, raised twins, and loved being part of a multigenerational tradition of caring, teaching, preparing, and showing up for others.

**WELCOMED:** At what point did your relationship to the Church begin to change?

**Cynthia Bailey:** Over time, I found that the tensions I had set aside kept accumulating. In Church culture, people sometimes speak of putting difficult questions "on the shelf," meaning that you set aside contradictions or harms you cannot yet reconcile. My shelf was heavy for a long time. Eventually, it broke.

I began writing pseudonymously about the concerns I had, and that writing spoke to many people. Mormon feminist organizing was risky, and there were real consequences for some who became publicly identified with it. But criticism often comes from care. People speak up because they believed what they were taught and want those ideals to be real.

**WELCOMED:** Was there a point when living faithfully required living differently?

**Cynthia Bailey:** Yes. I came out to my family before COVID, and over the following years we moved slowly in deciding what course was right for us. I now live as a residential faculty member on campus, am partnered with a woman, and am currently inactive in the Church.

**WELCOMED:** How do you understand faithfulness now?

**Cynthia Bailey:** One value I have retained is a sense that moral responsibility is inescapable. Although the Church denies me access to the temple rituals because I live with a woman, and although I no longer participate in the institution, I do not in any way feel like I am relieved of duty to live a life of service and integrity. I often think about the story of Esther, who was placed in a position of significant influence, “for such a time as this,” when her people needed her. That sense of duty and calling still permeates my thinking, and belief that the influence I have, including through my professional roles, is a gift that binds me to use that influence selflessly. I still believe in the values from the Articles of Faith, like being “honest,” “benevolent, virtuous, and doing good to all [people],” and seeking things that are “lovely.” Now I express worship through gratitude and celebration of joy, and I find sacred space in nature and in caring for other people.