

LETTERS

Editorial Excess?

I never met Eugene England, so it was hard to explain why I needed to be at the public memorial service after his death. Perhaps it is also inexplicable that I would sit in the Provo Tabernacle knowing no one and saying nothing to anyone, yet feeling a shared loss, a communal spirit, and even a unique discernment with everyone there.

In his letter to the editor (Vol 35., No. 2), a recent subscriber to *Dialogue*, John D. Van der Wall, questioned the wisdom of devoting nearly an entire issue to Gene and his writings. Much like Mr. Van der Wall, I too read *Dialogue* for its "provocative, informative, and challenging articles," but that is not the only reason. It is just as much (maybe more) because of my need for regular contact with a certain community of people—nearly all of whom I will never meet. I think of Gene, who helped found *Dialogue*, and Jack and Linda Newell, who introduced me to it, as examples of many others who have not only sensitively and courageously helped provoke, inform and challenge me, but with whom I share something important.

Having read *Dialogue* for over 20 years, my suggestion for the subscriber who thinks that the editors were "excessive" is to keep on reading new issues and as many back issues as you can get a hold of. Someday, you too may do things that will not always make sense to others and feel right about it. And if you are lucky, you may

be able to explain why. Gene England was really lucky.

Roger H. Hoole
Salt Lake City, Utah

In Perspective

The quotation of President Kimball, at the beginning of Craig Livingston's "Lions, Brothers, and the Idea of an Indian Nation: The Mexican Revolution in the Minds of Anthony W. Ivins and Rey L. Pratt, 1910-1917" (Vol. 35, No. 2), in which Kimball cautions against the use of revolutionary force, might benefit from context.

It was made in Bogota, Colombia, during the eighth and last of a series of area conferences in Latin America. During each of the seven preceding conferences, he had addressed the same general subjects—the importance of temple worthiness and temple ordinances, missionary work, and rearing families in righteousness. He departed from that pattern only in Bogota. I do not know why he did, but I speculate that he felt that there were peculiar dangers to the church in Colombian extremist politics at that time against which he should warn church members.

As used in the article, one might infer that President Kimball was against revolution on principle, but I believe that not to be true. On this particular occasion, he did not reject revolution per se, but made a more limited statement about effectiveness: "Today,

many are becoming extremists and are losing balance and effectiveness and are missing the results which they would desire to attain." He urged, as quoted, that perhaps a slower, more peaceful way would reach the same ends more surely and without such high costs.

In general his emphasis when considering social change was that the gospel of Christ was the best, most effective way to produce the "better life" sought by radicals. He feared that political zeal and spiritual zeal would conflict.¹

It is true that a number of his statements had pacifist overtones.² Whereas others of the General Authorities (principally President McKay and Elder Benson) had been highly vocal as critics of international Communism, President Kimball avoided the subject.³ In his view, speeches offending communist governments would simply arouse unnecessary antagonisms. They would not cause governments to fall, but would make introduction of missionaries into those countries and living the gospel by members there more difficult.

If President Kimball believed that revolution against oppressive government was wrong on principle, I am not aware that he ever said so. Indeed, he saw the American Revolution as God-endorsed.⁴ And referring to Book of Mormon peoples he said, "Power-greedy, paternalistic, centralized governments move toward the inevitable revolution which finally impoverishes

but frees the people to begin again from ashes."⁵ My belief is that he would have approved of "good" revolution—revolution that would replace tyranny with beneficent government—but only if it had a good chance of success, since failure would merely compound the misery.

Edward L. Kimball
Provo, Utah

Handmaiden of Faith

But if the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense.

David Hume

I was introduced to Dennis Potter's thinking skill at the 1998 Sunstone Symposium when he delivered a wonderful critique of atonement in his paper, "Did Christ Pay for Our Sins" (See *Dialogue*, Vol. 32, No. 4.).

His latest installment on Mormon theology, "Defending Magic: Explaining the Necessity of Ordinances," while certainly defending magic, does not explain the necessity of ordinances. Rather, Dennis is sliding into the silliness of his Mormon cohorts' vain attempts to "make rational religion."

These new Mormon theologian-philosophers at times recognize that religion is inherently irrational, but, unwilling to give up, invoke fuzzy science as a self-confirming mechanism to flex their intellectual muscles. To

1. In Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 409.

2. *Ibid.*, 413-18.

3. However, see *Ibid.*, 408.

4. *Ibid.*, 403.

5. *Ibid.*, 406.

this debate I add my own theories—since folk theories seem to abound:

A) The Theory of the Real World. Because Dennis uses baptism as his primary example in exploring ordinance-necessity, I will likewise address Mormon baptism and very briefly explain its real world origins:

1) Joseph Smith founded Mormonism.

2) Joseph Smith was a Bible believing Christian.

3) Joseph Smith adopted baptism into the new faith because any new religion needs stuff to do. What better activity than something old with a twist (for the dead).

4) Animal sacrifice was out of fashion, and Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca does not work for Bible believers.

B) The Theory of Hope Springs Eternal. A couple of Sunstone Symposia ago, a panel comprised of James McLachlan, Dan Wortherspoon, Blake Ostler, and Lorie Winder Stromberg gleefully presented another nifty rational theory on which to hang faith, "Process Theology." This exercise provided yet another example of my "Theory of Hope Springs Eternal" wherein, first, you make an assumption in the form of a truth statement (say, concerning baptism) and then go in search of any intellectual/scientific "view" or "evidence" which might seem to help justify it. Moreover, this justification must be murky and nebulous enough so as to confuse the layman, on the one hand, while at the same time impressing one's academic peers. Potter, for instance, appeals to Quantum Mechanics, of which, Richard Feynman has said, only a handful of people have even the slightest grasp.

Dennis writes, "A supernatural event is not one that transcends nat-

ural law. Instead, it is merely an event that transcends our understanding of natural law." The implication is a kind of license: should science and reason again dismantle our religious theories, we can, as a consequence, retreat into our secure fortress of faith, wherein reason does not reside.

· Oh yes, and thumbs up to Garth N. Jones's "Blood Sports" in the same issue.

Steve Oakey
Rexburg, Idaho

What is Scripture?

Thank you for including the Jana Riess' review of my book *Digging in Cumorah* in the Fall 2002 edition of *Dialogue*. I had worked on my book for 15 years with the help of two paid editors, the patient analysis of many competent readers and helpers, and encouragement from such notables as Wayne Booth and Robert Price, but none of us had any idea what the main thesis of the book was until Riess was generous enough to inform us.

The first goal of any review is to summarize the contents of a book for the readers of the review. In this, her most fundamental task as a reviewer, Riess has simply failed. She portrays my work as defending the nineteenth century origin of the Book of Mormon. She says that that is the thesis of my book. But I claim that there is not a single sentence in my book that addresses that issue, and I am willing to assert without hesitation that Riess is absolutely and completely mistaken in this assessment. If you, the readers of *Dialogue*, want to know what my book is about, her review will not help you. Nowhere in my book do I ever address

or even imply the issue of the Book of Mormon's origin. I am not interested; I do not care when the Book of Mormon was written. To me it is a boring issue.

But Riess is obviously bright and thoughtful. How could she be so mistaken? In part, it is because my book, *Digging in Cumorah*, speaks a new language, in a new paradigm that is simply very difficult to understand without a reorientation of thought. So I ask Riess and you, the reader, to give me one more chance to explain this new interpretive paradigm that I am proposing. For the sake of the big picture, I will ignore a few minor, inaccurate observations that she makes about my book and simply turn to the main issue—what is *Digging in Cumorah* about, and why is it so unusual?

Digging in Cumorah intends to listen carefully to the voice of the text, rather than argue about when it was written. This is a book intended for both Mormons and non-Mormons, and it makes no judgment whatsoever about the origin of the Book of Mormon. But, having said that, I contend that both Mormons and non-Mormons must agree that the language of the oldest text is the language of Joseph Smith. So we obviously will find theological and idiomatic phrases as well as forms in the Book of Mormon that reflect the language of Joseph Smith. That is the starting point for any serious interpretation of any book: the language of the text. So, the starting point for both Mormons and non-Mormons is the English text of the Book of Mormon. In addition, the Book of Mormon explicitly states that the audience of the Book of Mormon is the audience of Joseph Smith's times. Hence, regardless of one's religious belief, every competent interpreter of the Book of Mormon must begin with that audience in mind.

I give plenty of examples of the language and the theological setting of the Book of Mormon's nineteenth-century audience in my book. (I also give plenty of examples of ancient literary forms and phrases.) If one is serious about interpreting the text, one must account for and understand the significance of both the ancient and modern in the Book of Mormon. But all of this says nothing about the origin of the Book of Mormon.

Even though the nineteenth century is the starting point for serious interpretation of the book, it cannot be the ending point. Every text is trapped by its own audience and historical setting. But there is a way to escape history. As I state in the introduction of my book: "Symbolism transcends historical setting. Thus, while symbolism is inherent in the original rhetoric of the text, it also proved a means by which the current reader can enter into dialogue with the text." *That dialogue is what my book is about—the dialogue between current readers and this remarkable text of scripture.* (Yes, I do accept the Book of Mormon as scripture.) But serious scholarship cannot bypass the original rhetoric of the text to get to its symbolism. We must wade through it.

While my book relies on a variety of disciplines to analyze the Book of Mormon, its most significant contribution is literary. I spend a great deal of time discussing Book of Mormon literary forms and symbolism. All revelation is symbolic. It therefore cannot be proved either true or false by historical research. It can only be proved "true" by its adequacy to express the human condition in light of the Holy. My book discusses at length the existential symbols that portray the "natural man" (or as we would call it "the universal human predicament" of death, sin, and meaninglessness). The answer

that the Book of Mormon gives for this predicament is, of course, Jesus the Christ ("Christ" itself being a symbolic notion). Those existential symbols in the Book of Mormon include stain on the hand or garments, mists of darkness or sleep, chains of hell, a tree of life, and so forth with a two-tiered-narrative interpretive methodology.

That's my statement of what my book is about. Many people may be puzzled when I say that I do not even care when the book was written, while I wholeheartedly accept the Book of Mormon as scripture. Let me explain. What is scripture? I like the ancient rabbis' definition best: scripture is a book that defiles the hands with sacred power. Heft the text. If it defiles the hands, then you are a Mormon, whether you are baptized or not. And whether it defiles the hands or not, its symbolism of the Holy allows us a duet with this sorrowful song of the Nephites. If Riess were to pick up my book and read it again, with this in mind, I am certain that she would understand now the strange language that my book employs to describe this Nephite lament in the Dorian mode.

Mark D. Thomas
Salt Lake City, Utah

Minimum Requirement

The recent issue of *Dialogue* (Vol. 35, No. 2, Summer 2002) contains a notice from the Board of Directors of the Dialogue Foundation with "A Call for Editors." The "Call for Editors" contains a detailed editor's job description and a description of the desired qualifications. The desired qualifications fail to identify the first and most important criteria for the editor of *Dia-*

logue, active membership in and commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Dialogue was not established to be the loyal opposition to the LDS church. It was founded by active members of the LDS church who "wish[ed] to bring their faith into dialogue with the larger stream of world religious thought." It was to be "edited by Latter-day Saints" (See the *Dialogue* statement of purpose on page one of every copy of the journal). The failure to recognize that the new editors must be active in the LDS church betrays the original purpose of those who founded the journal and of many readers who support it.

It was my privilege to work as a volunteer with three different *Dialogue* editors, Mary Bradford, Jack and Linda Newell, and Ross and Kay Peterson. All were excellent editors and active in the LDS church. This tradition should continue with the next editorial team.

G. Kevin Jones
Salt Lake City, Utah

Not to Worry

Early in December of 2002, LDS anthropologist Thomas W. Murphy worried that he might be excommunicated for writing an essay published in *American Apocrypha*, saying that the DNA of New World natives didn't match up with that of Near-Eastern peoples.

This finding strengthened my testimony.

You may recall that I reported my 1997 Pioneer Mormon Trek experience in *Dialogue*. And I mentioned that the lady who owns Nu-Skin cosmetics

flew some BYU Native American boys into Scottsbluff, Nebraska, to dance for us Trekkers. It bothered me a little to see that all of them were rather dark-skinned, and obviously hadn't taken advantage of the pre-1981 promise in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 30:6).

But I now suspect that those particular dancers were probably of Asiatic extraction rather than Palestinian. And, therefore, the Book of Mormon promise did not apply to them. Perhaps the flaw in Murphy's research is that he doesn't realize that by now

most of the Palestinian Lamanites, who have been good and true people, have turned "white and delightful" as promised by the scripture. Therefore, they are now unidentifiable as having Native American roots. In other words, Murphy has been testing the wrong "Indian" population.

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(via: Joseph Jeppson
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