

THE POSSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE

A PERSONAL VIEW

Eugene England

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

Paul the Apostle

These words are an obvious place to begin to consider the possibilities of dialogue about a Christian religion and its cultural heritage. The words are familiar to our time. “Examine. Test. Prove.” The demand for re-evaluation and for proof and the pressure toward thoroughgoing skepticism continue in our universities and mount in our society generally. The voices against dogmatism (especially religious dogmatism) grow in the land. And here is Paul, who brought Christianity to the Western world, speaking the same words. “Prove all things”: consider all things; look at all possibilities; examine your inherited prejudices and evaluate again even your cherished beliefs; be open to what might be a new understanding — a new faith.

But, of course, Paul was no mere skeptic. The Christian Apostle would have us give our searching a meaning, not allow it to serve as an easy posture. He also said, “Hold fast that which is good”: respect certitude as well as doubt, commit yourself to the good you find, give yourself to the possibilities that begin to prove out, live the faith that is given you in your seeking — however deeply you continue to test that faith and examine others.

A Book of Mormon prophet named Alma understood this paradox. He knew that “faith is not to have a perfect knowledge” but is a willingness to “experiment” in new realms, to give place in our hearts for new words and not cast them out prematurely with our unbelief. He knew what it is to prove and also hold — to be open to seeds of potential meaning and being, to continually both

Eugene England is completing a Ph.D. in English Literature as a Danforth Fellow at Stanford University, where he is serving in the bishopric of the L.D.S. student ward. He has a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship for this year and has published poems in *The Southern Review*.

test and nourish them (because they can only be properly tested if nourished) until the good seeds produce fruit that is “most precious.”

Paul’s challenge and Alma’s experiment have been deeply significant to my own experience of the possibilities of life and my faith in the process of dialógue as a way to discover life’s possibilities. I have tasted the precious fruit of faith in specific things; I have been able, in all my proving, to discover and to continue to hold some things fast as certainties — faith in the divinity of Christ and in the saving power of His teachings and atonement, faith in the divine mission of His Church and His modern prophets — and the deep hunger of my soul has been fed as I have given myself to this faith. At the same time, I have sensed the risk of choice, the limitation of commitment to a defined context in this world that is full of richly complex possibilities and allows us only finite vision into their worth. Yet I have found that my very specific faith does not cut me off from this rich complexity, but actually intensifies and informs with meaning my involvement in it.

I am motivated in my relationship to Christ and my desire to build His Kingdom by both the questing openness and the loving authority exhibited in His life and in His revelations to His prophets. I think and act within a specific context of Mormon faith that defines my life and shapes my soul. I relate to my wife and children and friends and use my time in terms of the counsel of the Church and the heritage of Mormon experience. But my very grasp on this specific direction, this “iron rod,” turns me out to all people and their experience in desire for dialogue with them. The very principles I accept as definitive of my life warn me to be continually open to the revelation of new possibilities for my life from both God and man.

My faith encourages my curiosity and awe; it thrusts me out into relationship with all the creation. The Christ I have come to know through my Mormon faith affirms the world as good and each of its people as eternally precious; He insists that my words and actions be integrated with each other and relevant to that world — that they not just speak to it but really make the connection. My faith in Him encourages me to enter into dialogue.

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Such a dialogue seems to me to depend on some initial commitment to values, to some beliefs that give a person a place from which to speak and a purpose for speaking. It can be engaged in best by

those who hold fast that which is good. But such a dialogue depends also on willingness to prove all things. We must be willing to consider that anything we believe or base our lives upon may be a partial truth — at best something seen (as Saint Paul also said) “through a glass darkly” — or even may be dead wrong. We must take seriously the jovial words of Henry Eyring, “In this Church we don’t have to believe anything that isn’t true.”

A dialogue is possible if we can avoid looking upon doubt as a sin — or as a virtue — but can see it as a condition, a condition that can be productive if it leads one to seek and knock and ask and if the doubter is approached with sympathetic listening and thoughtful response — or that can be destructive if it is used as an escape from responsibility or the doubter is approached with condemnation.

A dialogue is possible if, in trying to describe our findings and convictions, we can be honest with ourselves and each other, if we can use traditional forms and conventions without letting them become lies or idols. We must be witnesses for all that is real to us and no more, recognizing the eternal dignity of truth which gives it claim finally over expediency and even perhaps charity.

But a dialogue can realize its full possibilities only if there is charity, if we can speak with sensitivity to each other’s framework or ability to hear and speak in order to communicate for each other’s welfare, not to justify or exalt ourselves at each other’s expense. We must truly listen to each other, respecting our essential brotherhood and the courage of those who try to speak, however they may differ from us in professional standing or religious belief or moral vision. We must speak and listen patiently, with good humor, with real expectation, and our dialogue can serve both truth and charity.

Joseph Smith, one of the prophets to whom I give my faith, has recorded the voice of the Lord urging men to be “anxiously engaged in a good cause . . . and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.” I am motivated by my belief in that power and agency to test the possibilities that this journal can be successful in fostering a valuable dialogue. I am also motivated by partial agreement with Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike that “The church should be a launching pad and not a comfort station.” (It should be both.) And I am motivated by the challenges to intelligent and creative discipleship made again and again by the leaders of the Church.

The faith I hold fast impels me to speak and to listen; it impels me to express honestly and fully and as gracefully as possible the convictions that shape my life, to try to demonstrate the things I find as I think and do research and experience the holy — it impels me to listen carefully and always. My faith as a Mormon encourages by specific doctrines my feeling that each man is eternally unique and god-like in potential, that each man deserves a hearing and that we have something important to learn from each man if we can hear him — if he can speak and we can listen well. Dialogue is possible to those who can. Such a dialogue will not solve all of our intellectual and spiritual problems — and it will not save us; but it can bring us joy and new vision and help us toward that dialogue with our deepest selves and with our God which can save us.

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

These letters are responsive to the editors' announcement of their intention to publish a new journal. The editors now welcome letters responding to the contents of this and subsequent issues.

Dear Sirs:

. . . . The genius of your plan lies in the title, for I think that at present many of us are engaged in a dialogue. Perhaps when we have better defined our position we will be capable of commentary, but for the present our task is more to discover where we stand and to search for our own identity. During the hundred or so years of isolation in the West, we developed something that is precious beyond words, and so far as I am concerned is worthy of all sacrifices. But the doctrine of gathering has been suspended and our job now is to live in the world. While we may know well enough who we are in testimony meetings and Ward Council and General Conference, the new context of