

# Letters to the Editors

Dear Sirs:

. . . . The first issue specified that "Dialogue is not a journal of conservative opinion or a journal of liberal opinion, an evangelical journal or a journal of dissent; it is a forum for exchange of research and opinion across a wide spectrum." All I can hope is that this policy will be followed. I would hate to see *Dialogue* degenerate into fostering the particular viewpoint of its editors, though I realize that this is difficult to avoid. Not only must the Scylla of becoming an official viewpoint of the Church be avoided, but also the Charybdis of developing into a liberal or even anti-Mormon publication. Both would be equally disastrous!

Though I do not personally agree with much so-called "conservative" opinion among Mormons on political, theological, and other matters, I recognize that it represents the feeling of a considerable number of our members. . . . I am not particularly opposed to the "biting" character of Dr. McMurrin's response to his reviewers in the Summer issue, as long as those who may disagree within the Church (Hugh Nibley, Chauncey Riddle, David Yarn, Louis Midgley, Truman Madsen, etc.) are privileged to answer *in kind*.

John J. Hamond  
Provo, Utah

*Both Richard Anderson and Louis Midgley have responded to Sterling McMurrin and their letters follow.*

*It should be obvious by now that DIALOGUE practices complete editorial impartiality with regard to point-of-view. All that can prevent the appearance in DIALOGUE of any person's responsible viewpoint is his unwillingness or inability to write. [Ed.]*

Dear Sirs:

I do not wish to perpetuate Professor McMurrin's literary genre, the Review of the Reviewers, but protest his pattern of taking my statements out of their context. As but one example, his recent *apologia* taxes me with a humanistic view of salvation on the basis of the definition contained in the following sentence, which obviously makes precisely the opposite point:

However, if one takes the position, as L.D.S. theology does, that salvation is the cumulative achievement of building a sin-free character, then salvation is in a deep sense earned, but at the cost of many mistakes, the consequence of which, the revelations affirm, are forgiven through the atonement of Christ.

It is a traditional concept of higher education that inability to read in context is corrected by careful training in the philological skills, the mastery of which seems to have given B.Y.U. a bad reputation as viewed by

McMurrin. There is a great need in the world of scholarship generally for less pontification and more documentation. How does one know that he reads Plato correctly without philology?

Richard Lloyd Anderson  
Brigham Young University

Dear Sirs:

. . . . It was disturbing to note that Sterling McMurrin seemed unwilling to really face up to the issues that his reviewers, especially Richard Anderson, raised. It is McMurrin's position that Mormon theology incorporates what he calls "a liberal doctrine of man," and by this he means, at least in part, that "Mormon theology is a Modern Pelagianism." There are ways in which the Mormon doctrine of man can be called "liberal," though they are not always those suggested by McMurrin. And there are elements in Mormonism that are obviously similar to Pelagianism, especially in the radical stress given by both to freedom of choice, or, to use the scriptural term, agency. But Mormon theology, i.e., that theology found in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, is unlike both Pelagianism and Liberal Protestantism on the question of the necessity of divine grace and the character of the atonement, for the Mormon scriptures always bear witness to the saving power of Jesus Christ. Mormon theology is a theology of redemption; the Book of Mormon is simply filled with passages asserting man's radical dependency upon God's mercy and grace for forgiveness of his actual sins and hence for his salvation from the estrangement and spiritual death that he has brought upon himself by the exercise of his agency. Clearly this is not the traditional orthodox Augustinian doctrine of original sin and prevenient

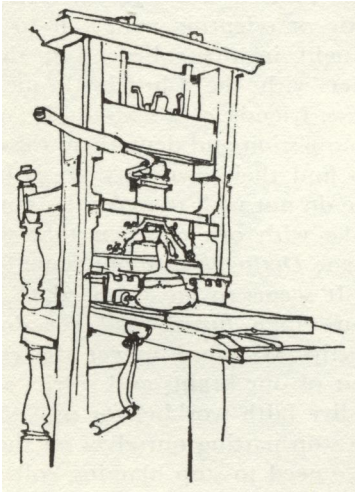
grace. It is, however, a doctrine that stresses the moral responsibility men have for their actual sinfulness and the absolute necessity of divine grace to free man from the consequences of his actual sins.

I do not believe that one can find Augustinianism or Protestant fundamentalism in the Book of Mormon; neither do I believe one can find scriptural support for McMurrin's claim that Mormons are Pelagian or like the Protestant liberals on the question of the atonement. Why should one desire to force Mormon theology into one or the other of these alternatives? Any such procedure does violence to features that are truly unique in Mormon theology, as well as, I believe, simply true. It seems to me that Anderson tried to make this point and Robert McAfee Brown also sensed the difficulties in McMurrin's description of Mormonism and asked some very appropriate questions.

McMurrin is certainly correct in saying that popular versions of Mormon theology often neglect the scriptures. I sometimes have the feeling that the Gospel is a rather well kept secret. However, the worst offenders are often those few intellectuals who like to be thought of as Mormon "liberals." There has been a tendency for some Mormons to engage in rather harmless forms of moral idealism; to insist, for example, on the necessity of faith in such things as the future, man, that all will turn out well, and so forth. It is even argued that the genius of Mormonism is to be found in the predominantly liberal and humanistic character of the religion, qualities that are grounded in an optimistic, life-affirming, positive conception of man. However, this kind of religion does not stand up too well under crisis, either personal or cultural. The reason is that optimism is merely a mood and it disappears when

challenged. A genuine faith in Jesus Christ as the Redeemer and Savior of man is not subject to the often violent alternations in mood between optimism and pessimism that result when some "likeness of the world" is treated as if it were God. My own conviction is that the Gospel offers an assurance to those who believe in it that God has the power to overcome what otherwise must seem to be the tragedy of this world — a power not possessed by man alone.

Talk about a liberal, positive, life-affirming assessment of man and the related optimism about man and his worldly destiny once had a certain



attractiveness for me. (I first heard the language of religious humanism from Sterling McMurrin.) I have turned away from liberal humanism for several reasons. First, humanism is radically inconsistent with the doctrinal content of the Mormon scriptures; I believe the Book of Mormon to be true, and I have come to see that this entails taking the book seriously as doctrine. Secondly, the slogans of humanistic liberalism do not speak to my own spiritual needs, nor to what I see as the tragedy of a lost and fallen world; humanism offers no answer to

the human predicament. The non-scriptural and popular forms of Mormon thought, in all their wide variety, now appear as banal trivialities, sentimental nonsense, or simply nice ideas that are hopelessly irrelevant to a world challenged by meaninglessness, sin, and extinction. I have the feeling that Mormons generally take their scriptures more seriously now than they did in the "good old days" before World War II. Of course, there has been, I believe, a similar and closely related and rapidly growing interest in scriptural theology among Mormon intellectuals. I feel there is now a stronger commitment to the Gospel among educated Mormons than there ever has been.

McMurrin opposes these trends; he is, for example, quite hostile to those who take the book of Mormon seriously as either history or doctrine. This may account for his outburst against what he calls the "theological atrocities" that are being committed at Brigham Young University by people like Hugh Nibley. He has some rather harsh things to say about those who cannot accept his belief that Mormon theology ought to follow what is now an old fashioned Protestant liberalism on such questions as the atonement and the moral assessment of man. He charges Mormon intellectuals with having betrayed what is genuine in Mormonism, but I cannot believe his readers will judge this matter the way he does. And he is not always consistent on these matters. I was amused to see him scolding Richard Anderson for having "abandoned all sense of the tragedy of existence and the meaning of redemption." It is McMurrin who bitterly complained of those who, like Anderson, favor the message of salvation and the description of man and the human predicament found in the Mormon scriptures. Furthermore, it is

Protestant liberalism and naturalistic humanism that issue in the belief that the Church is simply an ethical society. . . .

The answer to the question raised by Professor Bennett concerning truthfulness of Mormon theology is to be found, I believe, to the extent that it can be found, in the kind of thing that is being done by Hugh Nibley. McMurrin rejects as "dogmatic speculation" the idea that revelation may tell us something that is true. In dealing with the question of the factual validity of Mormon assertions about the eternal intelligences, McMurrin supposes "that there is not the remotest possibility of any empirical evidence bearing upon its truth or falsity." I appreciate the difficulties in these matters and I do not wish to seem to underestimate them, but the Prophets who gave us the idea that men are eternal intelligences also gave us scriptures which make some well-known historical claims. These can be tested. McMurrin hints at this when he admits that Mormon theological statements are not in principle meaningless by even positivist standards. If this is true, and McMurrin seems to admit that it is, a full and rigorous examination of Mormon truth claims is quite possible. The beginning of such an undertaking is to be found in the work of Hugh Nibley, but McMurrin brushes him aside simply by referring to "a sophisticated effort to square the doctrines with ancient and esoteric lore, scriptural and non-scriptural," which he thinks does not get at something called the "facts of life." Apparently, there is as much anxiety about Mormonism being true, not just intellectually strong, as there is about the possibility that it may be false.

Louis Midgley  
Brigham Young University

Dear Sirs:

Just recently purchased a copy of your Spring *Dialogue* and were so impressed that we decided to order a subscription. What a refreshing addition *Dialogue* has been to our reading. We found the material tasteful and challenging.

My husband is a student working on his Ph.D. in psychology at the University of Utah. Previous to this, he taught math and sciences for the Church in the South Pacific. Since returning to "Zion" . . . he does counseling with college students, and the thing that is throwing them into pangs of guilt and doubt regarding the Church has not been the atheistic or scientific approach to life as taught in the college, but the conflict with the Church through parents, friends, etc., who say it is wrong to question and deny them the chance to find their own way. It is because we do not wish to make the same mistake with our children that we welcome *Dialogue* into our home. . . .

It seems to me we need to get off our "high horse" and get down to earth. We need to get the cobwebs out of our brains and spirits and get a live faith working for us. We need to stop patting ourselves on the back. We need to stop blaming colleges for ruining our youth and take a bold look at *why* they are able to wreak such havoc. We need to face the questions of our youth and not push them aside with, "We must not question!" . . .

Mrs. LaVere E. Clawson  
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear Sirs:

I must admit that I put off subscribing to your publication for fear that it would end up being a journal of moaning and complaining, but having now seen the first issue I am

most excited about the intellectual appeal and quality of what I judge to be a long over-due organ within the Church.

Ralph H. Morris  
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear Sirs:

. . . . The effect that *Dialogue* has thus far had upon me is to enliven an awareness that the "blame" for that which concerns me about a number of facets of Mormonism must most certainly rest upon me (and others like me) and not be cast at those who lead me, for it is I who complain but do nothing more. And my desire to be of *meaningful service* to my Lord is being rekindled.

Bartell W. Cardon  
University Park, Pennsylvania

Dear Sirs:

In the words of a friend, "*Dialogue* is the best thing to hit Mormonism since polygamy!" Keep up the good words.

Nancy H. Cottam  
Sherman Oaks, California

Dear Sirs:

In the Summer edition of *Dialogue*, Dr. J. D. Williams has nailed his seven questions to the Church Office door. Perhaps it's time for us to take an honest look at the role of the Church in politics. Until recently, our leaders have been faced with a terrible dilemma: How to remain "impartial" and keep the Church safe for Republicanism. To many outsiders it appears that the Mormon concept of political impartiality consists of equal time for both the Birchers and the Eisenhower Republicans, with General Authorities to represent both points of view.

Dr. Williams has laid the cards

.(pardon the expression) right on the table. He is to be commended for his honesty at a time when most of us have developed huge political blind spots. This is a serious, vital issue that threatens the very integrity of the Church and deserves to be brought into the open. Bravo, J.D.!

Hyrum Coon  
Lebanon, New Jersey

*A very different response is Robert M. Frame's, "An Uncasual Review of Williams," in Notes and Comments.*  
[Ed.]



Dear Sirs:

. . . . Having talked with people in Santa Barbara, Salt Lake, and this week at Portland, I can report that *Dialogue* has won a loyal following already, as you know. It is a sign of health in the Church — a constructive effort which in the long run can do nothing but good. Those of little faith, fearful of questions, should thank the Lord that this enterprise is in your hands rather than in those of grim, bitter apostates.

Davis Bitton  
University of Utah

Dear Sirs:

It has taken several months for me to assimilate my outrage over *Dialogue* number one. The article on “honesty” by Menlove was the chief irritant and my reading of it soon degenerated into counting all the “shouldn’ts” and the “mustn’ts” and the “demands.” I thought I had a strong case for “crying aloud” for emotional honesty as something far more noble and vital than “intellectual” honesty, and so was eagerly gathering forces for a well-aimed and vigorous blow. My first assault went out in the form of a personal letter to a member of your editorial staff. It was to be followed by a passionate

discourse on emotional honesty and its hazards. (One can lose friends that way.) But in the midst of this battle plan I read Karl Keller — in issue number two. Suddenly, surprisingly, the edge of my belligerence dissipated. Imagine my frustration! I was captivated. Enchanted. Something deep down inside rang and pulsed and began surging upward. I cried and sighed with him as he and I together experienced the South. There is something princely and noble about spontaneous religion, isn’t there?

Eugene Kovalenko  
Los Angeles, California

