

An Open Letter to Nathan Oman

Robert A. Rees

DEAR NATHAN:

I appreciate your “An Open Letter to the *Dialogue* Board” (38, no. 4 [Winter 2005]: 227–29). I consider it a sincere and thoughtful expression of an ideal I share: a more balanced, diverse, and inclusive dialogue about Mormon religion and culture. As a former editor of *Dialogue* (1971–76), I am pleased that, as you say, “you care a great deal about the health and public reputation of Mormon intellectual fora” (227).

You identify what is a core problem for such fora, not only for *Dialogue*, but for all avenues of Mormon expression—how to foster balanced, responsible discourse. I am sure you recognize that the problem lies not just with *Dialogue* but with all venues that publish Mormon material.

You suggest that the problem might be solved were *Dialogue* editors “to solicit articles aggressively from well-known, established, conservative scholars” (229); but as far as I know, the editors have been doing that from the journal’s inception. I know that I made a number of attempts to get conservative scholars to participate. Some did, but that was before there was an official pronouncement about “alternative voices” (which, fairly or unfairly, many assumed was code for *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*) or the prohibition against CES and BYU faculty publishing in *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* (the only such prohibition in American higher education, as far as I know). Cutting off a large portion of available conservative voices has made it difficult for *Dialogue* to achieve the balance it desires. I was always disappointed when conservative (or even moderate) scholars refused our invitation. (For more of my thoughts on “The Possibilities of Dialogue,” see my 1974 editorial reprinted in this issue, pp. 97–100).

Thus, far from *Dialogue*’s editor or board “writ[ing] off its image problems” (228), engaging in “self pity” (229), or “washing its hands” (228) of the problem you identify, they have been trying for many years to persuade their more conser-

vative brothers and sisters to join the dialogue, generally without much success. *Dialogue* has also been soliciting material from the young scholars you reference in your letter, as evidenced by the special cash awards it has inaugurated for younger writers.

I do think you contribute to the problem rather than help solve it when you speak of the rising generation of young Mormon scholars as “loyal and faithful Latter-day Saints” and suggest that there is some truth to the perception that *Dialogue* is “an in-house journal for the disaffected Mormon community” (228). It might surprise you to know that many if not most of those who contribute to the journal also consider themselves “loyal and faithful Latter-day Saints.” I don’t know what the profile of the journal’s current readership is; but not too many years ago, a survey revealed that the average *Dialogue* reader had a profile of faith (as measured by such things as sacrament meeting attendance and tithing) superior to the Church average. I don’t know everyone on the current staff, board of directors, and editorial board; but a significant majority of those I do know consider themselves to be faithful members of the Church.

The degree to which I believe you misunderstand *Dialogue* is seen in your contention that articles on controversial subjects by conservative scholars and commentators would make “aging, liberal, cultural Mormons . . . absolutely furious.” You say, that *Dialogue* “need[s] to be thinking in each and every issue whether or not you have published something offensive to this group” (229). This practice, would, you contend, counterbalance *Dialogue*’s “willingness to offend conservative or orthodox Mormons” (229). Such sentiments demonstrate, I believe, a fundamental misunderstanding of *Dialogue*’s mission. From its inception, *Dialogue* has been committed to publishing *responsible* scholarly and other expressions, not regardless of whether they might offend particular individuals or groups, but whether they contribute something worthwhile to our understanding of what it means to be honestly and openly engaged with our minds, hearts, and spirits with our religion and its multiple intersections with history and with the world.

I take my own experience as editor as a case in point. Elsewhere I have recounted the difficult decision I faced in publishing Lester Bush’s landmark study on the historical origins of what used to be called “Mormonism’s Negro doctrine.”¹ Considerable deliberation, thought, and prayer (not just by me but by our board of directors and editorial staff) went into that decision, particularly because we knew it might offend some Church leaders and members. Not only were we not indifferent to how Bush’s “shaking of the foundations” study would be received, but we also took precautions to soften the effect by making sure that some General Authorities knew what we were doing and by also inviting three reputable scholars to respond to Bush. The fact that I was threatened (not officially but nevertheless seriously) with Church disciplinary action made the decision even more difficult because I then, as now, value my Church membership. But I also

value the process that that particular decision (and many like it that I and other editors have wrestled with for forty years) represents—a willingness to take risks so that true dialogue might take place.

One of the problems the editors of the journal face is that any criticism, no matter how well-founded or sensitively presented, will inevitably be seen by some as heretical or “evil speaking of the Lord’s anointed.” Another is that some Mormon scholars and writers withhold their manuscripts based only on the perception that the Brethren would disapprove of their publishing in a nonofficial or nonsanctioned journal, even though there has been no such specific prohibition. (One of the dangers of the contemporary Church is that legions are more than eager to tell us what the Brethren think or wish on any given subject.)

You have respectfully issued a challenge to the editors and Board of Directors. I would like, in turn, to present a challenge to you and to the young scholars and intellectuals you claim to speak for as well as to the “established, conservative” scholars you identify in your letter: If you are dissatisfied with *Dialogue*, work to change it. If you have important things to say, including about what you see as *Dialogue*’s imbalance, submit them. If you want to defend orthodox teaching and practices or enter into true dialogue with heterodox points of view, send in your manuscripts. I am confident that the current editor and editorial board will treat them with the same respect and fair consideration they give every manuscript.

Because you openly challenge the *Dialogue* board, I respectfully suggest a few things that you might do personally:

1. Since you contend that the way in which young scholars and intellectuals perceive *Dialogue* “is not entirely fair” (228), help make it fair by becoming better informed about *Dialogue*’s modus operandi and especially about the attitude of the editors toward a more balanced journal.

2. Help your young friends understand that, even though they may not be aware of it, they owe a debt of gratitude to those who have kept *Dialogue* alive over the years. You and they enjoy a religious culture that no longer withholds priesthood ordination to blacks, that has seen greater respect for the rights of women, that is not as homophobic as it once was (even though there is still a long way to go), that enjoys amicable relations with the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church) that has revised some of its teachings about the descendents of Lehi, that discusses real problems (divorce, child abuse, mental illness, etc.) more openly than it did a generation ago, that has removed some offensive publications from circulation, that is more respectful of scientific discovery, that is more balanced politically (though still imbalanced toward the right), that is vigorously engaged in interfaith work, and, perhaps especially, that is more open about its history and more honest about its institutional failings. *Dialogue* is not responsible for all of these progressive changes, but I believe that history will show it has played a role in all of them.

3. Since you are sincerely concerned about the state of Mormon scholarship, instead of being a "sometime subscriber" (229), become as consistent a subscriber as you are a reader. Even if you don't agree with everything *Dialogue* publishes (as I certainly don't), if you read it, support it. I assume you subscribe to other Mormon publications without necessarily agreeing with everything in them. Also, get your young friends to subscribe.

4. Solicit articles from "LDS grad students and other young people who care about such things," those "talented young intellectuals who [as you say] will be the leading Mormon scholars of this generation" (228)—and perhaps you might be willing to alter your statement to read "among the leading Mormon scholars," since some of those whom I could count among this number presently contribute to *Dialogue*.

5. Help arrange the kinds of articles you mention in your letter—by Lynn Wardell, Louis Midgley, and Daniel Peterson. In fact, I will make it easier for you: I am willing to engage in a dialogue with any (or all) of these scholars on the subjects you mention. I'm serious. These are lively topics that could benefit from thoughtful, respectful dialogue. We could do what I used to do as editor: Get several scholars in a room, turn on the tape recorder, share the microphone, and record, transcribe, and publish the results.

6. Send an open letter to the editors of *FARMS*, *BYU Studies*, *FAIR*, and similar publications encouraging them to solicit articles from more liberal/progressive scholars. Use the same logic with them that you include in your letter to the *Dialogue* board.

I attended the Christmas Eve 2005 service at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral and was struck by the speaker's statement: "We have to understand that questions unite us and answers divide us." I believe that Latter-day Saints should be (but often are not) united by the overriding questions facing the modern Church in the first decade of the twenty-first century: Can we be open to the truth, no matter where it may lead us? Can we reconcile our enormous wealth with the immense poverty and suffering in the world? Can we become more pluralistic politically and socially? Can we find successful solutions for the increasing percentage of single members? Can we become more engaged in working for social justice in our own and in other cultures? Can we be less hierarchical and patriarchal? Can we live together peaceably despite our differences? Can we integrate the riches of other cultures (including other faith traditions) with the Anglo-Americanism that presently dominates the Church? Can we become more successful in eradicating racism, sexism, and the other "isms" that plague us? Can we accommodate the relational needs of homosexuals? Can we be bolder in challenging governmental policies that lead to corruption, war, torture, and grinding the faces of the poor? And, ultimately, can we as individuals and as a religion foster the kind of discipleship of which B. H. Roberts spoke a century ago when he said that the disciples of

Mormonism, "growing discontented with the necessarily primitive methods which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take profounder and broader views of the great doctrines committed to the Church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cast them in new formulas; cooperating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of its development"?²

These are the questions your generation must find unity in addressing.

Come, my young friends, join the dialogue, and let us reason *together*.

Hopefully and heartfully,

Robert A. Rees

Notes

1. Devery S. Anderson, "A History of *Dialogue*. Part II: Struggle toward Maturity, 1971-1982," *Dialogue* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 22-27.

2. B. H. Roberts, "Book of Mormon Translation: Interesting Correspondence on the Subject of the Manual Theory," *Improvement Era* 9 (July 1906): 712-13.