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Roundtable

THE QUEST FOR AUTHORITY

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The editors have arranged a sort of "instant dialogue" concerning an article in the Spring issue of DIALOGUE, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," by the young Catholic scholar, Mario De Pillis. Richard L. Bushman, Assistant Professor of History at Brigham Young University, gives a Mormon's response to De Pillis, and William A. Clebsch, Associate Professor of Religion at Stanford, gives a Protestant's response. De Pillis then replies to Bushman and Clebsch.

TAKING MORMONISM SERIOUSLY

Richard L. Bushman

In his article on the quest for authority in early Mormonism, Mario De Pillis contends that "the question of the historical origins of Mormonism must ever remain central" in any exchange between Mormons and non-Mormons. Coming in the first paragraph, this statement may put off many Mormon readers. Far from providing a meeting ground for "honest dialogue," the question of origins has more often been the battleground for an exhausting fight between combatants with such radically different assumptions that agreement or even fruitful conversation is impossible. By now it should be apparent that no exhibition of the Prophet's anomalous brilliance as a theologian or personal stature as a man will win over people convinced *a priori* that revelation could never come to a New York farm boy. On the other hand, piling up similarities between Joseph's teachings and the notions of Alexander Campbell, Sylvester Graham, and Ralph Waldo Emerson is no demonstration that Mormonism is the undisputed offspring of nineteenth century America. Mormons are not surprised that a society engrossed with the Bible above all other books should spawn individuals teaching ideas similar to

Joseph's restoration of pure biblical Christianity. Moreover, the Mormon conception of apostasy and restoration postulates that God would prepare the world for his Prophet's revelations by fostering comparable attitudes and beliefs. L.D.S. historians have long argued that nineteenth century America was carefully cultivated to receive the teachings of the Restoration. The discovery of similarities confirms Mormon belief as much as it explains away the Prophet. Since the assumptions, rather than the facts, determine the conclusion, discourse between historians of differing persuasions has usually ended in acrimony and mutual distrust.

The Book of Mormon and the writings of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price are the aspects of Mormon teaching which offer scholarly leverage on the authenticity of revelation. Their claim to be ancient writings can be readily tested by established canons of proof. Unfortunately, non-Mormons have started at the wrong end again by showing similarities with nineteenth century beliefs. By the same measure, the appearance of Paul's theology in the sermons of New England ministers would prove his epistles fraudulent. The only way to prove the Book of Mormon and the writings of Abraham false is to find contradictions with the milieu of the ancient world from which they claim to have arisen. No non-Mormon historians have undertaken this task, however, and all we hear is that the Gadianton bands were disguised versions of the Masons. Meanwhile Mormon historians have gotten the jump on their antagonists and brought to light a multitude of similarities and harmonies which go far toward proving the Book of Mormon authentic ancient history.

De Pillis's failure to discuss the origins of Mormonism in these terms may blind Mormon readers to the value of his work, both for our own understanding of the early Church and as the opening comment in a potentially rewarding exchange. Actually De Pillis is reproving historians, as a Mormon might, for missing the significance of theology and belief in the rise of the Church. "Non-Mormon historians have not taken Mormonism seriously *as a religion*. They have thought it sufficient to take a position on the golden plates and to relate the 'movement' to the general history of the time. Mormonism ends up as a kind of religious Grahamism." He wants to rescue us from the social historians and the men of letters who see Mormons as colorful or bizarre but would not dream of treating Mormon theology with the same respect one affords Luther or Calvin or even the Puritans. De Pillis does not consider Joseph to have been one of the giants of his age, but the article does insist that he spoke directly to a major religious issue and must be placed in the intellectual as well as the social mainstream of his era. De Pillis's analysis of Mormon origins is substantially closer to the one Mormons themselves would give than those in most non-Mormon accounts and is far superior to those of Wallace Stegner or Fawn Brodie, which so often ring hollow to Mormon ears. At least he sees the Priesthood as more than an adolescent indulgence in ranks and titles.

De Pillis's search for origins is also useful because it goes beyond the somewhat naive and hopeless attempt to explain away Joseph and treats the more promising question of what was appealing about Mormonism. That side of his interest is probably what compelled De Pillis to take Joseph's religious teachings seriously. Mormons would do well to entertain the same question, for perhaps then we too would take Joseph more seriously. The long sojourn

in the Great Basin has so accustomed the Church to a provincial status that Mormons can hardly believe that our teachings could once have spoken to the most burning issues of the day. But the conversions of John Taylor and Sidney Rigdon, keen and well-informed as they were, and the success of Wilford Woodruff with the congregation at Ledbury, which included forty-five ministers, attests the relevance of the missionaries' message to contemporaneous theological concerns. De Pillis asks what attracted these people along with the thousands of less well-educated. What was it that made Mormonism plausible? What needs did it meet? However much Mormons believe that the Holy Spirit converts, we do not hold that it annihilates the mind, but rather that it works through the thinking processes. What elements of belief, what aspirations and fears in the minds of nineteenth century men gave the Holy Spirit a footing? On these grounds Mormons can indeed enter into a conversation with De Pillis and any other historians who care to join him.

De Pillis's main argument is simple and, in my estimation, true. The proliferation of denominations under American conditions of religious toleration impelled many to seek an authoritative faith. An anxious search for *the* truth moved Joseph to pray in the grove, and when he found his answer, others accepted it because they were bent on the same quest. Joseph's claims to revelation and priesthood authority appealed to men hungry for certain knowledge of God. De Pillis gives little evidence for his assertion, but a Mormon audience, at least, does not require it. Besides the familiar story of the First Vision, we have the account of Parley Pratt and countless others. Parley was reasonably satisfied with the gospel he learned from associates of Alexander Campbell except for one shortcoming: lack of a "commissioned priesthood, or apostleship to minister in the ordinances of God." One night's conversation with Hyrum Smith persuaded Parley to believe in Joseph's revelations and authority. Mormons can agree that De Pillis has hit upon an important reason for the success of the early Church.

Like many people who get a good idea, however, De Pillis carries this one too far. The quest for authority can help explain why converts were attracted to the Church. From a non-Mormon point of view it might even explain why Joseph would dream up the idea of Priesthood. (Though if it was such a successful solution, one would expect other Americans to have tried it; the same cause operating universally in America should have produced similar results in other religions.) But this single cause does not explain the intricate elaboration of priesthood into two divisions with multiple levels and a complicated division of duties. The cause is altogether too simple for the complex result. Men eat because they are hungry, but raw hunger does not satisfactorily account for sophisticated French cuisine. Custom, aesthetics, status-strivings, and probably a host of other social forces lie behind the delight in French cooking. De Pillis's hypothesis may well explain why Joseph and Oliver sought divine authority before baptizing one another, but those historians who reject the possibility of revelation will have to look further for an explanation of the layers on layers of keys and powers added in succeeding years. What in the world led Joseph to expand upon the claim to a single divine commission when the involved priesthood structure contradicted so severely the preference for simple ecclesiastical organization inherited from his New England forebears and approached dangerously the ways of the hated papists? That is a knotty problem indeed for critics of the Prophet.

By the same token, the quest for an authoritative religion may help us understand why revelation attracted investigators, but it does not explain (for Mormon or non-Mormon) why certain doctrines were revealed. Hopefully De Pillis's assertion that this single factor accounts for much of Joseph's teachings will not hinder researchers from looking for other relevant elements in the theological environment. Apart from the question of the source of the revelations (where the answer is settled for church members), there is the problem of why Joseph asked the questions he did. What stopped him on specific passages in the Bible and brought him to ask for illumination? Why did the statement on the resurrection of the just and the unjust provoke him to prayer? De Pillis's somewhat exaggerated claims could slow work on questions interesting to Mormons and non-Mormons alike.

Mormons will find factual and interpretative flaws in the work. There is, for example, no reason for ascribing skepticism to Oliver Cowdery on the question of authority to baptize. Both he and Joseph simply wanted to know the prerequisites for performing the ordinance. The Melchizedek Priesthood was not necessary to ordain Teachers or Deacons, and the position of High Priest as an office in the higher priesthood has been clear ever since the reception of Section 107 in the Doctrine and Covenants. But Mormons should not snap at De Pillis for relatively minor errors. If mutual understanding and trust is ever to grow between Church historians and non-members, tolerance on both sides is necessary.

In this vein, the only disappointing misconstruction for me was De Pillis's statement that the danger of doctrinal waywardness and the need for one true fold expressed in the Book of Mormon are "the only real theological themes of the book," which is much like saying that revulsion against sex is the central impulse of Augustine's *Confessions*. The Book of Mormon has always been difficult reading for outsiders. Little progress has been made since Mark Twain quipped that it was chloroform in print. The theological richness, the overpowering devotion to Christ and gratitude for His atonement, the narrative complexity and human interest — all these seem to elude non-Mormons. De Pillis is not to be blamed, especially when he has come so far toward understanding early Mormonism. Obviously Mormon writers have not adequately explicated the book. What authoritative work should De Pillis have read to grasp its import and beauty? Mormons must find words to reach the likes of him as well as a strictly Mormon audience. That goes for Mormon history as well, and De Pillis may have opened new ground on which a dialogue can begin.

EACH SECT THE SECT TO END ALL SECTS

William A. Clebsch

It is not only refreshing in itself but also an occasion for rejoicing by all serious students of American religious history that Mario S. De Pillis is recalling our attention to the historical study of Mormonism's origins, understood as human actions in time and space and interpreted as a constitutive part of the American pilgrimage. Such a view of Mormonism is unusually instructive when carried out in considerable detail and when thoroughly documented.

For even as the young Joseph Smith in Palmyra was receiving the first