

## DIALOGUE EAST

Robert Flanders

*Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action* (an independent quarterly "edited by individuals belonging to or associated with the Reorganized Latter Day Saint Church," 100 East South, Lamoni, Iowa 50140. \$6.00 per year.) Robert Flanders, a member of the Reorganized Church, teaches history at Southwest Missouri State College at Springfield. He is the author of *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (1966).

"To enter into dialogue with persons  
associated with the RLDS movement  
To support a means for independent  
scholarly expression  
To keep current on issues facing the  
movement, its history, and its expectations  
To keep alive the media for responsible  
criticism, concerned recommendations, and  
honest response"

In the spring of 1970, with the biennial world conference of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints approaching, an acute polarization of theological positions and emotional sets seemed to have occurred in the movement over the identity, the character, and the mission of the (RLDS) church.<sup>1</sup> Communication had become increasingly difficult for those holding dissimilar opinions, and attacks upon the faith, the testimony, and the "authenticity" of opponents was underway. A number of young men and women, mostly of liberal persuasion (many of whom were more or less under attack) agreed that loss of effective lines of communication and a resort to epithet was a situation that the church could not endure. The result was the launching of a quarterly periodical, to be a forum for an expression of responsible opinion in the church, but to be private, without formal institutional connection. (Personal letters from members of the First Presidency and Council of Twelve approve the purposes of the magazine, and express confidence in a constructive role to be played "if the search for truth is carried on in a spirit of mutual respect and concern," and if "you will keep your board broadly based, representing many points of view and areas of concern.") As of this writing one issue of *Courage* has been distributed, an April 1970 "pilot" issue, and it is this issue which is here reviewed. The second issue has been printed but not distributed.\*

Comparison of *Courage* with *Dialogue* is immediate and natural by those acquainted with the latter and it is a useful comparison. The appearance is similar, though *Courage*, while attractive and skillfully designed is somewhat

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<sup>1</sup>The controversy, and its expression in the dynamics of the April conference, is described with perception and extraordinary candor by William Russell in "Reorganized Mormon Church Beset by Controversy," *Christian Century* (88:769, June 17, 1970). Russell, a leading exponent of a liberal position, is a graduate of Graceland College and of St. Paul Theological Seminary, a Ph.D. candidate in history at the State University of Iowa, presently a member of Graceland's religion faculty, and a founder of *Courage*.

\*The second issue has now been distributed — ed.

smaller, plainer, thinner, obviously less expensive. The editing of *Courage* is competent, and reflects experience and professionalism (four of the nine executive editorial committee men and women are editors or former editors). The magazine contains six articles, an historical document (Joseph Smith III to L. D. Hickey, 1883), two editorials, three book reviews (a perceptive, unfavorable review of Hirshon's *Lion of the Lord*, and somewhat less perceptive reviews of Howard's *Restoration Scriptures* and F. H. Edwards, *History of the RLDS Church, Vol. 5*), and three letters to the editor. So, apparently, a smaller *Dialogue* for the smaller Latter Day Saint denomination. But there are some apparent differences, if the first issue of *Courage* may be considered at all representative.

The tone of *Courage* is somewhat less denominationally self-conscious than *Dialogue*, though paradoxically there is more immediate concern with denominational policy and identity. The president of Graceland College grapples with the issue of church relatedness; the Director of the Department of Religious Education speaks boldly to the fiery controversy over a proposed new curriculum for the church school; a brilliant young scholar scores the doctrine of the church as presented by the President of the Council of Twelve, and presents his own startling and provocative alternatives; a retired former editor of the *Saint's Herald* makes a querulous call for a return to the simple legalisms of One True Church, priesthood authority, and the preservation of the traditional power of the (generally conservative) Order of Bishops over against the aggrandizement of the (generally more liberal) First Presidency with their educated and bureaucratic departmental broods.<sup>2</sup> Two of the articles are solidly, professionally theological in content (Donald D. Landon, "A Question of Means or Ends: The Debate over Religious Education," and Harold N. Schneebeck, Jr., "The Doctrine of the Church: A Reply to Clifford Cole"). The Church Historian, Richard Howard, contributes an article the substance of which appeared earlier in *Dialogue* ("The 'Book of Abraham' in the Light of History and Egyptology"). There is from the first page of *Courage* to the last a seriousness — almost, one might say, a deadly seriousness — and a candor that is arresting to say the least.

Although the stated purpose of *Courage* is to be a "forum for a variety of viewpoints," it is certain that the moving force behind the enterprise is a relatively small group of persons whose cultural universe is rather homogeneous and decidedly different from that of a majority of adult church members. The group is an elite of intellectuals and professionals, some of whom are extraordinarily gifted, who are for the most part close friends, have frequent contact, and are influential upon one another's thinking. Many are in leadership or hold staff positions in the church headquarters organization. Most were classmates, or students, or professors of one another at Graceland.

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<sup>2</sup>This last article, by Chris B. Hartshorn, is the one "traditionalist" expression in the magazine, and seems curiously out of place; the author is in very fast company. "There are two reasons for my going on record concerning my Church in this new magazine," Hartshorn begins, "(1) The request of its editors, and (2) The possibility of effecting some changes in current trends which are disturbing some of our members."

A notable number are historians or theologians. Many graduated from Grace-land with a major in religion (a surprisingly formidable baccalaureate credential), and/or possess the B.D. from Union or Chicago theological seminaries, and/or the Ph.D. in History and Religion from the State University of Iowa (unique among state universities in offering a Ph.D. in Religion and in possessing a Sidney Mead on its faculty). Most of the group range in age from twenty-five to forty-five years and represent the broadening of collegiate education in the RLDS church since World War II. The impact of the thinking of this group upon the church, and especially upon many in the hierarchy, has already been formidable, but is yet at the threshold of influence. *Courage* may well hasten the process.

The first issue of *Courage*, not surprisingly then, breathes a kind of "new fundamental" Christian spirit, in striking contrast to the ubiquitous pseudo-fundamentalism of the scriptural literalists who confuse the church with Deity and the record of revelation with revelation. In inveighing against the promulgation of creedism as the proper end of religious education, Landon writes:

Latter Day Saintism was born in the awareness that creeds were an abomination. The business of elevating beliefs and doctrines into being the prime focus of faith was judged abominable and remains so for several reasons:

1. . . . Theological or doctrinal interpretations which suggest finality or inclusiveness [are] in violation both of the nature of faith and the nature of revelation. . . .
2. The primary focus of faith is Jesus Christ who is not reducable to propositions. Doctrines and beliefs guide us in our understanding . . . but Christ is not a belief, he is a living reality, and seeks to be *known*, not just known *about*. If beliefs about him [become] the prime focus of our commitment, the experiential base on which the faith is built disappears and we have simply another metaphysical system. Was it not Paul who said, "I know *whom* [not *what*] I have believed." (II Tim. 1:12)
3. To propose a creed or set of beliefs as a focus of our faith confuses means and ends. The temptation is to conclude that Christianity is essentially intellectual — words and ideas that are to be learned for the sake of assent. . . .

Our evangelism, Landon continues, often communicates this image of faith with a series of lectures on church organization, "true" doctrine, apostasy, restoration, life after death, and the Book of Mormon. "The preoccupation of many churches with beliefs reflects the power of denomination-ism to distort the gospel." To realize that our security lies not in possession of "all truth" but that "we are in relationship to One whose good pleasure it is to sustain us in the conscientious search for truth and meaning" is especially crucial amid the knowledge explosion of our time. "The pursuit of understanding is an integral part of [the man-God relation], but never supersedes it." Landon calls persuasively for replacing the church's "truth ethic" with a Christian "love ethic."