

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Edited by Maryruth Farnsworth

Mormons and Blacks: A Response to Hugh Nibley and Eugene England

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The publication of Lester Bush's important article on Mormonism's Negro doctrine in the last issue and the responses to Bush by Gordon Thomasson, Hugh Nibley and Eugene England have stimulated further dialogue on the subject. Some of these responses appear in Letters to the Editor. A more substantive and provocative response is the following by Martin R. Gardner.

Dear Editors:

As a longtime *Dialogue* fan, I feel prompted to voice my expression of support for the continued publication of this vitally important and necessary journal.

I consider myself an active and devoted member of the Church. But like so many others these days, I have had my problems reconciling conscience with certain Church policies. While kicking against the pricks has never been easy, some have trouble learning the lesson. *Dialogue* has been an important vehicle for keeping a great many of us misfits hanging in and around the Church. With every issue it renews hope that honest and free inquiry is not anathema in the context of today's Mormonism.

I wish to compliment you particularly on the latest issue. The thorough and careful discussion of the Black Issue by Lester E. Bush is far and away the most significant contribution *Dialogue* has rendered to Mormon thought. Not only is the piece itself excellently done but the subject is of vital importance to us as a people and is hideously misunderstood by the average Mormon on the street. I hope the Bush effort will stimulate much future study and dialogue concerning a subject each of us, if we claim to be morally minded people, must come to grips with.

I read with great interest the responses to the Bush article from Brothers Nibley, England, and Thomasson. I should like to comment on some of those responses and throw out a few thoughts of my own regarding the race issue. There can be no arguing with the "testimony" of another. Hence Eugene England and Hugh Nibley and all others claiming direct revelation from God showing them the divinity of the present racial policy are immune from attack by way of argument. But it does seem to me that some criticism of the thoughts of both England and Nibley can be leveled, not as to the basis of their personal beliefs, but regarding the way they read the Bush paper.

It seems to me that the discussion by Bush illustrates that there is no basis in doctrine, scripture, or reason supporting the policy denying blacks the priesthood.

England would seem to agree with that conclusion stating that his convictions have been confirmed that the policy is rationally untenable except from the perspective of "ecclesiastical authority." He never explains how the appeal to "ecclesiastical authority" makes this policy "reasonable." But I suppose the argument must go something like the following: The racial policy is supported by the prophets, the prophets by definition are inspired and therefore ultimately reasonable, therefore the policy must be reasonable. But this is not to say that the policy is in any meaningful way reasonably understandable to us. Indeed it is not to say that the policy is "reasonable" at all but only to affirm one's testimony of prophets. England would seem to be saying then that the policy is unreasonable in *every* way, but because of his conviction of the prophetic callings of our Church leaders he must nevertheless give his support to the practice. England does not stop here, however; his "Mormonness" will not allow him to live with a doctrine or policy without having a reason to support it. So he does what he criticizes others for doing, he creates a rationale; not a very good one, but certainly better than the curse of Cain explanation or the old first-estate-fence-straddling rule still alive in parts of Orem and Granger.

In succumbing to the temptation to try to make this whole thing reasonable, England suggests that God has given us the present lower law to prepare us for the time when we can learn to fully share all of the Gospel with all of our brothers and sisters. This strikes me as grasping at doctrinal straws. Why do *we* (any more than any other group of people) need to be *prepared*? Why does England assume that we as a people *at this time* lack the capabilities of lots of other groups of white Americans, indeed whites everywhere, to love and intimately associate with our black brethren? If a previously all white fraternity house at an Alabama campus can peacefully and lovingly admit blacks, why not a temple at Provo? Is England suggesting that the Mormon people are really the least tolerant bunch of moral bantamweights to grace the earth?

One thing does seem certain, the present policy is making matters worse. The Phase I restrictions on ordination suggested by England are not working very well to prepare us for Phase II acceptance of blacks into the priesthood. Of course England recognizes this and suggests the value of Bush's work might lie in helping reverse the trend, knocking down the myths so that Mormons and blacks may begin to know one another.

Assuming England's rationale is not acceptable, do we dare face the facts that his "Mormonness" found intolerable? The truth of the matter seems to be that there simply is no rational explanation of the present racial policy from which we can obtain comfort, allowing us to live with the attacks upon our senses of morality and justice generated by the practice. If we are to accept the policy as God's we must do so through an exercise of very profound faith, the kind of faith few of us know little of. I say "faith" and not personal revelation which is a form of "knowledge" because some of us can testify to contradictory "revelations." While we know the Church is led by inspired men, we know also that the present policy is immoral and inconsistent with our testimony of Jesus Christ and the spirit of His Gospel. And we know both through revelation and our exercise of reason that God does not contradict Himself and He has said that He is no respecter of persons. But while our reason and conscience may cause us to reject as ungodly the black policy on priesthood, our faith may allow us to affirm it as God's will. To

make such affirmation we must take a heroic leap, become Knights of Infinite Faith. To do so we are required to deny our reason, our sense of morality, our conscience, the very whisperings of the Spirit on which we have been taught to rely. However inconsistent with scripture the black policy may be and however contrary to our notions of God as a loving Father the practice appears, we must nonetheless completely abandon our own desires for understanding and throw ourselves behind the Brethren in the terrible hope that we are indeed supporting God. Such denial of our own integrity is the supreme test of our faith and devotion to the Lord and His Church. It is the most perfect manifestation of our humility, of our ability to give ourselves completely to God. It is a recognition that when it comes right down to it, we lack the powers of even beginning to comprehend our Father.

None of this is pleasant; working out one's salvation in fear and trembling was never meant to be a church picnic. But agony and despair and *angst* are the seeds from which true faith blossoms. We are to support the Church and hopefully our Heavenly Father in this morally intolerable matter. To support this racial policy is in short the truest possible test of our faith. But a caveat should be noted. All of this is a far cry from playing the favorite Mormon game of Follow the Leader Blindly. The players in that game are so joyously doing what they are told to do that they never become sensitive to the moral issues raised by a policy denying the Gospel fullness to people for no other reason than the accident of their ancestry. By failing to enter into the moral struggle with themselves, these happy sheep never exercise "faith" in its most commendable and heroic form.

I admire England's support of the Brethren in this matter and that of anyone else who does so for the right reason. (Or as I have mentioned the right lack of reason.) But everyone in the Church is not made of such stern stuff. Are these other souls who call themselves Mormons such spiritual weaklings that they are to be denied a place in the Kingdom because they just cannot seem to abandon their own consciences and believe this thing is of God? And the problem is not as simple as Dr. Nibley suggests, *viz.* that there is really no problem at all. My experience does not bear out the validity of Nibley's view that if one will only study hard enough and pray hard enough God will let him know this policy is His will. Lots of otherwise good Mormons spending lifetimes of study and prayer about this matter are not getting the same testimony Dr. Nibley has received. Quite the contrary. Is there any possible way for committed seekers after truth to reject the policy but still stay in the Church and maintain a general testimony of the fact that the Church was divinely restored and still is led by living prophets? The Bush paper suggests such a possibility.

Nibley suggests that Bush's study shows the leadership of the Church constantly embarrassed by the Black Issue and therein is evidenced the divinity of the policy. I fail to see much "embarrassment" in the words of Brigham Young, however. (And he does seem to put forth his opinion as revelation contrary to Nibley's view.) In fact it is the constant lack of "embarrassment" on the part of the Brethren, at least the early ones, which I find so troubling in the Bush study and everything else I have seen on the subject. There seems to be an almost cavalier dismissal of this whole matter by the Church leaders by appeals to tenuous scriptural grounds and appeals to just about any dicta, taken out of about any context by about any general authority. None of the general authorities seems

to be particularly bothered by the sandy foundations of the policy. While I see little "embarrassment," I see no agonizing by the Brethren over the moral implications (and of course I believe they are many and profound) of the practice. Even if God did command, it would seem to me that it still merits profound soul-searching by all moral men who claim to believe it. God commanded Abraham to slay his son too.

I do not mean to suggest that today's prophet is not a compassionate and loving man who is sincerely concerned about the welfare of all mankind. Nor that the Church is not guided by revelation. The Prophet may very well struggle every minute of his life with the burden of this practice, praying for the Lord to allow a change in policy. I have no way of knowing such things. But Bush's study does seem to raise the possibility that due to some racism, perhaps understandable but not justified, on the part of some early Brethren and even more understandable lack of sensitivity to race problems by later leaders, the Church got saddled with the present policy. This is not necessarily inconsistent with the notion of revelation. It simply indicates that the Lord grants considerable latitude to the Brethren to make policy on their own. They are not infallible and sometimes make decisions which are not as wise as they might be. Is it unreasonable to suppose that prophets do not lose their free agency, that they do not become automatons upon ordination?

Once stuck with the policy, reluctance to abandon it is understandable, especially since the denial of priesthood to blacks has been couched by the Brethren in terms of "doctrine" both through scriptural reference and modern revelation. (It seems futile to argue that Brigham Young wasn't claiming "revelation.") Any change in the policy would thus result in significant numbers of Church members losing a degree of faith in the Church as divinely inspired. To change the policy because it is a freak anachronism (even though change would be required morally and sound theologically in such circumstances) might seem to admit to some that the process of revelation has not worked very well. There is thus understandable reason for the Brethren to try to weather this storm in some way other than admitting the policy-doctrine was only a quirk of history not relevant in our society. Is it not at least conceivable that the Lord may not intervene and issue an express revelation either affirming or denouncing the policy? Why should He repeal a policy He never made? Hasn't He already made Himself clear that the Gospel is to be the means of salvation for *all* mankind, that He is no respecter of persons? But if the Lord has never "revealed" the black policy-doctrine, is it not reasonable to expect Him to do so if He in fact wishes to withhold the priesthood from blacks? Is it possible that He is withholding light on this subject to allow the Brethren to make *their own* decision? Is this a kind of moral test for them? To adopt some Nibleyisms, are the Brethren as well as the rest of us being "pushed into the water to learn to swim," and to "stew in our juice" until we do something about a problem which should never have existed? If the policy originated by man, it may as easily be abandoned the same way.

I certainly do not claim any inside knowledge in this matter, and I raise questions only to suggest that we know very little about how the policy on blacks and the priesthood originated and what is required to change it. We especially know little because the Brethren have never really discussed this matter. Until such time as they do (and I hope that they will) we must be allowed to speculate, and