

# Dialogue Toward Forgiveness: A Supporting View— A Response to “The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology”

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MINE IS THE INTERESTING CHALLENGE to comment on “The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology.” The bill of particulars that Lavina Fielding Anderson has presented is comprehensive and disturbing, her recommendations are intriguing, and her closing appeal is profoundly moving. Before commenting on her proposals, I wish to offer another set of recommendations—another alternate voice.

The phrase “alternate voice” entered the LDS vocabulary in an April 1989 general conference address by Elder Dallin H. Oaks.<sup>1</sup> The sermon recognizes a category in which many Mormon “intellectuals” can feel comfortable: “Some alternate voices are those of well-motivated men and women who are merely trying to serve their brothers and sisters and further the cause of Zion. Their efforts fit within the Lord’s teaching that his servants should not have to be commanded in all things, but ‘should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness’” (D&C 58:27).

Because the sermon also identifies alternate voices with less laudable motives and cautions members, particularly “church leaders,” against

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1. “Alternate Voices,” *Ensign* 19 (May 1989): 27-30.

participating in unspecified unauthorized activities, the term has taken on a mildly pejorative flavor. I use it, however, because no semantically neutral term describes the gatherings and writings of today's LDS intellectual community. "Unofficial" and "unauthorized" present problems, because even the writings of the general authorities contain such disclaimers as "This book is a personal expression and is not an official statement of the doctrines or procedures of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."<sup>2</sup>

A chronology of the troublesome interface between the two paths to knowledge prescribed in D&C 88:118—study and faith—can be projected backward to the founding generation of the church. Difficulties have arisen and will continue to arise because the instruments of study—reason, research, and experience—and the instruments of faith—the law, the prophets, and the Spirit—do not always produce compatible products. And no universally accepted system of priorities guides the choices that may need to be made in such cases. I emphasize the phrase "may need to be made" because *many* controversies have involved questions about history, science, metaphysics, cultural traditions, and other matters with little or no bearing on individual righteousness or building the Kingdom of God. The Anderson catalog would be a lot shorter if both intellectuals and authoritarians were less insistent on defining "right answers" in such cases.

In 1954 when I was about half as old as I am now, I was involved in a memorable episode that may be already known to many readers. Having criticized a book, *Man: His Origin and Destiny* (1954), in a public setting, I was invited to meet with the author. The result was back-to-back sessions in which my wife and I met alone with President David O. McKay and then Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, the author. They gave contradictory answers to the question, "Is the concept of evolution compatible with the gospel?" But each said that he expressed a personal opinion. Indeed Elder Smith described a conversation in which scientist Henry Eyring reportedly would not let him "get a word in edgewise."<sup>3</sup> The encounters left us with two impressions that have been strengthened by subsequent relations with other general authorities: they do not always agree, and they are less oracular in private than in public.

In 1968 after my Liahona/Iron Rod essay appeared in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and reprints began to be distributed in some LDS seminaries and institutes, I was invited to meet with my stake president. It

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2. Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord's Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), x.

3. Handling "Evolution" was still difficult for the authors, editors, and overseers of Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992), 2:478. See my review in *Journal of Mormon History* 18 (Fall 1992): 205-13.

did not occur to me that he might have been assigned to check on my testimony; having language from the article later quoted in a conference address by the president of the church suggests the possibility.<sup>4</sup> In any event the conversation was amiable and I remained a recommend-carrying, third-Sunday-preaching BYU stake high councilman. If the interview *was* by appointment, then the incident belongs in the Anderson chronology, and it illustrates how the handling of the challenge of intellectualism has changed in the last generation.

Two innovations are obvious, at least to me. One is a by-product of the increasing emphasis on unity and obedience. None of our leaders will answer "Yes" to the question, "Should all Latter-day Saints think alike about gospel-related subjects?" Yet they are uncomfortable—some more than others—with differences of opinion, and the discomfort increases when divergent views are publicly expressed. Unanimity being unattainable, even among the faithful, the suppression of dissonant voices is seen as protecting those members who find security in the formula, "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done."<sup>5</sup>

The second change reflects the growth and bureaucratization of the church. Time constraints and managerial concerns require the general authorities to delegate tasks to subordinates among the headquarters staff and full-time and volunteer leaders in the field. This particularly complicates handling sensitive issues that impinge on intellectual free agency.

In the spirit of Anderson's recommendations, I now address the "Church Leadership" dimension of the problem before directing most of my advice and counsel to the LDS "Intellectual Community." I speak only to the policy of discouraging dissonance and some methods used to implement it. I intend no criticism of either church doctrines or individual leaders.

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4. In April 1971 President Harold B. Lee warned against those who "profess to be religious and speak of themselves as Christians, and according to one such 'as accepting the scriptures only as sources of inspiration and moral truth,' and then ask in smugness: 'Do the revelations of God give us a handrail to the kingdom of God, as the Lord's messenger told Lehi, or merely a compass?'" The same sermon contains this definition: "A liberal in the church is merely one who does not have a testimony" ("The Iron Rod," *Ensign* 1 [June 1971]: 7).

5. "Sustaining the General Authorities of the Church," *Improvement Era*, June 1945, 354, as quoted in "A 1945 Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Spring 1986): 36. Asked to comment on this "Ward Teachers Message for June 1945," church president George Albert Smith replied, "I am pleased to assure you that you are right in your attitude that the passage quoted *does not express* the true position of the Church. Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church" (Smith to J. Raymond Cope, 7 Dec. 1945, *ibid.*, 38).

Certain tactics employed to discourage and suppress the expression of unauthorized ideas and constructive criticism are morally dubious. People under investigation or reproach are not confronted by their accusers, and sometimes they are inadequately informed of the grounds for being investigated or called to repent. Files of information, including untested allegations, are apparently maintained indefinitely. Bishops, stake presidents, and other line officers are sometimes given assignments that they do not understand or agree with, as several of the Anderson examples show. When they are asked to conceal the source of their assignment they are doubly misused. When the inquiry, reproof, or disciplinary action originates with one of the general authorities acting on his own or on a novel interpretation of an official assignment, the moral ambiguities proliferate. Enough of such actions have been reversed on appeal to show that no church calling exempts or insulates from errors of judgment. When the fair judgment of a dissonant sound—an alternate voice—requires that intent, context, and many other circumstances be taken into account, bureaucratic methods have severe limitations.

Particularly questionable, in my view, are cases in which temple recommends are recalled or jeopardized because of statements or other actions that have no conclusive relationship to temple worthiness. Having a recommend does not prove that one person is more virtuous, orthodox, or obedient than another. But it does demonstrate that church membership is important to the recommend holder, and it carries with it a right, within the stated criteria of recommend worthiness, to enjoy the freedoms extolled by President Gordon B. Hinckley in this admonition: "I plead with you, do not let yourselves be numbered among the critics, among the dissidents, among the apostates. That does not mean that you cannot read widely. . . . Fundamental to our theology is belief in individual freedom of inquiry, thought, and expression. Constructive discussion is a privilege of every Latter-day Saint."<sup>6</sup>

Because the withdrawal of a recommend ordinarily implies that unworthiness has been established by confession or ecclesiastical due process, the use of the recommend as a coercive instrument is inappropriate.

Moreover, the policy of inhibiting research, analysis, and expression, to the extent that it succeeds, deprives the church of a valuable resource. Many improvements in policies, programs, and even doctrinal understandings have come in response to ideas and activities born at the grass roots level. To discourage thoughtful and technically-skilled Mormons from applying talents and curiosity to church-related subjects, except when they have church callings to do so, is to obstruct a conduit by which the

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6. Fireside address to young adults broadcast from Temple Square on 23 June 1985, quoted in the Anderson chronology.

oxygen of insight and inspiration flows to those who bear the responsibilities of institutional leadership.

Furthermore the policy of trying to discourage or suppress dissonant voices is in my view counterproductive. A church that encourages its adherents to seek knowledge by study and faith is unlikely to achieve homogeneity of thought or utterance, and repressive tactics simply elicit sympathy for, interest in, or hostility toward the targets of such measures. As the church grows and the leaven of the doctrine of free agency works among converts of many cultures, the number and variety of alternate voices is inevitably growing also. The recent appearance of the Lia-hona/Iron Rod article in a Japanese language publication is evidence.<sup>7</sup>

A second consequence of the antidissonance effort involves the understandable institutional concern about public image. When the misspelling of "potato" can generate headlines, anything that smacks of suppressing freedom of thought is bound to make news, particularly when individuals with solid professional and church credentials are involved. Illustrative is the media brouhaha generated by the public acknowledgement of the Strengthening Church Members Committee and the curious First Presidency statement of 13 August 1992 that cited D&C 123:1-6 to justify the committee's activities.<sup>8</sup>

In summary for both ethical and practical reasons, I stand with Anderson in urging a thoughtful review of the current institutional handling of alternate voices. When people are believed by those with pastoral responsibilities to be engaged in activities threatening the well-being of themselves or others, direct pastoral counseling is not only appropriate but mandated by church doctrine. But to the pursuit of knowledge, the exploration of ideas, and the exchange of findings in a nonconfrontational manner, the case of Peletiah Brown is still relevant. As the prophet Joseph said in 1843: "I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodist, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled."<sup>9</sup>

I turn now to the "LDS Intellectual Community." I will identify several components of that community, make a few specific observations and recommendations, and conclude with advice for all of us. The perspective

7. *Mormon Forum* (Yamaguchi, Japan: N.p., 1991), 6:22-29.

8. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 8 Aug. 1992, D-1, and 14 Aug. 1992, B-1.

9. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 5:340. Brown's views on the beasts "full of eyes before and behind" (Rev. 4:6) apparently produced a high council trial in Nauvoo.

derives from a long and fulfilling life as a meeting-attending, calling-accepting, testimony-bearing Mormon academic. It has persuaded me that we eggheads are partly responsible for the suspicion with which some Latter-day Saints—leaders and followers—look at us and that we can and should do something about it.

Academic, professional, and other intellectuals whose contributions to journals, symposia, mass media, college, and church classes sometimes disturb “Church Leadership” have sorted themselves into three groups:

1. Those who voluntarily qualify for temple recommends and at least occasionally use them.<sup>10</sup>
2. Those who are involved in the programs of the church but voluntarily elect not to seek temple recommends.
3. Those who identify with (and may know a lot about) Latter-day Saint culture but play no part in church programs.

We are also classifiable by self-perception and motivation:

1. We see ourselves as constructive critics, seeking to influence the content and direction of institutional change.
2. We see ourselves as disinterested observers, seeking to understand and describe the church.
3. We see ourselves as opponents of the church, seeking to undermine its influence and growth.

We may see ourselves as disinterested observers while seeking and sharing knowledge about church-related subjects and as constructive critics while using that knowledge to influence institutional change. My perception is that most church-involved Mormon intellectuals see themselves in this double role. That some representatives of the institutional church do not share this perception is clear from the Anderson paper.

Finally we are classifiable by the treatment we may expect from the institutional church and its leaders if our deportment is consistent with our status and intentions:

1. If we are hostile voices, we may and should expect to be opposed. This area of confrontation is outside the scope of this response.
2. If we are disinterested observers with unsanctioned messages, we may expect a different institutional response if we are or have been Mormons than if our pedigrees are non-LDS. Individuals in the latter category are likely to be ignored or treated with respect. They may even be quoted in church publications.<sup>11</sup> In contrast Latter-day Saints with this motivation

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10. Individuals whose temple recommends have been withdrawn or withheld for the kinds of intellectual nonconformity described in the Anderson paper belong in this category.

11. See Jan Shipps, “Mormonism: An Independent Interpretation,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:937-41.

become suspect when they make dissonant sounds and particularly when they become favorite media sources. In my opinion it is very difficult for intellectuals with Mormon roots to be truly disinterested observers. A desire to defend the church or to legitimize criticism almost inevitably colors how observations and opinions are expressed. One sees it in both the Anderson paper and this commentary.

3. If we are or aspire to be constructive critics, then our reception will depend in part on our not gratuitously offending those within the church—followers as well as leaders—whom we seek to influence. Since any critical analysis, however circumspect, implies imperfection somewhere, the present institutional leaning toward concepts of prophetic infallibility, scriptural inerrancy, and obligatory conformity makes the pathway hazardous for even the most well-meaning alternate voices. Christ's advice to his disciples is fitting: "be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

We validate our right to the exercise of freedom *within the church* by demonstrating that we value the church, the gospel, and the fellowship of the Saints. We accept callings in the Primary or Aaronic priesthood, whose only drawback is that we would rather do something else. We act as though we care. Herein lies one of the great values of a temple recommend. Almost all active Latter-day Saints adapt church doctrines and programs to their own needs, opinions, and lifestyles without becoming alienated from the church or from other Mormons. But eligibility for a temple recommend being currently the trademark of "good Mormons," we must decide how our remodeling plans bear on this fact. We will discover that this decision has far-reaching ramifications.

The Anderson cases illustrate one of these ramifications. Because of the presumptions associated with a temple recommend, dissonant sounds from recommend holders are especially perplexing, even threatening, to some church leaders. But those same presumptions make arbitrary treatment of such alternate voices especially troublesome and counterproductive, for the reasons discussed earlier. Arbitrary action does occur, as it has in previous generations, but what Anderson describes as the institutional commitment to "ideals of justice and fairness" increases the probability that her more egregious cases will be corrected in time if they have not been already.

I am not suggesting that a recommend should be seen as an insurance policy, either for this life or the next. Indeed my advice to anyone who now holds a recommend only because his job requires it is the same as my advice to anyone who would participate in Sunstone activities or write for *Dialogue* if her employer did not discourage it: look for a more compatible job.

What I *am* suggesting is that intellectuals who have meaningful ties with the church and aspire to combine the knowledge-seeking role of

disinterested observer with the participatory role of constructive critic should consider the relevance of a recommend to their own lives. When I consider what the church has meant to me and my loved ones and how the gospel—as I understand it—puts these lives in eternal perspective, my recommend is worth its price. Furthermore, obtaining and using it confirms *in my own conscience* the right to be a constructive critic—an alternate voice.

Now some specific advice on how to make your alternate voice more acceptable among church members—followers and leaders—who are now skeptical, even hostile.

I endorse Anderson's seven recommendations with these caveats:

1. The third, "We must defend each other," waves a red flag. We should not impulsively rally at every cry of persecution. I am convinced that most disciplinary actions for apostasy stem from behavior sufficiently aberrant to provide a weak foundation for a Mormon Dreyfus case. Furthermore, assailing the institutional ramparts is usually at cross-purposes with converting the defenders of the walls. Nailing 95 theses to the Wittenberg church door produced not reform but schism, and in his later reaction to the Peasants Revolt, Martin Luther demonstrated that he too could err in judgment.

2. The fifth, "We must be more proactive in dealing with our leaders," directs us to an insufficiently used option. One can understand why Latter-day Saints are encouraged to take their personal problems to their local leaders and still assert the right to direct questions and suggestions to those within the institutional hierarchy who have the power to evaluate and adopt worthwhile ideas. In his thoughtful analysis of "Criticism," Elder Oaks acknowledges the option "to communicate with the Church officer who has the power to correct or release the person thought to be in error or transgression."<sup>12</sup> The same option must surely be available when the error or inadequacy is thought to be in a policy, program, or doctrinal interpretation.

We spend too much time talking to each other, and our ideas reach beyond us through media accounts that understandably focus on the sensitive, the controversial, and the bizarre. We should respectfully and quietly add our messages to the informal feedback that undeniably affects the tempo, direction, and content of institutional change.

The other Anderson recommendations and conclusion lead directly to these closing suggestions:

We intellectuals should avoid giving the impression that we are obsessed with aspects of the church that need changing. For the sake of our own mental health as well as our public credibility, we should be aware of developments that show the dynamism, the competence, the diversity, and

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12. *Ensign* 17 (Feb. 1987): 72.

the Christian caring that abounds at the ward, stake, mission, and general church levels. I find a lot of encouragement in the *Ensign*, which I read as thoroughly as I read the alternate voices. It shows that even the bureaucratic overreaction to Anderson's mistake did not homogenize the editorial staff or list of contributors. It also reminds me that people whose experience and temperament sustain relatively question-free testimonies find a lot of happiness and do a lot of good in and through the church.

We should avoid the dogmatism that we find offensive in some whom we criticize. Having doubts or questions about a church doctrine or policy is not the same as denying or rejecting it, nor does one inevitably lead to the other. Our academic mentors taught us that absence of proof does not constitute disproof, and our scriptures are full of reminders that we all "see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). Our documents and our data may require that we question, even discard, some of the institutional myths cherished by some of our brothers and sisters, but they do not justify arrogance or intolerance.

Finally, we should avoid giving the impression that we are smart alecks. "We . . . expect," says the program for the annual Sunstone symposium, "that everyone will approach all issues, no matter how difficult, with intelligence and good will." In my view too much intellectual discourse is deficient in the latter quality. We antagonize many who do not share our insights and perspectives by taking cheap shots for the sake of laughs. Mormons *are* a peculiar people, and our ability to laugh at ourselves is one of our collective strengths. But some of our humor is tinged with condescension, even malice. We make light of sacred things and dutiful people. Church leaders neither desire nor deserve our awe, but they are entitled to our respect. Unless we manifest good will, we cannot expect that our right to speak will be acknowledged or that what we say will be listened to.

Encouraged by the apostle Paul's observation, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Gal. 5:6), let us respond to Anderson's appeal for mutual repentance. Thus we may help to produce a Mormon chorus in which all of the singers hear the dissonant sounds of the alternate voices as polyphonic enrichment of the message of the music.