

*"Coming Out" Again*

Many thanks to *Dialogue* for publishing Edwin Firmage's "Seeing the Stranger as Enemy: Coming Out" (Winter 1997). It's not every day that one reads about a noted legal scholar (and, forgive me, an "old white man" to boot) rolling around on the floor of his office, laughing and dancing with a lesbian folk singer, and imagining that Brigham Young might do the same.

After my initial reading of this essay, I found my rejoicing tempered with some puzzlement—how did this anecdote (and others like it) fit in with Thomas Merton, Primo Levi, and the high-toned discourses of law and theology the author plied to the issue of Mormon homophobia? I realized, finally, that Firmage was indeed "coming out"—testifying to the highly personal, even physical dimensions of his struggle to overcome the bonds of ignorance and fear.

Those of us who call ourselves "Mormon feminists" are (like gays and lesbians, and people of color) well accustomed to telling our stories, revealing details of indignities suffered, opening to scrutiny our intimate relationships with God and with other human beings, in front of audiences both friendly and hostile. The act is never an easy one. And rarely are our confessions met with gestures of solidarity. Our auditors are more likely to judge, masking their privilege as "rationality" or "critical method."

In pretending no such critical distance, Brother Firmage demonstrates that the work of building a mutually flourishing community requires vulnerability, sacrifice, and self-examination by all. If his 1989 "Conciliation" address was answered with death threats, let his "Coming Out" be met

with amens and blessings. Mine among them.

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*Building the Kingdom with Total Honesty*

I enjoyed and empathized very much with Robert Anderson's article on "The Dilemma of the Mormon Rationalist," and appreciated the response of Allen Roberts, both in the winter 1997 issue. I wish to comment on two of President Hinckley's recent statements cited by Roberts.

The first was President Hinckley's response to questions asked by the national media about the Mormon doctrines of God having once been a man, and about the potential of humans to become gods (on p. 99). Roberts found Hinckley's responses, which seemed to be questioning the validity of these ideas, to be "refreshingly honest and human." However, I believe his equivocating to be just an extension of Mormon leaders' efforts since the turn of the century to publicly distance the church from its more radical teachings, in order to make it appear more mainstream. It's difficult for me to imagine that President Hinckley seriously questions doctrines which have been central to the Mormon concepts of God and man ever since Joseph Smith proclaimed them in Nauvoo. The second statement of President Hinckley referred to by Roberts was his seemingly callous dismissal of the five intellectuals excommunicated by the church, explaining "... that given the baptism of hundreds of thousands of new members that year, the loss of five was insignificant" (on p.

100). Roberts wonders if "the worth of souls is no longer great in the eyes of God." I wondered the same thing many years ago as a result of my own inquiries of the brethren regarding an issue then troubling me. Ironically, that issue also concerned church leaders' public equivocation on the topic of the Mormon doctrine of God.

For several years, beginning with challenges presented to me in the mission field, I had been struggling with the many conflicting statements of church leaders about the Adam-God doctrine. Initially, I deemed the subject to be one of those dangerous "mysteries" best left to the proverbial "backburner." Much new provocative material on the subject was coming to light in the mid-1970s through the early 1980s, however, and was being used very effectively by anti-Mormons to attack the church and its leaders. Concerned, and feeling my own testimony challenged, I wrote a letter to President Spencer W. Kimball in the summer of 1980, asking why he, as well as Mark E. Petersen, Bruce R. McConkie, and other general authorities, had been so vocally denouncing the Adam-God doctrine, while at the same time denying that Brigham Young had been the source of the idea, when there was an abundance of good evidence to the contrary (for example, see Kimball, *Ensign*, Nov. 1975, 77; Petersen, *Adam: Who Is He?* [Deseret Book, 1976], 7, 13-24; and McConkie, "Adam-God Theory," *Mormon Doctrine* [Bookcraft, 1966], 18; "The Seven Deadly Heresies," *1980 Devotional Speeches of the Year* [BYU Press, 1981]). I pointed out that this approach created a double dilemma for church members aware of the facts: first, how a prophet (Brigham) could claim as revelation and promote to the church an idea

deemed by later leaders to be a dangerous heresy: and, second, why later church leaders would dishonestly deny the true source of the "heresy," claiming it originated with "enemies of the church." Neither proposition felt very comfortable to me, a faithful member raised to believe that church leaders, particularly the prophet, could never lead the church astray, and that they were honorable, trustworthy men. I indicated in my letter, and truly believed it at the time, that I felt this dilemma was simply the result of a misunderstanding or lack of information on the part of the brethren. I suggested that a thorough investigation of the subject might be undertaken by the church historian's office to provide better information to the general authorities.

My letter received no response, and in that fall's general conference both brothers Petersen and McConkie again spoke out strongly against the Adam-God doctrine in their usual forceful manner (see *Ensign*, Nov. 1980, 16-18, 50-52). Dismayed, I phoned the First Presidency's office and spoke with their secretary, Michael Watson, about my letter, asking why I hadn't received a response. He indicated that the brethren had intended to write to me, with the recommendation that I read Mark E. Petersen's book *Adam: Who Is He?*, but when it was pointed out that I had already read the book, and felt it to be part of the problem, they felt they had nothing else they could say to me. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, I felt I had somehow failed to properly communicate the problem. At Michael Watson's prompting, I met with an informal committee answering to Mark E. Petersen, which had been set up to help members confronted with issues

raised by fundamentalist Mormons (the Adam-God doctrine being one of the chief of these). I'll spare you the details here, but the net result of my meetings with these people began to make me realize that Brother Petersen wasn't acting out of ignorance of the facts regarding the Adam-God problem, and neither was Bro. McConkie. I still wondered about the extent of President Kimball's knowledge of the subject, however. I suspected that my letter had never reached him.

In February 1981 I again phoned Michael Watson, and urged him to grant me a personal interview, which he did. He was surprisingly candid with me, revealing that my letter to President Kimball had been forwarded to Mark E. Petersen. Brother Watson showed me a memo written by Brother Petersen to the First Presidency with his recommendations as to how to respond to me. He informed them that the issues I had raised were real, that Brigham Young had indeed taught these things, but that they could not acknowledge this lest I would "trap them" into saying this therefore meant Brigham was a false prophet (which, of course, they did not believe). He therefore recommended that I be given a very circuitous response, evading the issue, which he volunteered to write. I asked Brother Watson, as well as members of the committee I had previously met with, how this approach would help people like myself who knew better? Wasn't there concern that some might be dismayed and disillusioned by their church leaders' lack of candor? Their response was very similar to President Hinckley's statement mentioned earlier about losing a few through excommunication: they said, in essence, "If a few people lose their testimonies over this, so be it; it's better

than letting the true facts be known, and dealing with the probable wider negative consequences to the mission of the church." I said, "What about Jesus' parable where the shepherd leaves the ninety and nine of his flock to pursue the one who has gone astray?" Again the response was that the brethren had to be more concerned for the majority of the flock.

Since it became abundantly clear to me that I would never find the answers I was seeking from church leaders, I continued to pursue the subject on my own. The end results were three essays published in *Sunstone* and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, two of which were later published in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, edited by Gary Bergera and published by Signature Books (cited by Anderson, 80n35). So it is from this perspective that I have difficulty accepting at face value President Hinckley's hedging about the Mormon doctrine of God. I have it on very good authority that building the kingdom is a greater priority than total honesty. Joseph Smith had already set that precedent with his public denials about polygamy when he was secretly practicing it in Nauvoo. The ends justify the means. And looking back on this episode now, I see how incredibly naive it was of me to expect it to be otherwise.

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### *Dilemmas Everywhere*

I suppose it is useful periodically to revisit the basic differences between the "rationalist" and "fundamentalist" understandings of religion, including Mormonism, even though the

great majority of Mormons cannot fairly be characterized as representing either one of these viewpoints totally ("The Dilemma of the Mormon Rationalist," Winter 1997). Both strains have always been present in the LDS heritage, with first one and then the other seemingly dominant in the leadership and in the culture more generally. It is a predicament that has been discussed in the pages of *Dialogue* regularly, if in somewhat different ways, at least since Richard Poll cast it in terms of the "iron rod" vs. the "liahona" mindset thirty years ago. Even if there is nothing new here, perhaps each new generation of readers is entitled to express its disillusionment upon discovering the same predicament.

Yet I find it somewhat surprising that apparently mature and sophisticated thinkers would expect Mormonism or any other religion to find its justification in rationality, whatever may be the claims of its advocates. Religion is but one way of satisfying the common human tendency to place faith in the "unfalsifiable"—that is, in that which cannot readily be disproved ("the substance of things hoped for"). That is a characteristic which religion shares, incidentally, with psychoanalysis: both invite their clients to accept definitions of reality that can neither be proved nor disproved but which hold the promise of enhanced understanding of oneself and one's place in the universe. Retrospective accounts of religious conversion, and testimonies of lives changed for the better through such conversion, have their counterparts in clinical accounts of enhanced social and emotional functioning by clients who will offer testimonials to the benefits of psychoanalysis. Religion and psycho-

analysis both are thus not so much "irrational" as *non-rational* in their truth-claims. The same might be said for other forms of "unfalsifiable" faith that people exhibit in astrology, regular gambling, or even remarriage ("the triumph of hope over experience")! There are but few of us who do not invest our time, treasure, and/or energy in *some* causes or enterprises for which the "pay-off" is so far in the future, or so uncertain, as to be ultimately tests of faith. In any of these enterprises, disillusionment is constantly lurking in experience, or in the discovery that the initial promises (or premises) were misrepresented, even if by well-meaning advocates. To expect any religion to function outside of such common human experience is to expect too much.

Nor should anyone be surprised to find in religious communities certain organizational imperatives similar to those operating in other communities, including the periodic deference to authority over truth. Actually, it is rare that there is only one "truth" in historical or other accounts, so the role of authority is to determine what the *operative* truth shall be in a community. To see that as a process affecting a particular religious organization is again to overlook a much more common social predicament. Even in scientific "communities" or disciplines, which, after all, might be expected to operate at the peak of rationality, history illustrates repeatedly that major "paradigm shifts" are often made in defiance of the "conventional wisdom," which is enforced by the authority of the leaders of the discipline. Even Galileo, let us not forget, was as much out of step with the scientific authorities of his day as with the church authorities. Freud's early struggles

with the medical authorities of his day would be another illustration. Even today a study across time of the diagnostic manual used in psychiatry and psychology would show drastically different "authoritative" diagnoses now, in DSM-IV, from those which have appeared in earlier versions (e.g., for homosexuality); and practitioners have always disputed the "established" definitions and diagnoses at their political and professional peril. Not all "excommunications" occur in ecclesiastical courts.

All of these common traits in human social life might well present "dilemmas" for the rationalist that are more difficult to tolerate in religious communities than in others, or for some individuals than for others. Like other common human predicaments, they should make all of us sympathetic with each other's anguish as we each work through our feelings and our church relationships as best we can. Active church membership entails a somewhat different "cost-benefit" assessment for each of us. We must extend our love and understanding, not our condescension or condemnation, to those who can no longer deal with these dilemmas and opt to leave active church life; those who are still hanging in and struggling are entitled to the same, of course. Yet no one should be surprised at finding these dilemmas in the LDS church or in any other community.

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### *A Warm, Grateful Feeling*

I am grateful for the decision to publish critical biblical scholarship in

*Dialogue*. John Meier, whose work appeared in the winter 1997 and spring 1998 issues, is legendary, and I have enjoyed his writings over the years.

When I was a young missionary in Spain in 1972, I contracted hepatitis, requiring of me a two-week quarantine, followed by a two-week recuperation. Hepatitis made me yellow and tired, but I otherwise felt fine. I determined to study the four Gospels intensely during this hiatus; it turned out to be an effort that changed my life.

Principally, I concluded that the Gospel of John was not a history at all. I wasn't sure what it was at the time, but I was certain that "John" had never heard about the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, and vice versa. I was disturbed by this discovery, enough to compel me to a degree in philosophy and a life resolved to searching for truth. I became a trial lawyer along the way, but I've always remained my biggest case, constantly weighing the evidence and searching for the appropriate perspective for life. Even while serving as a bishop for years, I was probably the most tentative Judge in Israel around, quite unwilling to define testimony or knowledge.

If there had been a Lazarus, the event of his rising from the dead would have been too noteworthy to have been missed by the synoptic authors. John's Jesus never spoke one parable, was probably never born, was omniscient, declared "I am" sayings and his own divinity, and experienced post-resurrection events at complete odds with the other accounts. It seems, except for an occasional Marcan reference, there is no correlation at all with the other Gospels. James Talmage's efforts notwithstanding, any attempt to harmonize the two major traditions is, at best, in

vain and, at worst, dishonest. Critical scholarship allows for the study of scripture in an atmosphere of sincerity and honesty.

Meier is most accurate in placing Nazareth as the birthplace of Jesus. The two Gospel accounts are irreconcilable on this matter, and bear such similarity to both pagan and Hebrew archetypes that they may be easily rejected as nonhistorical. Meier is also likely correct in his identifying Jesus as an apocalyptic, radical prophet; without this fact about Jesus, his disciples could not have coalesced into the eventual Christianity which followed. The Jesus Seminar's reliance on "Q" to reach a contrary conclusion is misplaced.

However, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and the Jesus Seminar lay claim to the better rationale as to Jesus' last days. Why insist that Jesus' riding the donkey into Jerusalem is historical, when two generations had pondered the relevance of Zechariah 9:9 before the matter was reduced to writing? Why lay any credence to midnight court proceedings which, obviously, no disciple of Jesus could have witnessed? The Jesus Seminar is correct in relying upon evidence extraneous to the Gospels in order to explain these events in Jesus' life for numerous sound reasons.

I admire Meier's and others' efforts to discover the historical Jesus. No one of these critical scholars can be totally correct; but collectively Jesus' reality is most ably considered. I read them all; I am encouraged to continue to understand Jesus and the human efforts to define him in the Gospels. My first book of critical New Testament scholarship was the late Morton Smith's *Jesus the Magician*. While I accepted only some of his conclusions, I

still get a warm, grateful feeling for his opening to me a grand vista of scholarship, just when my own traditional resources for study seemed so narrow, dead-ended, restrictive, and untenable. Thanks Mr. Smith, Mr. Meier, Mr. Crossan, Mr. Sanders, and all the rest.

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### *True Intolerance*

I found personally offensive and exceedingly unperceptive the effort of Reed Neil Olsen in the spring 1998 issue to tar Jessie Embry with the filthy brush of "ironic hypocrisy" and "intolerance and prejudice" by swiping her with my review of Leslie Reynolds's *Mormons in Transition* for statements in her review of Altman's and Ginat's *Polygamous Families in Contemporary Society* in the fall 1997 issue. Perhaps he did not realize that there is a qualitative difference between attaching the label "Christian" to all who believe they are saved through Christ's atonement and attaching the label "Mormon" to contemporary polygamists. In most areas where the LDS church has wards and branches, the practice of Christianity is not a crime. Anyone may worship Christ and the law not only does not object, it protects them. By contrast, in much of the same area, polygamous marriage is illegal.

Unless he is absolutely ignorant, Olsen must be aware that in common discourse most people use the term "Mormon" to refer to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. LDS church leaders try to discourage this terminology, and have for some time tried not to refer to themselves in print as Mormons. This has

had little effect since most people, including most Latter-day Saints, refer to us as Mormons.

Contrary to Olsen's charges, the problem with categorizing polygamists as "Mormons" for those who do not share the prejudice he condemns is legality and practicality rather than hypocrisy and intolerance. At least since 1904, members of the LDS church have tried—often, unfortunately, with little success—to convince others that we have abandoned the illegal practice of polygamy and that we now generally try to live as Christian monogamists and as law-abiding citizens. When scholars like Altman and Ginat or, more frequently, popular journalists use the term "Mormon" to refer to those who practice polygamy, they imply in the mind of many readers (however unintentionally) that members of the LDS church also practice polygamy, that we are unchristian, and that we are criminals.

Anyone who has spent much time outside of areas with large populations of Latter-day Saints, and particularly those who have served as missionaries, will understand the practical problem. Simply stated, the linking of the term "Mormon" with "polygamous families" generates prejudice against us.

One example from my own mission will illustrate the point. In addition to the usual charges made by people we met while tracting, on one occasion we found the popular perception reinforced through the linking of the terms "polygamist" and "Mormon" on posters plastered throughout German cities. The Harlem Globetrotters were making a tour through the country at the time, and their advertisements carried the notice that they would play the House of David, a team

made up of "Mormons," each of whom had, the poster said, brought two wives along. Our mission president objected and many of the posters were covered or taken down, but not before the message had reinforced an unfortunate public prejudice.

Under such circumstances, it becomes exceedingly difficult to get past the perception that Mormons are unchristian criminals before missionaries can give people the message of the restored gospel.

Personally, I have no problem, and I expect that Jessie would have none, if others who trace their teachings to Joseph Smith and who try to live law-abiding lives were to call themselves "Mormons," or if scholars and others were to call them such. I suspect, however, that many do not wish to be called by that name. Many members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, for instance, prefer not to be called "Mormons." I would not object if many of the fine Evangelical Christians I know called themselves "Mormons," though they would undoubtedly prefer to be called Baptists, Nazarenes, or Pentacostals.

There are, of course, numerous examples of intolerance and prejudice among the Latter-day Saints. Before 1978 much of it was directed against African Americans; some of it still is. There are far too many instances of persecution of Protestants and Catholics in Mormon-dominated areas. More to the point, Mormons direct a great deal of prejudice against fundamentalists who practice polygamy. It is very difficult for many to deplore the illegality of their polygamous marriages while respecting the people for their religious beliefs. There is, nevertheless, a qualitative difference be-

tween insisting on tolerance for those otherwise law-abiding people who break out of religious conviction on the one hand, and insisting that Latter-day Saints who do not practice polygamy are intolerant and hypocritical because we decline to categorize them with ourselves as "Mormons." We simply do not wish to have our religion associated with an illegal activity.

Moreover, Jessie Embry is hardly the right target for Olsen's wrath. Jessie is one of the least hypocritical and most tolerant people I have ever met. She has gone out of her way to befriend African Americans and Hispanics, and she met and conversed with

numerous members of polygamous families as she did research for her book *Life in the Principle*. She served as president of the John Whitmer Historical Association, the bulk of whose members belongs to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Olsen and others who rightly deplore intolerance, prejudice, and hypocrisy might serve their causes more effectively if they found real examples rather than fabricate bogus instances out of whole cloth.

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