

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mormons and the Arts

We think the definition of artistic or scholastic success in the article by John and Kirsten Rector ("What Is the Challenge for LDS Scholars and Artists?" *Dialogue* 37, no. 2 [Summer 2003]: 33–46) is too narrowly defined.

We are converts to the Church. I serve on the high council and my wife is second counselor in the Relief Society. My wife has a master's degree in art history from the University of Illinois, School of Fine and Applied Arts. I was a Ph.D. candidate in economics, dropped out of that program, and graduated with a degree in economics from the University of Illinois, College of Commerce and Business Administration, the equivalent of a master's degree in business.

We are struck by the significant number of LDS households with pianos and people who play and sing. All our nonmember friends are college graduates. Out of the hundred or so we still regularly see or talk to, none is musically inclined. I can think of only one nonmember friend who has a piano.

We agree that the orientation of the Church would discourage an individual from applying the time needed to "achieve" greatness. Limiting your definition of success to

the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes creates an inaccurate model of success. Both these prizes have a significant political element. Hundreds of deserving scientists and writers will never receive one of these prizes. It is akin to the statistically abstruse attempt to look only at hand-gun deaths and not all the other non-fatal experiences in analyzing gun control measures. By registering only the very pinnacle, the Rectors miss the immense balance of the iceberg just below the surface.

It is also curious that the Rectors discount "action-oriented" success. Business is about the truth and about solving problems. Liars do not last long in business. They always need fresh dupes. Solving real problems creates enormous good in the free market and rewards many people in ways not measurable in dollars alone.

We live near Northwestern University in Evanston. This gives us the opportunity to interact with many LDS scholars. They consistently seem to be at the pinnacle of their respective sciences whether they be metallurgists or psychologists. A broader measure might be more difficult to measure, but the scholarly achievements of average members, much of which is done as a hobby and not a career, are enormous. Placed

in their proper perspective, against the average nonmember, Latter-day Saints stand head and shoulders above their peers.

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Mormon Peacekeeping in Practice

In his essay on “The Possibilities of Mormon Peacekeeping” (*Dialogue* 17, no. 1 [Spring 2004]: 12–45), Patrick Q. Mason takes the position that the Book of Mormon is ambivalent on the justification of war. On the one hand, he uses the example of the Anti-Nephi-Lehis to make the case for pacifism in the Book of Mormon. On the other hand, Mason quotes Mormon’s counsel to future Lamanites: “Know ye that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood, save it be that God shall command you” (Morm. 7:4).

Making the Book of Mormon’s case for what he calls “defensive warfare,” Mason then adds, “Mormon quotes an otherwise unknown revelation that ‘the Lord has said that ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed.’ As part of the Nephites’ just war ethic, the defense of these ideals and institutions and people—family, homes, rights, liberties, and religion—was in fact ‘the duty which they owed to their God’”(17).

The problem with the Anti-Nephi-Lehi episode mentioned above is that today many people take it out of context and use it as a scriptural justification to “fight for freedom, family, and liberties” in modern times. That modern use of the scripture necessarily assumes that the Nephites received a revelation giving them some kind of standing commandment to defend their families and liberties with bloodshed if necessary. That the Nephites did not have such a standing commandment but had to get a commandment in each specific instance before going to war is evidenced by several passages in the Doctrine and Covenants and Book of Mormon. For example, we read in Doctrine and Covenants 98:33–35:

And again this is the law that I gave unto mine ancients, that they should not go out unto battle against any nation, kindred, tongue, or people, save I, the Lord, commanded them.

And if any nation, tongue, or people should proclaim war against them, they should first lift a standard of peace unto that people, nation, or tongue;

And if that people did not accept the offering of peace, neither the second nor the third time, they should bring these testimonies before the Lord;

Then I, the Lord, would give unto them a commandment, and justify them in going out to battle

against that nation, tongue, or people.

The scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants suggests that there was no *standing* commandment to engage in “defensive war.” A divine injunction had to be obtained *each time*.

Evidence that the Nephites understood that they had no standing commandment to defend their families and liberties but had to get divine permission each time is found in the account of Alma and his people when an army of Lamanites was approaching. His people became frightened and gathered in the city of Helam. Alma did not tell them to fight the Lamanite army. Instead “Alma and his people went forth and delivered themselves up into their [the Lamanites’] hands” (Mosiah 23:29). A peaceful means of escape was later devised through divine intervention.

Moroni was familiar with this principle. He told Pahoran:

Behold, the *Lord saith unto me*: If those whom ye have appointed your governors do not repent of their sins and iniquities, ye shall go up to battle against them. And now behold, I, Moroni, am constrained, according to the covenant which I have made to *keep the commandments of my God*; therefore, I would that ye should adhere to the word of God, and send speedily unto me of your provisions and of your men, and

also to Helaman. (Alma 60:33-34; emphasis mine)

Indeed in the same oft-quoted passage cited by Mason regarding defending their families and liberties by bloodshed if necessary, Alma records that the Lord would “warn them to flee, or prepare for war, according to their danger” (Alma 48:15).

Facing “numerous hosts” and with nothing in the record indicating that they had a divine injunction to fight, Gideon told King Limhi: “It is better for us to be in bondage than that we should lose our lives; therefore, let us put a stop to the shedding of so much blood” (Mosiah 20:22).

At a time when the Gadianton robbers were powerful and hiding in the mountains, waiting to come down upon the Nephites, the Nephites asked their leader Gidgiddoni to “pray unto the Lord, and let us go up upon the mountains and into the wilderness, that we may fall upon the robbers and destroy them in their own lands.” Gidgiddoni replied, “God forbid, for if we should go up against them, the Lord would deliver us into their hands” (3 Ne. 3:20–21). This passage again illustrates how the Nephites, when righteous, sought specific directions through revelation regarding warfare.

It seems clear that the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants teach about when war is justified. Whether those teachings are practical in modern times may be debated. In the United States some might say: "If we followed the teachings of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants about war, the United States would never be able to go to war because we do not have a theocracy in which a living prophet or leader 'with the spirit of revelation and also prophecy' (3 Ne. 3:19) is used to secure a divine commandment for the nation to follow."

Others might respond: "That would not be so bad. We would have to exercise faith in Christ's teachings regarding doing good to your enemies and doing unto others as you would have others do unto you. We would have to believe that Christ's teachings will work for nations as well as people. We would need presidents who put into practice the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount with respect to international relations. And with regard to terrorists, we would have to find out why they hate us so much and do things which would reduce that hatred." Unfortunately probably most Americans—and many Latter-day Saints whom President Spencer W. Kimball called a "warlike people"—would consider such a presi-

dent to be a wimp ("The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign*, June 1976, 6).

The same two responses could be made with respect to any modern secular state. With respect to the modern theocracies, the relevance of Book of Mormon teachings regarding warfare would depend on one's perspective regarding the truthfulness of their spiritual leaders' claims to be spokesmen for God.

Jeddy LeVar

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Editor's note: Jeddy LeVar died from complications following open-heart surgery shortly after mailing this letter. Dialogue extends condolences to his loved ones.

Animadversions

Congratulations on Gregory Prince's brilliant and well-documented account of the McKay-Benson-John Birch controversy ("The Red Peril, the Candy Maker, and the Apostle: David O. McKay's Confrontation with Communism," *Dialogue* 37, no. 2 [Summer 2004]: 37-94). However, two historical errors should be corrected:

1. He described the Soviet Union "collapsing under its own weight in the late 1990s" (92). The date should be the "late 1980s" and the notion that it collapsed

under its own weight (Ronald Reagan had nothing to do with it?) is surely a historically tentative and slanted comment. The question still goes unanswered: Had Carter, Mondale, and Dukakis won their elections what would the Soviet bloc and nuclear proliferation be like today?

2. The statement that “McKay initially greeted the Russian revolution of 1917 with optimism, telling a general conference audience, ‘It looks as if Russia will have a government “by the people, of the people, and for the people” implies that McKay had an early, perhaps naive sympathy for Communism (38). “Russian Revolution”” means Lenin and Communism in most people’s minds but ignores the fact that there were two Russian Revolutions. When McKay spoke on April 7, 1917, Lenin was still an unknown in Switzerland, and the Bolsheviks were a very minor faction in that first provisional, pro-democratic government. The Bolsheviks/Communists did not gain power until the second revolution the following November, more than six months after McKay spoke. While I understand the temptation to use such a juicy quotation, it really has nothing to do with the article’s thesis on Communism.

What made the experience of this article especially interesting was

reading it while listening to the Ronald Reagan funeral and then reading the very next article (Raymond Kuehne on the Freiberg Temple), in which Spencer W. Kimball told East German leaders, while Benson was still alive, that “you must force yourself to befriend the Communists” (Raymond M. Kuehne, “The Freiberg Temple: An Unexpected Legacy of a Communist State and a Faithful People,” *Dialogue* 37, no. 2 [Summer 2004]: 101). Prince’s article would also have been even more interesting if he could have found notes on how Spencer W. Kimball, Thomas Monson, or Gordon B. Hinckley weighed in on the Benson controversy.

One of the fine subtleties of this article was to show that, while I youthfully and naively once assumed that Brown and Tanner (and McKay) were the only “good guys” and that there was a “right wing conspiracy” with Ezra Taft Benson, Cleon Skousen, Ernest L. Wilkinson, Thorpe B. Isaacson, and even Mark E. Petersen, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Harold Lee all marching in lockstep, there truly was a vast diversity of thought and spoken word in the Church at that time, with almost all the Brethren questioning Benson.

I spent my teenage years tor-

tured over the commands to “follow the brethren,” while I circled in our church magazines Elder Benson’s attacks on the civil rights movements as Communist fronts and heard local stake leaders imply that Elder Benson spoke officially for the prophet and all the other brethren. To further complicate matters, my father joined the LDS Church in the same year that he became a lifetime member of the NAACP, forcing me to deal with very complex issues.

The downfall of Communism brought further complexity. It was not only the right-wing Ezra Taft Bensons and Ronald Reagans who called the Soviet Union “an evil empire,” the thousands who flooded across the borders and had actually lived the nightmare also called Communism evil. Elder Benson and the Birchers were ridiculously extreme; but to my surprise, Ronald Reagan turned out to be more in tune with political realities than my many professors (and myself) during those same years.

All this leads to my current down-the-middle passion, summarized by my belief that, during the first half of my life, on the two great moral issues of the day, the conservatives were 75 percent wrong when it came to civil rights, and the liberals were 75 percent wrong when it came to Communism. Amazingly, I

find such thinking quite compatible with LDS Church teachings since 1978.

I am now thankful that the First Presidency took a strong stand in writing against Communism but would be even more grateful if similar documents existed against Naziism and the KKK. To those who believe in providence, we should be thankful for the firmness (stubbornness) of Elders Brown, Tanner, Lee, and others, and also thankful that Elder Benson did not become Church president in the 1960s or 1970s when his brand of conservatism would have done so much more harm to the Church. By 1985, we had already had four years of “getting used to it” under President Reagan, and by then, age, illness, or inspiration had likewise mellowed President Benson. Things could have turned out far worse.

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Erratum

In Klaus Hansen, “The Long Honeymoon: Jan Shippo among the Mormons,” *Dialogue* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 28: “Harry” in the next to last paragraphs and “Bowdoin” in footnote 49 should read “Henry” and “Bowden.”