

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Appreciation for Frances Menlove

Note: The following letter was first posted on Dialogue Paperless, <http://www.dialoguejournal.com/content/?p=27#comments>.

I have been an ardent reader of Frances Lee Menlove since reading her "The Challenge of Honesty," republished in the thirty-fifth anniversary issue of *Dialogue* (34, nos. 1-2, [Spring/ Summer 2001]: 2-9). Hence my delight in finding her essay "The Unbidden Prayer" tucked away in the final pages of the recent issue of *Dialogue* (39, no. 1 [Spring 2006]: 188-91). As I read, I found myself privately overwhelmed by the power of her message and, in an admittedly unscholarly manner, commenced planting tear-moistened kisses on the final, long-awaited paragraphs.

It has been three decades since my sibling was returned prematurely from an LDS mission. Since then, I have sought answers to the problem of same-sex attraction and Church policy, reading everything I could, keeping a file, and joining support groups.

At long last comes Menlove, like an angel of mercy, enlightening my understanding, lifting me above the chronic heartache and family wrenching with insightful perceptions of the larger context and the commonality of the problem: "Reality has a knack . . . for trumping false certainties," she assures, and further: "In each generation, issues arise in which Church authority is held in tension with the demands of an informed conscience" (191). And one of

the manifestations of our informed conscience is: "Members are realizing that people they know and love have been given labels that are supposed to equate with sinfulness but that the labels don't fit" (190).

It is immensely gratifying to me to finally have the nature of the beast clearly defined in a manner that resonates with my religious experience.

So now I'd like to offer my own heartfelt prayer:

Thank you, thank you, God, for the insightful wisdom of Frances Lee Menlove.

Susan Lee Andersen
Salt Lake City, Utah

An Issue Reflecting Balance

Kudos to Bob Rees for again putting it right and articulating things so well ("An Open Letter to Nathan Oman," 39, no. 2 [Summer 2006]: 173-77). The entire issue reflected the balance that both Rees and Oman yearn for. Another instance was the pairing of essays by Molly McLellan Bennion ("A Lament," 115-22) and Carrie A. Miles ("Patriarchy or Gender? The Letter to the Ephesians on Submission, Headship, and Slavery," 70-95). In her lament Bennion speaks for many, not just for sisters, while Miles reminds us all that grace and good will, not contention, are the proper stance in all sacred relationships.

Tom Rogers
Bountiful, Utah

Kirk Hagen's Accomplishment

Professor Kirk D. Hagen should be commended for his outstanding essay: "Eternal Progression in a Multiverse: An Explorative Mormon Cosmology," (39, no. 2 [Summer 2006]: 1-45) Above all, Hagen has clarified many profound cosmological ideas. In addition, he has revealed the possibility of a multiverse congruous with the central tenet of Mormon doctrine: eternal progression. This is masterful work. The groundwork has clearly been established for LDS scientists. They will definitely add their knowledge and perspective to this exciting venture. To this end, there is also a great opportunity for this essay to become an interesting topic for *Dialogue* in the future.

LaVal W. Spencer, M.D.
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Natural vs. Supernatural

It was great to see some serious science treated well in *Dialogue*: Kirk D. Hagen, "Eternal Progression in a Multiverse: An Explorative Mormon Cosmology," 39, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 1-45. It is an infrequent event for *Dialogue*. Unfortunately, this excellent article again demonstrates the reason for this dearth. Science and religion are both serious subjects and worth further thought, but not together. One is the world of natural law, the other is the world of the supernatural. Trying to understand one by means of the other does harm to both.

I don't know Kirk Hagen's reasons for this attempted reconciliation, but usually such enterprises are based on the hope that finding some correlation

of one with the other will support both. Since the time of Newton, thinkers have tried to emulate the power of his construction of a mathematical basis for scientific observation in other areas of thought. In many cases this has worked spectacularly well, as witness our scientific society and its achievements. In other disciplines, it is still a work in progress, but clearly it is a useful task and it has a clearly defined methodological direction.

In this case, the science of branes and multiverses is so fragmentary and preliminary that conclusions are premature. String theory has great appeal but no real support from experimental work. Physics has rarely strayed so far from experimental grounding for its ideas as it has with string theory. All scientists (including Hagen) acknowledge the speculative nature of these ideas, but most (including Hagen) are unwilling to forego the pleasure of reveling in their bizarre nature and tantalizing suggestions.

Trying to live simultaneously in the worlds of the natural and the supernatural is difficult. Working in science and coming home to religion is hard if you don't recognize the conflict of epistemologies. Faith is important to us as individuals, as families, and as a society, but not as a way of acquiring real knowledge of the world. Religion and faith operate more or less successfully in the realms of personal psychology, emotion, sociology, and societal policy, but not in the area of natural law. That does not make them less important, but it does severely restrict their place in our thinking and our actions in the world. We should not ex-

pect the world of faith to become scientific, John A. Widtsoe notwithstanding. We can seek understanding and internal consistency, but the world of faith will remain outside the world, describing a mental reality without natural causes, reliable effects, or predictable directions.

The Harry Potter stories of J. K. Rowling show the peculiar interface between these two worlds. Harry's magical world has flying cars with no apparent motive force or energy that drive along streets full of mundane (literally *worldly*) cars. Sometimes they can be seen by mundane eyes, sometimes not. But why use cars or trains at all if teleportation is available? Why is a creature a toad when a spell could make it an eagle? Rowling's is a very strange world. I find it hugely disconcerting because there are no basic laws of operation. One wizard's spell can be trumped by another's, but why didn't the first know about and use the stronger magic? Even if one has learned his magic from Spells 101 and the other from Spells 499, it isn't just a matter of schoolboy education, since the most powerful, postgraduate wizards appear to have the same limitations. The world of magic seems to be without fundamental principles and laws. But then, we still enjoy these books as wonderful creations of the imagination.

A religion of water-to-wine, golden plates delivered by angels, and so on has similar problems, with practitioners always wondering if their knowledge and skills are level 101 or 499, and wondering why they don't work repeatedly and reliably. It is hard to make the supernatural exist in the world of New-

ton and Einstein. Is an angel subject to gravity? Does it exist in space-time? If not, why not? If it is, how does it do its job? The fact is that the world of the supernatural and the natural don't co-exist. Those who would use revealed information as worldly knowledge will continually confront intractable dilemmas. A worldly religion and a literal interpretation of scripture are impossible in a world of astrophysics, plate tectonics, and Charles Darwin. And, despite the fervent hope of many true believers, we don't live in Harry Potter's world.

David O. Tolman
Princeton, New Jersey

What Is FARMS Afraid Of?

In my review of Dan Vogel's *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (38, no. 3 [Fall 2005]: 188-92), one sentence was unclear, and as a result I may have caused Kevin Barney some sleep loss. At least that's how I interpret his letter, "Fairness to FARMS" (39, no. 2 [Summer 2006]: vi-vii). In my review, I wrote, "Vogel has not written an anti-Mormon book. Contrary to the reviews published in FARMS, Vogel's book is moderate and balanced" (190). I was referring to past FARMS reviews (plural) of books by authors like Vogel, Todd Compton, and D. Michael Quinn and, most recently, to the numerous reviews trashing Grant Palmer's *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003). These reviews were apologetic, lacking in balance, and devoid of the charity one would expect from "Saints."

My unfortunate lack of clarity led Kevin Barney to suggest that my review contained “an embarrassing example of the attitude” (vi) of some in the LDS intellectual community, that FARMS is wrong about everything it touches. What a fine example of the overstatement too common in FARMS reviews themselves! I doubt that any of the four authors cited above consider FARMS wrong about everything. I certainly don’t. Not all FARMS reviews of liberal books lacking in orthodoxy are uncharitable, apologetic, and intolerant of opposing views.

I don’t judge a review until I have read it, thank you, and now that I have read the first FARMS review of Vogel’s book, I repeat my statement with a slight revision: “As between Vogel and the FARMS review by Andrew and Dawson Hedges, Vogel’s writing is moderate and balanced; the Hedgeses are apologetic and one-sided.” FARMS apparently doesn’t publish replies to their critical reviews, so readers may want to read Vogel’s reply to the Hedgeses on Signature’s website: <http://www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/making2.html>.

If FARMS really were a “scholarly clearinghouse” (vii) as Barney asserts, implying that they are open to a variety of views, why don’t they publish rebuttals to their reviews of the liberal scholars I’ve mentioned above? For example, FARMS published harsh reviews by Daniel Bachman and Richard Lloyd Anderson of Todd Compton’s *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997). Perturbed by these reviews, Todd sent a response to his old friend,

Daniel Peterson, at FARMS. FARMS did not publish his response.

The reviews of Grant Palmer’s book were very disturbing. FARMS published five reviews that I have seen, beginning in volume 15, no. 2 (2003). I understand there were more. Apparently five weren’t enough. If it is such a bad book, what are they afraid of? The reviews by Davis Bitton and Jim Allen were most disturbing to me, not because they were the worst reviews but because I was disappointed that these two distinguished historians, Leonard Arrington’s two assistant Church historians in the days of “Camelot,” would resort to such uncharitable apologetics.

Leonard Arrington was practically idolized by those of us in the RLDS historical community (now Community of Christ) because he was so welcoming and encouraging to each of us as we entered the field. He loved to read our writings, many of which would be considered heresy of the rankest sort by orthodox Mormons and FARMS people. Jim and Davis, along with Leonard, were among the first Mormon historians I met in 1971 at Provo. They, too, were encouraging, though knowing full well that I, at least, was out in left field from the LDS perspective.

The rethinking of Mormon origins that Grant Palmer’s book reflects is quite similar to what many of us in the RLDS community were undergoing in the 1960s and thereafter. Most of us were employed by our church. No one was fired. Many of our controversial writings appeared, in fact, in Church publications. In my first year on the

faculty at our Church college, Graceland, I published a letter in the official monthly magazine, the *Saints' Herald*, criticizing our president-prophet W. Wallace Smith for having too narrow a view of the Church's mission in the world. It never occurred to me that this letter might jeopardize my employment at the Church's college—and it didn't. In my forty years on the faculty, I have never had any pressure from the Church or from Graceland about anything I have ever published or said in the classroom.

Shouldn't our Church leaders recognize that, if we believe in new light and truth, we have to be open to it? It makes me heartsick to see a man like Grant Palmer give his life to the LDS Church Educational System and then, upon retirement, be given a "thank you" in the form of being disfellowshipped. FARMS reviewers treated him as if he were Judas Iscariot.

William D. Russell
Lamoni, Iowa

Ashurst-McGee Replies to Vogel

In the summer 2006 issue of *Dialogue*, a letter to the editor from Dan Vogel criticized an earlier letter of Larry Morris, which had criticized Ronald Huggins's recent *Dialogue* article about accounts of the Moroni visions—a topic on which I have also written. Concluding his arguments, Vogel writes: "Given the obvious shift away from 'folk [magic] culture' in Joseph Smith's account, why is it so hard for Morris and Ashurst-McGee to believe that the luminous 'angel Moroni' was once a nameless, bearded treasure-guardian

'spirit?'" (Dan Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," letter, 39, no. 2 [Summer 2006]: xi).

I cannot answer the question because it is *not* difficult for me to conceive that Joseph Smith originally understood Moroni as a treasure guardian. At the same time, one must acknowledge the obvious shift toward profane treasure guardian motifs in the accounts of Smith's antagonists. Therefore, it is not difficult for me to conceive that Joseph Smith originally understood Moroni as an "angel" or any other kind of divine messenger. Because an unbiased approach requires being open to both possibilities, this is precisely where my original essay began (Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?" *Mormon Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 [2001]: 39–75).

After assessing the sources, I found that all first-hand accounts of the Moroni visitations portray him as an angel. This is not a matter of interpretation but an indisputable fact. Also, Larry Morris and I have demonstrated that, in the earliest sources, Moroni is either called an "angel" or his status as a heavenly messenger is explicit or implicit (Larry E. Morris, "I Should Have an Eye Single to the Glory of God': Joseph Smith's Account of the Angel and the Plates," *FARMS Review* 17, no. 1 [2005]: 11–81). Again, this is not a matter of interpretation but an indisputable fact.

In proceeding to issues of corroboration and contextualization, we move onto interpretive ground. Here I am not at all implying that the debate is over or that the contextual analysis

conducted by Vogel (or by myself or Morris) is irrelevant. But any analysis should begin with rigorous source criticism and the most basic standards of history. Exploring further into issues of corroboration and context led Morris and me to acknowledge the relevance of the treasure-seeking context of the Moroni visitations and the possibility that Smith viewed Moroni as a treasure guardian. However, our investigations did not negate the possibility that he also understood Moroni as a divine messenger. Rather, they supported the view that he understood Moroni as a divine messenger—and primarily so—from the very beginning.

While Vogel emphasizes Moroni as a treasure guardian, he nevertheless acknowledges that “Lucy and other [Smith] family members make it clear that God was involved from the start” (x). In my view, this is the most important point of the entire dialogue.

We differ on the secondary issue of whether Moroni was primarily conceived as a divine messenger or as a treasure guardian. Vogel’s star witness is Palmyra’s tabloid newspaper editor Abner Cole, who reported neighborhood rumors that Moroni’s status as a divine messenger came later. As a source, the Jesse Smith letter is vastly superior to Cole. Whereas the June 1830 issue of Cole’s tabloid may be reporting or exaggerating the most sensational of Palmyra’s gossip, Jesse Smith’s letter of June 1829 was written in response to, and apparently quotes from, an 1828 letter from a member of the Smith family. In fact, Jesse may have been quoting a letter from Joseph Smith. Jesse groused:

he writes that the Angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation, which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years [and] is at last made known to him, he says he has eyes to see things that are not, and then has the audacity to say they are; And this Angel of the Lord (Devil it should be) has put me in possession of great wealth, gold and silver and precious stones so that I shall have the dominion in all the land of Palmyra. (Jesse Smith, Stockholm, New York, to Hiram Smith, Palmyra, New York, June 17, 1829; transcribed in Joseph Smith Letterbook 2, 59, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives)

Jesse’s letter reflects a Smith family understanding of Moroni as both a treasure guardian and an angel, but primarily as an angel. This is by far the earliest window into Smith’s understanding of Moroni and, in my view, the most accurate. I find it probable that Smith’s earliest understanding of the Moroni experiences was influenced to some extent by his involvement in the early American treasure-hunting subculture. I find it even more probable that Smith’s earliest understanding of the Moroni experiences was influenced by his involvement in Bible reading, family worship, recent revivalism, and early American Christian culture generally. I do not find either probability exclusive of the other.

As for the tertiary issue of appropri-

ateness of the word *angel*, Vogel writes: "I think it's best to regard the word 'angel' (as we do the term 'urim and thummim') as anachronistic to the 1823 setting" (x). The term "urim and thummim" has been questioned for two reasons, which are related: Mormon usage of the term "Urim and Thummim" has not been documented prior to 1833 (Richard Van Wagoner and Steven Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 2 [Summer 1982]: 53.). Conversely, it does not show up in earlier sources where you would expect to find it. For example, Smith's 1832 history mentions only that "the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book" (Joseph Smith, "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith Jr.," Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, 5, LDS Church Archives). By the same reasoning, should we regard the word *angel* as anachronistic to the 1823 setting? The fact is that the word "angel" *does* appear in the earliest sources. And using the same standard, we have more reason to regard the treasure guardian motif as anachronistic to the 1823 setting.

Mark Ashurst-McGee
West Jordan, Utah

A Founder Bows Out

I have been associated with *Dialogue* since Gene England stopped me on the stairs of the Stanford Library rotunda, in 1965 or 1966, and asked me how the nascent group could solicit subscriptions from libraries.

After he explained what the group was endeavoring to accomplish, I advised him to "give it up." Periodicals come and go with the wind, and the chances of succeeding were slim. His response was to put me to work, and thus began my quarterly column "Among the Mormons." When Wes Johnson left Stanford, *Dialogue* moved to Los Angeles, thanks to Robert Rees. I was literally the last staffer standing—in the Johnson garage as the moving van pulled away from the house.

I am now seventy-nine and in failing health. In addition I find the articles in *Dialogue* much too sophisticated for my feeble brain. Consequently I have decided not to renew my subscription.

I wish you continued success in an enterprise that has succeeded when I predicted failure.

Ralph Hansen
Boise, Idaho