

“A Climate Far and Fair”: Ecumenism and Abiding Faith

Thomas F. Rogers

Two analogies occurred to me as I developed this essay—first, that of a dialectical assertion with its thesis, antithesis, and subsequent synthesis. The second analogy, more visual, is of a triptych, with two opposing side panels and finally a central one—an attempt to integrate and reconcile the other two. Hence, the essay’s three divisions. It is less an argument than a plea. Its reconciliations depend upon the reader’s willingness to make the shifts in perspective necessary to see, in the same moment, the opposing panels and the emergent synthesis of the center.

I

We believe that man is eternal, in the image of God, with capacity for freedom, with responsibility for himself and others, that all men are brothers, and that they have the capacity to grow in the likeness of God, sharing increasingly in His creative work and glory, finding joy by fulfilling their human and divine natures. Believing this, I refuse to accept any interpretation of Scripture or of the Gospel which contradicts or impedes the free agency of man, his brotherhood with all men, or which bars his opportunity for self realization.—Lowell L. Bennion¹

This vision of Mormonism requires a robust ecumenism—that is, we must cultivate a sense that truth is a universal gift of God to His children. While we believe that, through the restored gospel, we have access to the fullest expression of fundamental, eternal postulates, nothing in Mormon doctrine suggests that we ought to be content with the truth that Mormons have recorded since Joseph Smith’s vision. Instead, we are repeatedly exhorted to be dili-

gent in seeking to “understand . . . things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad: the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms” (D&C 88:78–79).

I was recently struck by the following words: “Settle for nothing less than moral and spiritual greatness. Don’t cheat yourself.” Teasingly, I asked a fellow priesthood bearer if he knew which of the Brethren was its source. He couldn’t recall but agreed that it was a fine utterance. Then I told him that its author was a Polish Catholic, Karol Jozef Wojtyla, the late Pope John Paul II. My friend’s immediate response was: “Yes, but he didn’t have the authority!”

I fear that, as a people, we are increasingly inclined to dismiss insights that do not come from officially approved sources. And yet, we are only too willing to grant authority to faddish notions and their popularizers. Of course, not all of the fads we follow are without merit: J.R.R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis have abundantly informed our sensibilities, while treatises by psychologist Scott Peck and psychiatrist-theologian John Sanford have in their time been equally popular items at the BYU Bookstore.² Hebrew scholar Jacob Neusner³ and the prodigious atheist literary scholar Harold Bloom⁴ have in turn been equally welcome to a number of Mormons who cite them approvingly because of the many fine things they say about our theology. Similarly, Margaret Barker’s arresting insights about temple traditions have brought that British Methodist preacher and biblical scholar to BYU as a forum speaker.⁵

While this trendy dabbling may seem ecumenical, it serves more to confirm our good opinion of our own religion than to truly broaden our theological understanding. We seize on such thinkers precisely because elements of their thought are familiar and comfortable. Real ecumenism requires a sustained engagement with the thought of “others” that stretches and challenges our familiar and comfortable certainties. Latter-day Saints have scriptural warrant and authoritative encouragement to diligently seek truth, wherever it is found.

The definition of “the best books” (D&C 109:7) has, especially in times past, been fairly wide-ranging. And why not? Does-

n't that wonderful elastic clause, the Thirteenth Article of Faith, imply that the sources of what is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy" are manifold and may crop up in various unexpected places? What of those intriguing Book of Mormon verses: "Know ye not that . . . I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?" (2 Ne. 29:7) and "For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have" (Alma 29:3)? The memorable First Presidency declaration of February 15, 1978, attesting to the inspiration and goodness in the major non-Christian world religions reiterates that same ecumenical principle: "The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light."⁶

Tancred I. King's 1983 observation in *Dialogue* further elaborates the possibilities inherent in the First Presidency statement: "Christianity can gain from Islam a heightened awareness of the majesty, the grandeur, and the absoluteness of God. From Hinduism, Christianity can gain greater respect for meditation and reflection, from Buddhism, Christians can understand the impersonal side of ultimate truth. The Confucian emphasis on humanism, social order, and filial piety can enhance Christian life. From Taoism and Shinto, the Christian can more fully realize the sacredness of nature."⁷

As he so often did, Lowell Bennion put it pithily: "Latter-day Saints have no monopoly on truth. . . . Latter-day Saints have no monopoly on virtue or righteousness."⁸

In like manner, the words of others in the Christian tradition can deepen and hone our sense of how better to apply the gospel in our daily lives. Catholic Thomas Merton; Protestants Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr; the Russian Orthodox Aleksandr Yelchaninov, Dmitry Dudko, and Aleksandr Men⁹; and the Jewish devotee of Christ, Simone Weil, have been among my own spiritual mentors. Other instances, so keenly concerned with the consequences of our own recent government's social and moral default, might well include Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine, and Rabbi Michael Lerner.

But have we, as a people—particularly in a day when broad,

deep reading seems such an antique exercise—kept pace at all with the spirit of inquiry we associate with the School of the Prophets? Were we as a people to read more discerningly, concerning ourselves with social issues in the light of fundamental Christian ethics, we would not, I'm persuaded, so monolithically settle for jingoist piety. We could not easily believe that so many U.S. military incursions, past and present, are mandated by God. We might also realize that indifference to the socially and economically disadvantaged is a grave sin, and we would not so easily borrow the social and political agenda of Evangelical Christians, who appreciate our work in behalf of their political aims but otherwise deride us as non-Christian. Surely, such discerning study would remind us that thoughtful and fair-minded moral and spiritual concern is as vital and applies as much to the broadest societal level as in our private lives.

As for the world's heritage in the fine arts and great literature, to what extent do we contemporary Mormons tap into that vast and richly augmenting source of self-insight and perennial wisdom? I have, for instance, long contended, not so facetiously, that each fifth year of the Sunday School curriculum cycle we ought to read Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as a cautionary manual in courtship and marriage. The list of morally important literary works, ignorance of which among North American Latter-day Saints rivals that of their electronic media-saturated fellow citizens, is long and discouraging. In our earnest striving to be "not of the world" (John 17:16), we risk insulating ourselves from much that is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy" and thereby disqualify ourselves as participants in the grand human conversation.

We are also, to a great extent, ignorant of our age's most viable and influential medium—film. I remain indelibly impacted by the sense of sacred, even eternal, family ties that emerged in several remarkable films in the 1950s. In almost the same year appeared the films of Carl Theodor Dreyer, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Satyaj Ray—the latter two non-Christian—then later those of the Soviet auteur Andrej Tarkovsky. Uncannily, each of their representative masterpieces (Dreyer's *The Word*, Mizoguchi's *Shansho the Bailiff*, Ray's *The Apu Trilogy*) and Tarkovsky's spiritually compelling triad (*Andrej Rublev*, *Stalker*, and *Sacrifice*) indelibly de-

picts the turning of a child's heart to "the fathers." The stunning coda of American Robert Benton's subsequent star-studded *Places in the Heart*, in fact, brings a family both literally and figuratively into holy and eternal communion. As for Mormonism's own modest cinematic efforts, nothing strikes me as more refreshingly and wonderfully ecumenical than Richard Dutcher's *States of Grace*, with its street preacher and universally welcoming crèche.¹⁰

By sensitizing us in their own distinct way, serious art and the humanities afford a moderating hedge, a brake, a buffer that can keep our devotion from lapsing into fanaticism, our good intentions from ossifying into smug, even cruel self-righteousness, whether in the Middle East or on the Wasatch Front.

Another possible avenue for ecumenical engagement is our missionaries' worldwide exposure to a variety of other peoples and cultures. Returned missionaries could do much more to cultivate a continuing engagement with the cultures in which they have served. With the present-day's simplified and heavily prescriptive manuals of instruction and the classroom habit of assigning quotations rather than encouraging spontaneous views, even our doctrinal discourse has, I'm afraid, become extremely limited and superficial. Perhaps the approach of the new missionary manual, *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2004), which emphasizes personal witness, stems from the recognition that greater authenticity and persuasive impact arise from a posture of openness to one's own distinctive, spontaneous, individual encounter with the Divine. We would also, I believe, benefit from emulating the Jewish tradition of more earnest, freewheeling discussion, not to mention more self-confident, self-directed good humor.

It goes without saying that, in the Church itself, we ought to graciously fellowship those who possess what strike us as dissident views. I believe that we must respect whatever another person genuinely believes simply because what she believes is an intrinsic part of her very identity and being. But the need for such respect cuts in both directions. We must remember that total objectivity eludes each of us. Though we may have strong reasons for our disagreement or dissent, they are our own reasons, while others have their own strong reasons for believing quite otherwise.

Paul made eloquently clear in his epistle to the Ephesians that one of the Church's primary institutional purposes is "for the perfection of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13). In the process, we only stand to gain when we are allowed, even in conversation and engagement with our friends of different faiths, to "discover" saving truths on our own, rather than always having them pressed upon us by didactic dictum. Credibility increases, moreover, as we openly admit to ourselves and to others just how fallible—how very like everyone else—we, deep down, really are.

II

Our Father, who art in Heaven. Deliver us in this terrible time . . . [Deliver] all those who do not believe in Thee because they are blind. Those who haven't given Thee a thought simply because they haven't yet been truly miserable. All those who in this hour have lost their hope, their future, their lives and the opportunity to surrender to Thy will. —Andrey Tarkovsky¹¹

The posture of openness should extend, not just to those of other faiths, but also to the points of Mormonism that may seem intellectually troublesome. I am frankly saddened whenever another of our leading lights disavows his or her belief in the historicity of the restored gospel's faith claims. This all-too-common stance among Mormon intellectuals, many of whom I otherwise admire, is often cavalierly dismissive of the very first principle upon which all viable religious commitment is necessarily grounded. Struggle as we all variously do while we peer "through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12), if we so categorically repudiate fundamental creedal postulates, then how can they efficaciously serve us? How, when put to the test, can we possibly respect sacred covenants? Just how inclined are we then to turn to the Spirit for enlightenment and direction beyond our own understanding? Such total repudiation of fundamental faith involves a failure to recognize the necessary deference to higher, transcendent insight

that attends all genuine reverence and religiosity. Paul forcefully put what I call the epistemology of faith:

For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

Which things also we speak not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth; but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:11–14)

To which we might add Sister Joan Chittister's wry formulation: "Beware the ability to reason. It enables us to be the only part of nature that behaves unnaturally."¹² Rabbi Michael Lerner likewise cautions that scientism

has become the religion of secular consciousness. Why do I say it's a religion? Because it is a belief system that has no more scientific foundation than any other belief system. The view that that which is real and knowable is that which can be empirically verified or measured is a view that itself cannot be empirically measured or verified and thus by its own criterion is unreal or unknowable. . . . The intense skepticism about religion and spirituality on the left makes [many liberals] reluctant to talk in a language that could be seen as inherently religious or spiritual. In this, they are reflecting a long history of indoctrination into the scientific assumptions of the dominant secular society, assumptions that have shaped our educational system . . . and been internalized as "sophisticated thinking" by the self-appointed . . . arbitrators of culture.¹³

We should sooner heed and emulate the appeal voiced by the father of a possessed son: "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief"—about which, after healing the son, the Lord declared, "This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:24–29). If, as New Testament and other scriptural sources consistently remind us, our access to divine intervention and our very understanding of "things not seen" (Heb. 11:1) evade mere reason, then perhaps we should feel reassured that—whether by Lou Dobbs, Jon Krakauer, Larry McMurtry, James Wood, Tom Hanks, or the producers of HBO's *Big Love*—the LDS Church is still uni-

versally viewed both by those outside it and by its own severe critics as weirdly preposterous, even malevolent. Mormonism's theology is inscrutable, even incredible, in an age which prizes skepticism and ironic detachment.

The Savior understood that this would be so, asking non-believers, "Perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?" (Mark 8: 17–18). Here he clearly warns that his gospel's seeming opacity—like his parables' unintelligibility for many listeners—somehow protects what is most sacred. The onus is thus shifted from the mouthpiece of authoritative truth to his hearers. The peculiar challenge for Saints educated in the critical methods of modernity is to consider the deficiency of our individual faith before finding fault with the evidence, to be self-critical enough to recover the stance that gives us eyes to see and ears to hear. While remaining open to the truly ecumenical—that is, while congenially engaging all of God's children and the wisdom of their traditions—can't we still assent to the demands of faith so readily dismissed by modern skeptics?

Walking that perennial razor's edge between remaining one's unique, individual self and subordinating one's will to acknowledged authority and conforming to group expectations—well, that, too, makes life anything but dull and unchallenging. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for instance, has observed in his arresting manual of discipline for a Christian fellowship, *Life Together*: "Every act of self-control of the Christian is also a service to the fellowship. On the other hand, there is no sin in thought, word, or deed, no matter how personal or secret, that does not inflict injury upon the whole fellowship. . . . It must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him."¹⁴

Three prominent truth claims underlie Mormon understanding and belief: Christ's atonement, the restoration of His Church and gospel in their fulness, and from then to the present, a succession of divinely appointed leaders with a legitimate claim to revelation. These fundamental tenets support the Church's singular claim to be the Lord's divinely authorized instrument for human betterment and eternal salvation. To believe otherwise is to relati-

vize its status and reduce it to merely one of many otherwise beneficial religious institutions.

Allow me here to acknowledge that an individual's faith in such postulates doubtless wanes and waxes from day to day, even one moment to the next. Despite our desire and fervor, we all entertain moments of doubt. We in fact pray, come together, and mutually testify to reinforce each other's certitude. Without doing so, our faith might easily dwindle. Moreover, as commonly attested to, it is the Spirit, the Holy Ghost, that ultimately informs and enables our belief and conviction. In his March 2009 First Presidency's message, President Thomas S. Monson again reminds us of the familiar and potent phrase from James 1:5—"faith, nothing wavering"—that prompted the Prophet Joseph's initial inquiry.¹⁵ James's injunction suggests that we, too, if so inclined, can confront and overcome doubt and reinforce its opposite.

We should also recognize that many who lack or even repudiate such faith are altruistic and high-minded persons who do much good—even more than many of the rest of us. This is true of many "cultural" Mormons who feel particularly at home with their fellow Saints and, without necessarily sharing their sense of certitude, also value the wholesome lives and charitable actions of other Church members.

Does sustaining Church leaders mean we must agree with every word that crosses the pulpit? Does it preclude our seeking a personal witness of what we are asked to do and consider? From time to time, we are, in fact, told that it does not. But trust in our leaders' special mandate to conduct the affairs of the Church, acceptance of their responsibility to impart counsel, and, when called on, a deferent willingness to contribute to the Church's work are, it strikes me, an absolutely essential bottom line. If, despite our differences, we depart too far from the common denominator of mutual acceptance, respect, and toleration, we cannot then enjoy one another's association enough and work well together. We lose our savor (Matt. 5:13). It's a truly bad sign if we derive greater pleasure and satisfaction from finding fault than from deferentially engaging our equally flawed counterparts and sometimes idiosyncratic leaders. Lest we forget, such distancing has, throughout the restored Church's relatively short history but

especially in its turbulent first fourteen years, often led to dissension and disunity—and all too frequently, to defection.

To varying degrees, our particular religious heritage and membership in the restored Church have involved us all in a great experiment in sociability and mutual assistance—a practical effort to realize, once more, that humanistic ideal of the human family, the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind. Is there elsewhere a more all-encompassing expression of divine purpose than the Church's statement of its threefold mission to preach the gospel, perfect the Saints, and redeem the dead? For these distinctive elements, we are truly indebted to the vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the transcendent influence that worked through him. There are no sweeter expressions of that desirable concord and affinity than in Alma's admonition to new converts to be willing "to bear one another's burdens, that they might be light; Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:8–9). Or in the charge and promise that conclude Doctrine and Covenants 121: "Let thy bowels also be full of charity toward all men, and in the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thee as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever" (D&C 121:45–46). Or in the greeting prescribed for teachers and their pupils in the Kirtland School of the Prophets: "Art thou a brother or brethren? I salute you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in token or remembrance of the everlasting covenant, in which covenant I receive you to fellowship, in a determination that is fixed, immovable, and unchangeable, to be your friend and brother through the grace of God in the bonds of love, to walk in all the commandments of God blameless, in thanksgiving, for ever and ever. Amen" (D&C 88:132–33). But can we, or do we, in all instances nowadays so salute one another, speaking from our deepest conviction?

Another important component of Latter-day Saint fellowship

is sacrificial service, which tempers and smooths out our various personal kinks. In the process, paradoxically, both our authentic selves and a heightened sense of all we have in common come to the fore. In such full-blown interaction, we sooner or later expose our irritability, our pettiness, and our self-absorption. It then behooves us to continue interacting with increased graciousness in the important, but mundane, contexts in which we are called upon to take up the cross. One simple indicator of such graciousness might well be the degree of cordiality with which we receive those assigned to us as home or visiting teachers.

Such refinement occurs as we fulfill routine assignments, for which the need and opportunity are boundless. Robert A. Rees, while serving in what is now the Baltic States Mission, commented in his Christmas letter home one year: "When you're working in a primary way with the basic issues of the gospel and with people who are learning them for the first time and emphasizing them in their lives, there is no room or luxury for criticism or negativity." But as we nurture and further support our own offspring, sustain one another, and pass personally through recurring shadows of temptation and doubt, when do we ever really cease "working in a primary way with the basic issues of the gospel"? The fact that the Lord would entrust others' spiritual lives to comparably limited, fallible, and idiosyncratic leaders (other mortals) is no more astounding than the fact that He regularly consigns His spirit children to the total care and keeping of far-from-perfect and often truly inadequate parents. But that seems to be the way He audaciously works, trusting us to learn how to love others and further perfect ourselves by taking on such weighty stewardships. That also strikes me as what is ultimately so ingenious and right about the Lord's lay-led, restored Church.

Meanwhile, certitude in the postulates I have mentioned can help us more diligently adhere to the difficult and challenging personal standards the Lord's Church holds before us. Over the long haul, surely, those with such convictions are more inclined to weather the inevitable disappointments, misunderstandings, and rebuffs they periodically encounter as they endeavor to accommodate differences and get along in such a close-knit fellowship. As so well explained in the *Lectures on Faith*, published during the Kirtland period:

Unless they [the Saints] have an actual knowledge that the course they are pursuing is according to the will of God they will grow weary in their minds, and faint; for such has been, and always will be, the opposition in the hearts of unbelievers and those that know not God against the pure and unadulterated religion of heaven . . . that they will persecute to the uttermost all that worship God according to his revelations, receive the truth in the love of it, and submit themselves to be guided and directed by his will; and drive them to such extremities that nothing short of an actual knowledge of their being the favorites of heaven, and of their having embraced the order of things which God has established for the redemption of man, will enable them to exercise that confidence in him, necessary for them to overcome the world, and obtain that crown of glory which is laid up for them that fear God. . . .

A religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation. . . . When a man has offered in sacrifice all that he has for the truth's sake, not even withholding his life, and believing before God that he has been called to make this sacrifice because he seeks to do his will, he does know, most assuredly, that God does and will accept his sacrifice and offering, and that he has not, nor will not seek his face in vain. Under these circumstances, then, he can obtain the faith necessary for him to lay hold on eternal life.¹⁶

Abiding faith must focus on Jesus Christ. Such faith is as rationally challenging as faith in the Restoration or in continuing revelation: externally, the historical reality of the resurrection and the theological claims of Christ's salvific role are no better authenticated than distinctive LDS truth claims. But should we question the Savior himself, then we remove ourselves far away from qualifying as His faithful and believing disciples. Some of His commandments are impossible to keep without at least a desire to believe. And how often do we pray to confirm or question our own dissident opinions?

III

Love for our neighbor, being made of creative attention is analogous to genius. . . . Instead of speaking about love of truth it would be better to speak about a spirit of truth in love.—Simone Weil¹⁷

I am aware that among us are more than a few whose personal experience with other members and with authority has been less

fortunate than my own. I do not presume to judge how fairly or unfairly they've been dealt with. I empathize with their pain. I'm not sure that, in their shoes, I would see things any differently. If their experience has led them down a more skeptical path, then that is between them and their Maker. But the possibility that in the process they have confused what are ultimately accidentals with what is fundamental must be explored because getting the fundamentals right is existentially important.

Clearly, the Church's encouragement to members in 2007 to petition lawmakers regarding the definition of marriage and its persistent encouragement to members to counter efforts for same-sex marriage (most recently in California's Proposition 8 campaign in 2008) is a burning case in point. In our time, traditional marriage and, with it, the stability of family life and the optimum welfare of children are diversely and multiply challenged—as much by fashionable indifference to marital bonding and by ubiquitous divorce as by fundamentalist polygamy, spotlighted by scandal. The devastating social consequences are everywhere before us. Keeping pace with nature's perpetual life-and-death cycle and in accord with its cosmic mission, the LDS Church focuses its human and material resources on spiritually nurturing each successive generation. It decidedly emphasizes what adults can contribute to the young. In their mutual involvement, each generation enhances and strengthens the other. The more private and solitary relationship of separate individuals to God, while not displaced, is only part of a much larger, socially oriented endeavor for which heterosexual marriage has historically afforded the most secure and stable nexus. This rationale, tentatively offered, will, I realize, not satisfy everyone.

In our pluralistic society, should consenting adult citizens who opt for same-sex unions be accorded equal rights and privileges with all others? I think so. Will all citizens and Church members who hold the more traditional construction as their ideal be charitable enough to accord homosexuals those same rights and privileges? We can be sure they will not—at least at present. Here, our lack of ecumenism is sadly apparent.

It seems to be an innate human tendency to discount and at times demonize those who noticeably differ from one's self: If I am white but you are black . . . If I am a man but you are a woman

. . . If I am a Christian but you are a Jew or Muslim . . . If I am a Mormon but you are a Jehovah's Witness . . . If I am a Republican but you are a Democrat . . . If I am blue or yellowed white collar but you are an intellectual (despite your own yellowed white collar or frayed T-shirt) . . . If I am heterosexual but you are gay . . . If I am a Utah Mormon in 1857 and you are from Missouri . . . or if I am rich and you are homeless, unemployed, uninsured, and poorly instructed . . .

Dismissal, mistrust, and disparagement of the "other" may be natural to all species. It certainly fits what scripture identifies as the carnal, prideful, selfish "natural man" (Mosiah 3:19) whom we are meant to overcome by seriously embracing Christ and His gospel. But how many of His otherwise earnest disciples consciously enough, with sufficient goodwill and without exception, apply the gospel's criteria to such "others"?

Many Wasatch Front Mormons took an ugly, public stand by buying a full page ad that ran on February 15 in both the *Deseret News* and the *Salt Lake Tribune* with the headline "Shame on Governor Huntsman for Joining, and Adding to This Public Shame . . ." Huntsman had expressed appropriate support for extending some civil rights to domestic partnerships. Far beyond addressing the definition of marriage, the signers' visceral antipathy and unwillingness to afford fundamental civil rights to all citizens betray a sad disconnect between our espoused Christlike ideals and our actual behavior. The question of how to treat our gay sisters and brothers, both in the Church and in public policy, is a test of our ability to paradoxically hold fast to the particulars of our own faith, while allowing "all [people] the same privilege" (Eleventh Article of Faith). Our abiding faith in the precepts and ideals of Christ's restored gospel commits us above all to the ecumenical conviction that all human beings—even, or especially, those "others" whose difference from ourselves arouses the antipathy of the natural man in us—are also children of our Heavenly Father. Remembering this, we may begin to recognize that failure to put off that natural man and esteem all our brothers and sisters as ourselves constitutes a grave transgression of the second of the two commandments on which "hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40).

Reading John Donald Gustav-Wrathall's deeply poignant "A Gay Mormon's Testimony" in the April 2006 issue of *Sunstone*, I was immediately reminded of Dostoevsky's great novel, *The Brothers Karamozov*. Dmitry is accused of and condemned for a most heinous crime, patricide. Until his psychopathic half-brother Smerdyakov is revealed as their father's real killer, Dmitry considers himself to be the perpetrator and suffers accordingly. Smerdyakov's eventual suicide and the resulting dementia of a third brother, Ivan, stemming from his own subconscious complicity, amplify the agony Dmitry undergoes, both publicly and privately. Tellingly, it is expressly the unruly and unconventional Dmitry before whom the holy abbot Zosima mysteriously bows. Critics understand this gesture as the abbot's intuitive recognition of the inordinate suffering that Dmitry must shortly undergo—suffering that is particularly sacred and saintly, considering Dmitry's innocence. At this point in time, we all need to bow before our John Donald Gustav-Wrathalls, as I do before my former students and those missionaries I served with whose hormonally and neurologically defined path was much the same.

And yet, as Gustav-Wrathall seems to recognize and as the artist John Hughes has so memorably put it: "In art, the literal gives meaning to the abstract, . . . [while] the abstract gives beauty to the literal; together the two transcend what could not be accomplished alone."¹⁸ In the same way, the interplay of doctrinal fundamentals and real life have or can have, I believe, a similar effect. Though personal contexts may vary, is not such engagement—as in Gustav-Wrathall's case and for each of us—an ultimate test? As Joseph Smith himself both experienced and expounded, "By proving contraries, truth is made manifest."¹⁹ We must not fail to appreciate the extent to which the all-too-human can be fraught and imbued with holiness, both in ourselves and in all others. Matter is also spirit.²⁰ What comes to our minds can also be by way of revelation.

I conclude with a kind of reverse ecumenical gesture: a reverent evocation of universal love from May Swenson, raised in a Mormon family. Since "God is love" (1 John 4:8), we need only substitute one or two synonyms from our religious vocabulary to

sense how deeply Swenson responds to the spiritually transcendent and ultimately ineffable:

like? Is it a particle,
beyond the microscope and
the length of hope? Is
that we shall never dare
color, and its alchemy?
can it be dug? Or
it be bought? Can it be
a shy beast to be caught?
a clap of sound. Love is
nests within each cell,
is a ray, a seed, a note,
our air and blood. It is
our very skin, a sheath

. . . What does love look
a star, invisible entirely
Palomar? A dimension past
it a climate far and fair,
discover? What is its
Is it a jewel in the earth,
dredged from the sea? Can
sown and harvested? Is it
Death is a cloud—immense
little and not loud. It
and it cannot be split. It
a word, a secret motion of
not alien—it is near—
to keep us pure of fear.²¹

Notes

1. Lowell L. Bennion, "The Logic of the Gospel," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1971): 162.

2. See M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); John A. Sanford, *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus' Sayings* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), and other titles.

3. Jacob Neusner, *The Glory of God Is Intelligence* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), Vol. 3 in the BYU Religious Studies Center's monograph series. Neusner also contributed separate articles to *By Study and Also by Faith*, a two-volume festschrift honoring Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990).

4. Harold Bloom, in *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), devotes three chapters to the Mormon religion, lavishly extolling Joseph Smith as a "religious genius." In Helen Whitney's 2007 two-hour PBS documentary, *The Mormons*, he is also given the final word, averring that, if he could believe it, he would be a Mormon.

5. On May 6, 2003, Margaret Barker delivered a BYU forum address, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" Particularly influential is her *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Holy Trinity Church, 2004).

6. "Statement of the First Presidency Regarding God's Guidance to All Mankind," February 15, 1978, in Gary James Bergera, comp., *Statements of the LDS First Presidency: A Topical Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007), 370–71.

7. Tancred I. King, "Missiology and Mormon Missions," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 48.

8. Lowell L. Bennion, *An Introduction to the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Union Sunday School Board, 1955), 315, 316.

9. Upon emigrating to Paris after the Revolution, Yelchaninov became a priest and eventually presided over its Orthodox congregation; his widow, Tamara, gathered and posthumously published his penetrating aphorisms. See Alexander Elchaninov, *The Diary of a Russian Priest* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967). Arrested more than once during the Cold War, Father Dudko fervently defended Christianity, baiting KGB hecklers in his Moscow church. Another Orthodox priest and Jew, Men, was a popular spiritual icon in the late Soviet era and is thought to have been murdered by the KGB.

10. Dutcher's unfortunate subsequent disaffection from the Church in no way diminishes his stellar and so far unprecedented contribution to LDS film art. See "Dutcher's *Falling* Explores Darker Territory," *Sunstone*, No. 150 (July 2008): 77, in which he states: "The doctrines of Mormonism . . . demand that an artist grow as much as he can . . . but the culture certainly doesn't." See also Dallas Robbins, "Marrow: A Review of Dutcher's Mormon Films," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 169–79, which provides an overview and analysis of Dutcher's films with particular concentration on the fourth, *Falling*. Dutcher's advice to his fellow Mormon cinematographers after the third film was: "Stop trying to make movies that you think General Authorities would like" (174). Richard Dutcher, "'Parting Words' on Mormon Movies," *Daily Herald* (Provo, Utah), April 12, 2007, <http://www.heraldextra.com/content/view/217694> (accessed December 23, 2008).

11. This prayer is uttered by Tarkovsky's protagonist Alexander, a Christ figure whose prayer prevents the destruction of the world but who, much like his predecessor in Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, is hospitalized as insane. Andrey Tarkovsky, *The Sacrifice*, (N.p.: Svenskafilm-institutet, 1986) film, English subtitles translated from Swedish, unattributed.

12. Joan Chittister, *Becoming Fully Human: The Greatest Glory of God* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 47.

13. Michael Lerner, "Bringing God into It," *The Nation*, April 24, 2006, 21.

14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 1954), 67, 70.

15. Thomas S. Monson, "Come unto Him in Prayer and Faith," *Ensign*, March 2009, 6-7.

16. "Lecture Sixth," in *Lectures on Faith*, compiled by N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), 57-60.

17. First sentence: Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1951), 149; second sentence: Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait*, no translator identified (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), 152.

18. John Hughes is a professional landscape painter and adjunct instructor of art at Salt Lake Community College from whom I took an adult education class in about 2006. He made this statement on one of his class handouts.

19. Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev. (6 vols., 1902-12, Vol. 7, 1932; rpt., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951 printing), 6:426.

20. See D&C 131:7: "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes." I also find related concepts in the description of the earth's creation as occurring spiritually before it occurred physically (Abr. 5:5) and also the promise that the earth itself shall "receive its paradisiacal glory" (Tenth Article of Faith).

21. May Swenson, "The Shape of Death," in her *New and Selected Things Taking Place* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1954), 100. My thanks to Paul Swenson, May's brother, for confirming the form of the poem.