

LETTERS

Deserted Promised Land?

Edwin Firmage Jr.'s call for a holy war against climate change requires a compass of curious workmanship because he insists we travel a promised land he long ago deserted. (See his "Light in Darkness: Embracing the Opportunity of Climate Change," *Dialogue* 43, no. 3 [Fall 2010]: 100–127).

He does not explain why, after discarding both organized religion and God, he believes not only that the burden of controlling climate change be shouldered by churches, but also that this is their obligation and that they hold the key to combating this threat, noting that it is from within "our communities of faith that the transformation of individuals and society must begin" (118). He argues that people of faith must "*live* the principles of Zion here and now" (199; emphasis his) to avoid the apocalypse (climate change). And he concludes: "Until every church and every member of every church is carbon-neutral, we Christians are not living the gospel that we profess" (119).

We?

I accept that those associated with a faith-based belief system often can be counted on to rally round a cause. But the gospel these people profess also asks help dealing with hunger, racism, unemployment, poverty, lack of medical care, housing, transportation, and landlords, not to mention their own marital, child-rearing, employment, and money issues. And, yes, spiritual uncertainty.

Why doesn't Firmage organize his fellow unchurched, spiritually detached population? They are certainly

equally responsible for the waste and disregard for this planet. Is he saying that they either don't have the same concern as those occupying pews each Sunday, that they lack responsibility, or that they are less competent to handle such an issue?

I'm also confused about his proclamation that "the central problem of our time is climate change, in comparison to which all other issues, even legitimate ones, shrink to insignificance" (101) because, as he states in note 12: "Righteousness is to society what water is to the desert, the source and sustainer of life" (124). Thus, the central problem is maintaining righteousness in all its forms to sustain life itself. Climate change certainly must be considered part of righteousness, but not *the* central issue above the righteousness that leads to feeding the poor, redistributing wealth, more productive use of resources, commitment to family in all its manifestations, and finding peaceful solutions to disputes at all levels. An increased love of others, the essence of righteousness, might bring about concern over climate change; I'm not sure the reverse is true.

What I'm suggesting is that while climate change certainly looms as a huge threat, the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots remains the catastrophe waiting to explode into a calamity. Until that problem is solved, forget climate change because an empty stomach makes a louder noise than a glacier sliding into the sea and those unable to pay this month's rent can't be expected to

get too worked up about the timing of spring runoffs.

Another point needs clarification. In his haste to condemn a society based on consumption, Firmage wrongly associates heart disease, obesity, and diabetes with “an indulgent lifestyle” (117). These diseases occur disproportionately among the non-white and poor, not among the rich. That suggests that a flawed medical system and indifference to poverty block controlling climate change more than consumption.

But whatever the issue, churches have no more obligation for finding solutions than other organizations—unless Firmage believes those outside organized religions lack commitment to saving earth.

Gary Rummler
Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin

Sanctimonious Review

I was dismayed to read Christian Harrison’s review of Jonathan Langford’s *No Going Back* (“Characters to Care About,” 43, no. 3 [Fall 2010]: 11–14). He starts off by condemning gay Mormons for their “vitriol and sanctimony” (211), as if that attack itself wasn’t vitriolic and sanctimonious. I admit he doesn’t specifically say it is the gays who are vitriolic. He *could* be referring to Church leaders. But that seems unlikely for someone who goes on to congratulate himself for being a gay but “faithful and active Latter-day Saint” (212) who is above the “smarmy” (211) acts of the rest of us gay Mormons.

Then he praises the book because it shows another gay Mormon who

chooses to live a life of celibacy in the Church. So is he critiquing a political agenda or a novel? I wasn’t aware that a chaste main character was required for a book to be considered good literature.

This novel may in fact be good, but that should be completely unrelated to the sexual decisions the main character makes. *Schindler’s List* was a great film (and novel) despite the adultery of the protagonist. For *Dialogue* to publish a review that seems based on the moral judgment of the reviewer rather than the quality of the writing seems misplaced in a journal of its reputation.

I appreciate the fact that *Dialogue* devoted space to review a gay novel at all, and I certainly don’t begrudge Langford a positive review. But I do think that the reviewer’s self-righteousness calls into question the value of the review.

Johnny Townsend
Seattle, Washington

Christian Harrison Responds

When I read Johnny Townsend’s letter, I genuinely wondered if he’d read someone else’s review of the book. So I reread what I’d written and am as puzzled as ever. Townsend levels a few accusations at me. Allow me to respond, briefly, inline:

He says that I condemn “gay Mormons for their ‘vitriol and sanctimony.’” What I *do* say is that the debate found at the intersection of “gay” and “Mormon” is filled with vitriol and sanctimony—which is true. And the vitriol and sanctimony are found on all sides.

He says I congratulate myself “for being a gay but ‘faithful and active Latter-day Saint.’” Stating that I am a gay man who is also a faithful and active Latter-day Saint is no more self-congratulatory than stating my preference for the color orange or my distaste for pastries. I could as easily be “faithful and active” in my local chapter of the ACLU as my church—and I could be happy in that state or disaffected. More importantly, however, my statement is essential to the review. My being gay *and* active in the Church necessarily colors my view of the book.

He says I consider myself “above the ‘smarmy’ acts of [other] gay Mormons.” Here Townsend catches an error on my part. I often confuse the terms “smarmy” and “swarthy.” My apologies to all concerned, especially to the oiled-and-bronzed denizens of the calendars in question.

He says I praise the book “because it shows another gay Mormon who chooses to live a life of celibacy in the Church.” Nowhere do I praise the protagonist’s choices. My review is almost entirely about the author’s approach to his material. But were I to praise the protagonist for choosing to “live a life of celibacy in the Church,” I’d be misrepresenting the character as the book is completely silent on Paul’s future.

So . . . the first three points strike me as a willful misreading of the review, and the last is a complete fabrication.

I feel strongly that *No Going Back* is evidence of a nascent opening of the Mormon heart with regards to homosexuality and homosexuals—a turn in affairs that has been excruciatingly slow in coming, but that promises a

brighter tomorrow for all concerned. Here’s hoping that day comes sooner rather than later.

*Christian Harrison
Salt Lake City, Utah*

Editor’s Comment

Both Johnny Townsend’s letter and Christian Harrison’s response serve as helpful reminders of the difficult and fraught nature of Mormon discourse around homosexuality. All of us approach the questions raised by Jonathan Langford’s book heavy laden with personal, cultural, and religious assumptions, biases, and judgments. I believe that Langford’s book, Harrison’s review, and these two letters offer instructive points for modeling discussion. First, Langford’s book reminds us that these questions are not abstractions, that real (or fictional, but fully developed) people must live with the questions and our best answers, and that we do well to develop the moral imagination necessary to sympathize with our brothers and sisters across the wide spectrum of opinions on these topics. Second, Harrison’s review demonstrates a willingness to forthrightly declare the subject position from which he approaches these questions. Third, Townsend’s letter speaks honestly from a position of some anger, and dares to speak freely about core issues. Finally, Harrison’s response to Townsend responds civilly to criticism with an elaboration of his understanding of the points of disagreement, as well as his objections to the criticism.

For my part, I wish to assure

Townsend (and other readers who may have drawn similar conclusions) that we chose to publish this review based on the literary merits of the book and its attempt to speak to readers of broadly varied convictions. Langford's book is particularly admirable for *not* passing preemptive moral judgment on the protagonist's choices but for simply laying out the dilemma that faces young gay Mormons and attempting a sympathetic portrayal of Mormons approaching this issue from many directions. My reading of Harrison's review leads me to the conclusion that he has fairly considered the book's successes and failures at the task it sets for itself, and that, like Langford, Harrison has not prejudged the course of action the novel's protagonist ought to take. (And Harrison is correct in pointing out that the novel itself is silent about Paul's decisions about how to live as a gay and/or Mormon man).

Mind-Changing Issue

I've changed my mind (or is it a change of heart?) about *Dialogue*.

From its beginning in 1966, I have lamented that *Dialogue* has been too cerebral and academic. Probably it was because I didn't feel smart enough to understand it much over all these years. Instead of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, I lobbied unsuccessfully for "*A Journal of Mormon Experience*." To me it seemed a continuing contest between experience and explanation with explanation (thought) always trumping—even marginalizing or disregarding—experience. Experience is one thing;

explaining it is another. And I couldn't help thinking in terms of a corollary to Heisenberg's celebrated uncertainty principle: $\Delta\Sigma \bullet \Delta E \approx K$, where Δ = uncertainty, Σ = experience, E = explanation, and K = some kind of Kairos (not chronos) constant. This means that, if one must explain something *exactly* (i.e., no uncertainty or $\Delta E = 0$), it will be done at the expense of any experience (i.e., $\Delta\Sigma = 4$).

The fall 2010 issue changed all that.

I read Dana Haight Cattani's sermon "Hidden Treasures" (221–26) and was moved to tears three times—the first as I read it quietly to myself, then to my very non-Mormon Protestant wife Birgitta, and finally to my beloved Orthodox priest friend, Fr. John, who had been an Episcopal priest for forty-seven years before his conversion to Orthodoxy. Sister Dana's sermon reminded me of Fr. John's inspired sermons.

My interest in this issue now was kindled enough to take on Edwin Firmage Jr.'s essay, "Light in Darkness: Embracing the Opportunity of Climate Change" (100–128) after which I wrote him to challenge his conclusions. He answered immediately with passion, and our fierce but friendly exchange continues at this writing.

Roger Terry's "Eternal Misfit" (182–202) wondrously reminded me of my own misfit stories of thirty-five years ago ("Heart Planting" and "Fugitive Half-Breed Russian Black Bear"), and I felt I'd found a lost-long brother.

Even Holly Welker's restrained re-

ply (v-vi) to Kevin Jones's challenge (v) to Holly's "Eight-Cow Wife" article (Spring 2010, 37-58) changed my prejudice toward her usually prickly reactions to those critical of feminist issues.

Of particular interest was David H. Bailey's "Creationism and Intelligent Design: Scientific and Theological Difficulties" (62-88). My evangelical Christian wife had earlier attended a course on this very subject at her church and wanted my opinion. Since I found the subject of no personal interest, I was reluctant to invest energy in it, but then the *Dialogue* issue came and Bailey's rigorous treatment took

the pressure off. It enabled Birgitta and me to have a civil, responsible discussion.

Amazingly enough (for me) I have now read everything in this issue, the last being Blair Dee Hodges's comprehensive essay comparing the views of C. S. Lewis to those of LDS authorities (21-61).

All in all, it's been a healthy read, and I have grown from it. Thanks, *Dialogue*, for a new lease on your stuff. I'm grateful that you include the email addresses of your contributors.

Eugene N. Kovalenko
Los Alamos, New Mexico