

Dialoguing Online: The Best of 10+ Years of Mormons Blogging

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Over ten years ago, blogs changed the look, feel, and immediacy of Mormon discourse almost overnight. The ongoing lively conversations, brilliantly constructed posts, and sometimes even unruly debates have not stopped since. *Dialogue* both views and participates in this online dialogue, submitting archival references to current discussions and writing pieces in concert with the printed prose found within its present-day pages. With that in mind, *Dialogue* takes a look back at some of the best of the blogs from the past ten-plus years in an effort to more permanently cement these posts into the collection of Mormon thought. Post descriptions are arranged topically, then chronologically with the most recent posts first, in an effort to capture the change (or non-change) in conversations through the years. Full URLs for each post are listed in the notes at the end of this article; the digital version at dialoguejournal.com also contains live links.

Theology

March 3, 2014: “At some point, as we all sat there, Jane asked if I would give her a blessing. I was the only man in the room, so, for better or worse, I was her only option. I would have given anything not to have been there at that moment. I had no idea where Jim was, or what he was doing, or if Jane and her two small kids would ever see him again. I’m not one for spiritual experiences.” Stephen Taysom pens an incredibly powerful essay about a friend and how “He Will Find His Way Home.”¹

December 12, 2013: Not many could get away with titling a post “Advice for a Mormon Intellectual,”² but James Faulconer does—twice. Why? In part 1, he explains, “The only authority I have for giving this advice is age and interest: I’ve spent a lot of time engaged in intellectual pursuits, particularly philosophy and the close reading of scripture. In philosophy I’ve said, written, and done things that I later regretted. I’ve done the same with regard to religion. I hope I learned from all those mistakes.” In Part 2,³ he looks at truth claims of the LDS Church, testifying that

I believe in the truth of Mormonism in the straightforward, propositional sense: Joseph Smith was called by God to be a prophet. He did have plates of gold, and he translated a portion of those plates by the power of God, resulting in the Book of Mormon. And so on. But I am much more interested in, and even more firmly committed to belief in, the truth of the LDS Church in the second sense: through membership and life in Mormonism, a way of living is opened that gives me genuine relation to God and other people; the good news of Christ shows itself in and through the LDS Church. I am so much interested in this sense of truth that it shapes how I understand the first sense.

October 6, 2013: In an open and heartfelt blog letter titled “This Is an Hard Saying; Who Can Hear It?”⁴ Steve Evans writes to Elder Dallin H. Oaks in an effort to gain clarification regarding certain things he said his October 2013 General Conference talk:

I was particularly interested by (and agree with) your testimony that “unlike other organizations that can change their policies and even their doctrines, our policies are determined by the truths God has identified as unchangeable.” One of the best things about our Church, what I love, is that we start with fundamental truths revealed by God and use those as the basis for our policies and programs. But I have noticed that we have changed our policies several times in the Church on various matters. I don’t need to cite these; I’m not trying to build an evidence file to oppose your words. But you do seem to imply that these policies are forever unchangeable, and I wonder if this is truly the case. I believe that

our current policies are in place because of inspired leaders and I intend to obey those policies, but the bedrock of our Church is ongoing revelation and the certainty of your words seems (at least on the surface) to run contrary to that principle. Has God identified his standards against same-sex marriage, for example, as unchangeable? I know that I am under covenant to keep His commandments, and I agree wholeheartedly that “man’s laws cannot make moral what God has declared immoral,” regardless of whether the immoral behavior is popular or not. I guess I am asking the same question I asked above: how do I know which parts of the plan cannot change? How can anyone know? I suppose this does not affect my present duty very much, but I’d like to better understand how it works.

January 1, 2013: Kate Holbrook offers a beautiful essay on “Why I Pray”⁵:

I know that people have prayed that if it were God’s will, my eye would heal, cancer would leave, and I would orient to monocularity without too much struggle, and we seem to be realizing this good fortune. I suspect some have prayed that I would be receptive to whatever possible benefits could come from this period in my family’s life, and I’ve found the benefits have been many. At diagnosis and during later complications, I have been that “human being in fear and doubt.” But religion did not exploit my vulnerability. I have felt guided, enlightened, amplified, and accompanied. I have prayed and others have prayed not because we are gullible, stupid, or otherwise inferior to the atheist minds of the day. We pray because of what we find there.

October 4, 2011: As John Crawford said of *Dialogue* editor Kristine Haglund’s now-famous post, “Boyd K. Packer and Prophetic Despair,”⁶ “It is brilliant and beautiful, compassionate and clear-eyed, the very best of Moblogging.” Kristine begins, “I’m just going to say it. Please don’t throw things. I loved President Packer’s talk.”

September 29, 2011: “It seems to me that some willingness to bear each other’s joy as well as our burdens is a necessary lubricant to sociality in the church,” writes Kristine Haglund in “I Pray

You . . . Bear My Joy Awhile,”⁷ a must-read piece at By Common Consent. “If the fact of someone’s pain requires silence about our own joy, the bearing of one another’s burdens becomes grim duty indeed—those burdens, it seems to me, can be borne better as they are lightened by shared happiness. Being all members of one body cannot possibly provide relief if every part of the body must constantly suffer the affliction of all the other parts.”

April 28, 2011: Chelsea Shields Strayer does some digging around her foundational beliefs and uncovers “My Religious Manifesto.”⁸

As I’ve aged I realized that I actually built my house upon the sand. I founded my testimony on a rigid black and white understanding of the do’s and don’ts of the gospel that when held under the scrutiny of the wind, the rain, and the flood—which in this metaphor is historical reality, eternal principles, and critical thinking—washed away the house that I built. I had been taught and wanted to believe in such a whitewashed version of a complex gospel that I never had to dig through the earth to find the true foundation. Instead I just built right on top of the soil. Let me clarify that there is nothing wrong with soil. It is a wonderful thing that brings life and fecundity. But it also erodes through time and space. It changes with the seasons and when disaster strikes it cannot secure a foundationless house.

April 12, 2011: Adam Miller waxes philosophical in “Be Ye Perfect”⁹ at Times and Seasons.

If you want to be “perfect”—not in the abstract, not as some shiny, stainless steel composite of John Keats, Brad Pitt, Albert Einstein, and Gordon B. Hinckley, but *as* the Father is perfect—then you must be complete in the same way that the Father is complete. The Father is “complete” because he is not “partial.” To be like him, you must love completely. You must love not just your friends but even (especially) your enemies. You must love not just the just but the unjust. You must make your sun shine on *all*. You must make your skies rain on *everyone*. Perfection consists in being im/partial. It is equanimity.

June 15, 2008: In “Spoken Fatherhood: Communion and Community,”¹⁰ Samuel Brown speaks both philosophically and personally in his Fathers’ Day sermon.

Because I believe that life is lived in details, I would like to place these ideas within the concrete terms of my own experience. In my experience, the road to Communion can be long and hard. My own father was a complex and sad man. Driven by insanity and the chasm that yawned between who he hoped to be and who he remained, he was not available to his family. In a conversation I have never been proud of, I told him once, surveying the damage he had done to our family, that he was my biological father but had no claim on me beyond his genes. Diagnosed with profoundly bipolar depression and a narcissistic personality disorder, he limped from pathological melancholy so severe he disappeared into dark motel rooms for days at a time to sheer mania, when he spent towards bankruptcy and filled his young children with dreams of staggering wealth and comfort.

Homosexuality

April 1, 2014: “Drop the term ‘lifestyle’ as a description of gay relationships. Recognize that there is a difference between a promiscuous lifestyle (whether one is gay or straight), and a decision to be in a committed relationship, rather than assuming that all gay people, by virtue of being gay, fall into the former category if they aren’t celibate. Note that the lifestyle of gay couples is pretty much the same as the lifestyle of straight couples.” This and five other suggestions comprise Sheila Taylor’s “A Few Simple Ways to Talk More Constructively about Homosexuality (That Don’t Require Major Doctrinal Changes).”¹¹ Her follow-up post discusses “More on Being Gay and Mormon: Some Simple Ways People Have Been Supportive.”¹²

January 29, 2014: “One thing is clear: the international church is part of what is playing out in Utah. Whatever church authorities emphasize now or in the future, whatever they apply as policies dealing with legally married same-sex couples, whatever individual Mormons advocate in public fora and organizations,

it has worldwide resonance and implications.” In “Utah Same-Sex Marriage and the International Church,”¹³ Wilfried Decoo provides another thoughtful addition to the ongoing discussion about Mormonism and same-sex marriage, placing it into a more global perspective.

Feminism

May 8, 2014: Using probing questions, instructive graphs, and understandable explanations Andrea Radke-Moss provides a thorough background to “Mormon Studies in the Classroom: Mormon Women, Patriarchy and Equality” at the Juvenile Instructor.¹⁴

I hope that in laying out my teaching methodology, I have also reached beyond my student audience and the teachers/professors who will find usefulness in these ideas. I have had the opportunity to present this introduction to a handful of groups, including students, a Mormon intellectual/historian gathering, and my own department colleagues—all to very positive response; and I sincerely hope that these ideas will continue to find an audience among church members and leaders alike, who hope to understand the complexity and history of women’s roles, spheres, expectations, and rights in a more sophisticated manner. Mostly, a caution: Given this historical and theoretical context, we should avoid strong claims to Mormon women’s “**equality**,” when we might really mean that women are “**protected**” or cherished. There is a difference.

March 26, 2014: “These Are Our Sisters,”¹⁵ exclaim Cal Robinson and Juliann Reynolds, guest posting at the FAIR blog regarding the Ordain Woman movement. Of note, they dismantle a few of the oft-heard arguments hurled at Ordain Women supporters.

Of equal concern are those well-intentioned counter arguments to women’s ordination that not only diminish women in general, but the priesthood itself. Any defense that involves a refusal of the priesthood as if it was just one more thing to add to an already full schedule is no defense. Likewise, declaring that its primary purpose is to force men to be responsible is not consistent with

statements by church leaders that describe the role of the Priesthood with utmost reverence.

March 24, 2014: Melissa Inouye calls readers to re-examine the rhetoric regarding those with whom they may disagree within the Church in the provocative new post “No More Strangers.”¹⁶ She explains,

When we use such harshly judgmental rhetoric to suggest that active, contributing members of the Church should be excommunicated or otherwise expelled from our fellowship because we deeply disagree with their interpretation of doctrine, we are forgetting two things. In the first place, we are forgetting that a group of people that comprises at very most .002 percent of the world’s population cannot afford to excise entire sections of its membership.

February 20, 2014: April Bennett uses personal but anonymous examples to consider the problematic nature of “Church Discipline: Women Disciplined by Men,”¹⁷ and wonders, “When a man requires a woman to submit to an interrogation by a group of men about sensitive personal issues such as her sex life, does she feel love or shame? Does this process meet the criteria set forth in the Thirteenth Article of Faith: ‘virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy?’”

January 18, 2014: In “If Your Sexual Thoughts Were Like My Asthma,”¹⁸ Emily Belanger provides a fantastic comparison to explain why the modesty discourse toward women can be frustrating:

But I’m still affected by their actions, just as many faithful members feel impacted by how others dress. So I take responsibility for my own body and do what I need to in order to minimize the way others’ smoky attire impacts me: I take my allergy medication; I bring gum to church, which helps minimize mild allergy symptoms; I keep my inhaler on hand so that I can use it if I need to. And no, I don’t generally sit right next to someone who smells strongly of smoke. And if I really, truly need to, I leave the building for a bit to get some fresh air. But I do all of this without criticizing others, either to their face or behind their back.

October 8, 2013: In “Modesty and the Imaginary Me,”¹⁹ Rosalynde Welch adds to the modesty discourse by speaking of it in a more personal vein:

I want to write about how I have personally experienced modesty standards, and how they shape not only my behavior but my sense of self. I don't expect to convert anybody to my point of view, but maybe I'll begin to articulate how it can be that some women experience modesty as a kind of security and power. It feels risky to write this, because I will no doubt show myself to be not only flawed but flatly ridiculous in my vanity and delusion. But here goes. . . . Clothing and make-up were the most important ways I mediated my relationship to my body. Thus the act of choosing clothing, getting dressed, and surveying my reflection in the mirror was an unwholesome cocktail of dread, fantasy, desire, and despair. I loved my clothing, I wanted more of it and more fashionable styles. I fetishized my favorite outfits, the ones I believed made me look fashionable and skinny. The fantasy of recreating the outfits I saw in magazines, displaying myself in them, and attracting the envious gaze of other girls and desiring gaze of boys was powerful.

September 30, 2013: “So is there a way to preserve the fraternal character of existing priesthood quorums, and their motivating centrality to the workings of the church, while also involving women and girls in church governance, both to reinforce their connection to the institution and to raise the effectiveness of that governance at the ward level?” So wonders Rosalynde Welch in this post on “Thinkable Priesthoods, Usable Pasts”²⁰ that is full of introspective questions along with some interesting speculative answers.

June 18, 2013: Jacob Baker captures the importance of reframing the modesty discourse in the well-written post on “Men, Sex, and Modesty”²¹:

What was untrue, however (what remains untrue), and this is point number two, were the stories that had produced that anxiety and powerlessness in the first place. Stories about girls and women being centers of uncontrollable desire and lust that must look and act in particular ways in order to tame the beast

within me. Stories about learning to be strong and courageous while surrounded by frightening temptation everywhere I turned, thereby transforming women around me into either enemies or potential enemies (should they choose at some point to not dress according to current acceptable standards, on my behalf). Stories that metaphorically and realistically banish or exile women from thought and place so I could feel safe and powerful. Stories that divided not just women against men in significant ways, but also women against women, in which women saw other women as potential insidious bearers of the seeds of destruction sown in husbands, sons, and fathers.

May 15, 2013: In “*The Friend* and the Orange Tank Top: The Difference between Shaming and the Spirit,”²² Lisa Butterworth asks us to examine what we say to and about children:

But going with current usage for the sake of this conversation, when *The Friend* impresses upon little girls that That Orange Tank Top is immodest. What *The Friend* is really telling our babies is that they should not dress in such a way as to encourage sexual attraction in others. Stop and think about that for a minute. We are telling our babies to think about their bodies, and to think about covering them up, and to feel guilty for wanting to wear an Orange Tank Top because they might encourage sexual attention from others.

May 6, 2013: Melissa Inouye writes about her personal experience with Julie B. Beck’s “Mothers Who Know” talk in “Put Your Mormon Where Your Mouth Is: Gender, Sexuality, and the Second Great Commandment.”²³ She explains,

Somehow, I had drawn a battle line where one didn’t properly belong. Actually, I didn’t have a problem with most of the things that Sister Beck said in her talk. I absolutely believe that the mundane physical chores of parenthood are imbued with spiritual power. Now that I have children of my own, I truly appreciate the awesome investment of time, talent, and pure grit that my mother made in the process of raising my four brothers and me. Call it nurturing, homemaking, war, or Bob, it is definitely not for

the faint of heart. On this fundamental point my mother, Sister Beck, and I were all on the same side.

April 22, 2013: Joanna Brooks also wonders, “What Is Priesthood? What Is the Relationship of Gender to Priesthood?”²⁴ and writes,

What we have instead is an accretion of scriptures, historical events, personal experiences, and interpretive impulses—a chaotic body of data that is typically managed in order to tell the story the speaker wants it to tell. Every faith tradition has a theological history rich in chaos, and Mormonism is no exception. What we can see at best as we begin to piece together the history of thought on questions like “What is priesthood?” and “What is the relationship of gender to priesthood?” is the human outlines of our hunger for the truth and the way in which the terms of our search for the truth have evolved over time. Mormons call this process *continuing revelation*. The more we learn about change in Mormon history and doctrine and the more prepared we are to be candid, we must acknowledge that human dispositions and error play a vital role in shaping Mormon doctrinal history—especially on questions of power and its administration.

September 11, 2012: Angela Clayton provides some spot-on “Musings on Modesty”²⁵ over at Wheat & Tares:

But at the same time, we’ve got someone madly photoshopping cap sleeves on toddlers so that no shoulder is left exposed, no matter how young. According to Photo Standards²⁶ on lds.org: “Because of the **need** to present **women and girls** modestly, **regardless of age**, please avoid submitting photos of them in **sleeveless** tops and dresses or short skirts.” In case you are wondering, I am not making this up. Someone thinks there is a “need” to cover the shoulders of toddlers (if they are female) so that they are not immodest. Toddler girl #1 above was on lds.org up to very recently. Toddler girl #2 with magical appearing cap sleeves is there now. This happened.

June 20, 2012: In “Why Mormon Feminism Is True,”²⁷ Patrick Mason writes, “In sum, Mormon feminism manifests the redemption

of Eve and Adam (and all their sons and daughters), proclaims the literal deification of women, wrestles with the paradox of equality in difference, and insists on rooting the self in the bonds of human community and communion with God. And that, at least in part, is why Mormon feminism—the seeming ‘contrary’—is true.”

October 1, 2011: “Let My People Pray: It’s Time to Consider Having Women Give Opening/Closing Prayers in General Conference,”²⁸ says Cynthia Lee. She explains, “Perhaps the prayer restriction in General Conference has simply escaped notice. Whatever the reason, I think that the recent Handbook changes make this the time to consider including women in the offering of invocations and benedictions in a general session of General Conference.” Two years later, it happened.

September 15, 2010: Kathryn Soper looks at “Why Standards Night Is Substandard”²⁹ and laments,

Our standards nights and chastity lessons usually focus on the dangers of strong sexual desire. Predictably, we exhort young men to bridle their libidos, which we describe as wild beasts that must be restrained until domestication in marriage, and we caution young women to avoid arousing and indulging the young men—tempting the beast out of its cage, so to speak. It’s a troubling model for a number of reasons, but I’ll address just one: by focusing on physiological motivators for teenage sex, we completely overlook significant *psychological* motivators. This oversight shortchanges all youth, and exacerbates the risk of young women’s needs flying under the standards night radar completely. After dismissing libido as a serious issue for them (which may be a mistake in and of itself), we turn their attention to assisting their male peers without even considering other compelling reasons for sexual behavior. In our outreach we miss the mark by emphasizing virtue, modesty, and chastity without considering what might motivate a young woman to eschew the same.

September 1, 2008: Meghan Raynes pens a beautiful post titled “From Mother to Daughter”³⁰ on the eve of birthing her daughter and explains, “By choosing to stay, I am knowingly exposing my daughter to a church that proclaims equality but does nothing to demonstrate it in its structure. Because of my

choice, my daughter may come to know the pain of discovering that despite all the declarations of equality, the rhetoric and a good part of the theology does not support the notion that women are full participants in a spiritual life. By staying, I am left with the very real possibility of having to answer questions I have no answers for myself.”

November 11, 2007: “It’s high time I confess a heresy that may put me at odds both with many Mormons and with many feminists: I’m not really all that enamored of the idea of the divine feminine, of the doctrine that we have a Heavenly Mother,” says Sheila Taylor in the provocative post “Why I Don’t Want to Believe in Heavenly Mother.”³¹

I don’t recall when I first encountered the teaching that we have a Heavenly Mother as well as a Father—though I can say that the idea that Heavenly Father had multiple wives was one that rather horrified me (it still does). But even beyond the potential polygamy problem, the notion of an Eternal Mother was one that left me feeling a bit icky. I projected the kinds of saccharine rhetoric about women that I heard about church onto her, imagining a Mother who was always soft-spoken and dripping with sentimentality. I figured that if such a divine personage did indeed exist, I didn’t want anything to do with her.

Race

December 8, 2013: In “Bound Hand and Foot with Graveclothes,”³² Kristine Haglund provides a beautiful interpretation of the Lazurus story and how it can apply to the recent release of the “Race and the Priesthood” explanation in LDS Gospel Topics.

I think there might be something for us to learn from this story in figuring out how we ought to respond to the remarkable statement on race and priesthood posted at lds.org. Strangely (to me, at least) it has been my friends who consider themselves most progressive who have been a little bit like those who “went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done”—they’ve not wanted to let go of their idea of what rebirth ought to look

like, they've wanted the statement to emerge from the tomb of the COB (sorry, couldn't resist ;) without the graveclothes of institutional inertia and bureaucratic caution. They are eager (as I am) for the process of healing to be complete, the vision of a less racist future for the Church given to us in the form we would recognize most readily and celebrate most gladly. It seems to me, though, that it almost never works that way.

April 26, 2013: “The publication of (Elder John) Dickson’s talk in the *Ensign*, LDS anti-racist advocates worry, will provide renewed cover for Mormons who would like to avoid reckoning with the human origins and harmful consequences of the faith’s historic racism. And that, they say, is no cause for celebration.” Joanna Brooks looks at the “Shifting Talk on Mormon Racism Reveals Divisions within LDS Church.”³³

March 1, 2012: In “Professor Bott, Elijah Abel, and a Plea from the Past,”³⁴ Paul Reeve weighs in on Randy Bott’s racist remarks:

Professor Bott’s recent comments to the *Washington Post* again dishonor Abel’s legacy. If even one black Mormon was eligible for the priesthood before 1978, then all blacks were. In Elijah Abel all of the hokey rationalizations and false justifications for a race based temple and priesthood ban fall by the wayside. If even one black Mormon was eligible for the priesthood before 1978, then all blacks were. Abel was not in need of white paternalism in 1883 when he served a third mission for Mormonism at the age of 75 and he certainly does not deserve it in 2012.

February 29, 2012: In a short but powerful guest post, Armand Mauss³⁵ outlines five reasons Professor Randy Bott was wrong in his reasoning about the priesthood ban:

Professor Bott seems to be a little behind in his reading on the history and doctrine regarding black members of the Church. He seems unaware of any of the scholarship on this topic during the past 45 years or more. Otherwise he would know that (1) the references that he cites from the Pearl of Great Price and other scriptures have the meaning he attributes to them ONLY if the reader already believes the folklore that Bott is proposing and elaborating—that is, only if one reads them through the lens of

that folklore; (2) numerous spokesmen from LDS Public Affairs, plus many other official statements in recent decades, have denied that such folklore was ever official doctrine; (3) despite such folklore (in versions common to American history more generally), Joseph Smith ordained at least a few African Americans to the priesthood; (4) there is no record of any revelation to any prophet denying the priesthood to people of black African ancestry; and last, but not least (5) this kind of armchair theologizing done by well-meaning, but ill-informed LDS religion teachers like Bott, does enormous damage to the public image of the Church in a time when the Church is trying hard to overcome its historic association with that very kind of folklore.

August 9, 2010: “We believe that there must and will be a significant future for those of African descent in the Church, and far greater prominence in the leadership than we see today,” write Margaret Blair Young and Darius Gray in “The Colorful LDS Future.”³⁶ “But it won’t come without full acknowledgment of the complexities that always attend race issues, and some bold approaches to the challenges before us.”

January 27, 2009: Brad Kramer looks at racism in the Church in “There is an End to Race”³⁷ on By Common Consent.

Racism is a problem in the Church. Whether it is a greater problem for Mormons than for anybody else is an open question (though not the subject of this thread), though I think we can all agree that, despite the fact that we are clearly better than we were in previous generations, it is still a problem. I think that it vexes us Mormons in unique ways, and I’d like to explore some of those in this discussion, paying particular attention to what light contemporary biology, anthropology, and epidemiology can shed on the question. You see, the real problem is *race*.

Mormon Studies

October 30, 2013: Jana Riess gets to the heart of the problems with divisive rhetoric in this piece on “How Not to Disagree with a Mormon Apostle.”³⁸ She says,

It's one thing to disagree with LDS leaders, and to speak plainly and pointedly about the reasons why. Such discussions can elevate our people's reflections about important issues. I have no problem with any Mormon writing an open letter expressing dissent on any topic; the more transparent our discourse, the better. Bring it on. But we do not call each other horrible names, or blame total strangers for the deaths of children. We focus on issues, not personal attacks. We behave like grown-ups"

September 1, 2013: "I don't understand much of the tensions that people see in the relationship between science and faith," says George Handley in "Science, Faith, and Policy."³⁹ "To me, it seems patently obvious that scriptural accounts of the origin of the world, for example, are not scientific texts. Nor for that matter are scientific explanations for the origins of life sufficient narratives of the reasons for our existence or for our moral self-understanding. Science tells us how things work and religion seeks to tell us why they exist."

August 16, 2013: "What is Mormon studies? Who is doing it, where and how is it being done? What is the relationship between Mormon studies and apologetics? Does Mormon studies exclude or necessarily bracket discussion about the fundamental truth claims of the religion? How are Mormon studies to be situated within the wider academy?" Blair Hodges compiles an impressive list of online articles and posts attempting to answer these very questions with "A Mormon Studies Bibliography"⁴⁰ on the Maxwell Institute Blog.

July 24, 2013: "In the beginning, Mormonism was a cult. Not in the vulgar sense often attributed to feared or misconstrued religious minorities, but in the way that earliest Christianity or nascent Islam was a cult: a group that forms around a charismatic figure coupled with radical new religious claims. Like these predecessors, Mormonism has long since grown from cult to culture. This is reflected in its fertile, distinctive parlance—by turns revealing, quaint, ingenious, paradoxical, and humorous." Philip Barlow stops by the Oxford University Press blog with some insightful thoughts "Of Mormonish and Saintspeak."⁴¹

July 15, 2014: Taylor Petrey offers some fascinating insights into “The Greater Apostasy? Responsibility and Falling Away in LDS Narratives.”⁴² He explains,

Over the course of the 20th century, LDS narratives about early Christianity shifted dramatically in one respect. While earlier accounts explained that the Great Apostasy occurred due to the failure of church leaders, by the 1980s, retellings of the Great Apostasy narrative blamed the general membership for going astray. LDS narratives about early Christianity, like most other Christians, have a great deal to do with constructing a meaningful identity. In this way, these narratives have a different goal than those of historians. Nevertheless, this shift in the LDS narrative reveals a great deal about how LDS identity is constructed and what values these stories seek to communicate.

August 10, 2010: Steve Evans muses on the “Future of Mormons on the Internet”⁴³ and writes,

LDS blogs exist for a number of identified reasons, but fundamentally a single reason predominates: *community*. Humans are social creatures, craving interconnectedness, and Mormons are especially social humans. This is partially attributable to Wasatch Front Western friendliness, I suppose, but I also view our society as a central feature of our faith: we are saved in great chains of family stretching back and forward through the eternities, and Joseph Smith wrote, “that same sociality which exists amongst us here will exist among us there only it will be coupled with eternal glory which glory we do not now enjoy.”

Public Conversations

October 22, 2012: Before one of the presidential debates between Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama, Patrick Mason looks at “The Politics of Jesus.”⁴⁴ He explains that

religion not only can, but must, take into account the political. This does not mean baptizing our secular political ideologies in religious warrants, essentially equating the kingdom of this world

with the kingdom of Christ. When that is the case, religion ceases to be prophetic and becomes culturally captive. The politics of Jesus are always in relationship with the politics of this world. The relationship, however, is never one of outright endorsement, but rather a prophetic witness aimed at reordering human societies so as to more fully approach Zion. . . . In listening to more than three decades' worth of church lessons, I don't think I've ever once heard this prophetic statement quoted—President Kimball's teachings on heavy petting, plenty of times; his teachings on rejecting the false god of militarism, never.

September 19, 2012: James Faulconer responds to Simon Critchley's New York Times piece about Mormons' belief in deification in "A Public Conversation about Mormonism."⁴⁵ He explains,

My view, a view that I think is shared by a number of other LDS thinkers, is that as a church we are not particularly hung up on theology. We can take it or leave it. . . . As a result, the decision to accept the belief as Joseph Smith taught it or to accept part or none of it has no official consequences. . . . Pick three Mormons: She straightforwardly believes what was taught in the 19th century. I believe that God was never a human being, but that we can become like him by receiving a fullness of his grace (as is suggested by passages such as John 17:20–23 and Romans 8:17). He believes neither that God was once a human being nor that we can become gods.

May 23, 2012: Taylor Petrey asks a provocative question: "Is Mormonism Ridiculous?"⁴⁶ He explains,

Like Elder Price and Mitt Romney, Mormons are praised for certain characteristics: being nice, having good families, valuing industry, thrift, or for being good citizens in the community. These are indeed genuine compliments that any community should be proud of. What is missing from this list of positive attributes is praise for Mormonism as having any important religious ideas. In fact, praises of Mormons as people often include the caveat that Mormon ideas and beliefs about angels, golden plates, and Kolob are strange, weird, ridiculous, and sometimes even dangerous.

April 27, 2012: In “I’m a Mormon, yes I am!”⁴⁷ Patrick Mason analyzes the “I’m a Mormon” campaign:

In my mind, what the ‘I’m a Mormon’ campaign actually reveals is twofold: first, that the LDS Church is, in pragmatic fashion, grasping at any strategy to maintain growth, particularly in the United States, where real growth has more or less flatlined (or may even be negative); second, that this is a young religion still desperately trying to gain legitimacy and validation. If you have to keep telling everyone that you’re just like them, chances are you’re not. And last time I checked, being different was sort of the whole point of Mormonism.

April 4, 2012: “Why Is It So Hard to Figure Out What Mormons Believe?”⁴⁸ asks Matthew Bowman at the blog Peculiar People. “Understandably, many in the media were confused when the church distanced itself from its own members. If a professor of religion at a church-owned university cannot be trusted to elaborate on what Mormons believe, who can? If the Mormons really wanted to stop particular proxy baptisms, couldn’t they?”

December 8, 2011: Jana Riess, on being on the receiving end of anti-Mormon prejudice: “And then someone found out the dirty truth that I am a Mormon. Not only that, but a ‘vocal Mormon,’ as an embarrassed, kind editor at the website put it in the apology sent to my publicist. (Apparently it is bad enough to be a member of a religious minority, but far worse not to feel a proper sense of shame.)” Read Riess’s post at Patheos, “Your Mormon Friend.”⁴⁹

December 5, 2011: Max Mueller discusses “Making Fun of Mormonism”⁵⁰ in Religion Dispatches: “So yes, religion does intersect with politics in this country, and we do need to find ways to talk about it. I’d like to suggest, though, that unless a set of Mormon underwear declares its candidacy for the presidency we would do well to leave it out of the conversation.”

July 26, 2010: On the Segullah⁵¹ blog, Carina Hoskisson asks, “Why aren’t you standing up for yourself at church? Why are you letting them get you upset week after week? Why aren’t you saying something? What happens if all the moderate, progressive, and in

some places, conservative voices leave the church? We need you. What if you're like me and don't care what flavor the politics are, you don't want to hear it at church? You have something that is worth hearing; your voice counts. So **WHY WON'T YOU SAY SOMETHING?**"

September 23, 2008: Craig Harline writes about the problems that occur "When Being Right Is Wrong."⁵²

There's just one problem. Your tongue-lashing shuts not only them up, but everyone else too. Now no one will talk. You've killed whatever good feeling was in the room—killed it more than those students were killing it. Now you're the one ruining the learning experience for everyone. You were right, those kids deserved it. But you were wrong as well. Wrong in how you handled it. Wrong in your tone, and delivery. Wrong in your meta message, which was (whether you meant to say so or not) that you probably don't care enough about the offenders to figure out an approach which not only solves the problem but allows the offenders to feel that they still matter to you. And thus, just plain wrong.

History

September 10, 2012:

I have serious reservations about recommending it to the average church member; if you need your prophet to be larger than life, or even just better than the average bear, this book is not for you. I think there is a substantial risk that people raised on hagiographic, presentist images of prophets would have their testimonies rocked, if not shattered, by this book. Perhaps this is just an idiosyncratic reaction, but I felt an increased appreciation for Joseph Smith, David O. McKay, and Spencer W. Kimball after reading their biographies. I can't say the same for Brigham Young; I liked him—and respected him—less. Much less.

So says Julie M. Smith in this "Book Review: *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* by John G. Turner."⁵³

July 30, 2012: Benjamin Park looks at “Individualism, Communalism, and the Foreign Past of Mormonism.”⁵⁴

This post is not designed to be a condemnation of today’s society or a passionate plea to return to nineteenth-century Mormon economic principles; far from it. Nor is it a denouncement of only one political outlook; indeed, both sides of the political divide are lacking a communalistic ethic. Rather, it is merely a reminder of the chasm between today and years past—a chasm that provides ironies, lessons, discomfort, and difficulty in squaring past traditions with today’s world; a reminder that things we assume is natural today has not always been that way. This is an especially complicated issue in a tradition that claims both prophetic authority as well as progressive revelation, causing issues that can often be difficult to solve.

May 2, 2012: “I think the (Reed) Smoot hearings are the great silent backdrop to this 2012 election,” writes Joanna Brooks in “Mitt Romney and the Ghost of Anti-Mormonism.”⁵⁵ Her interviewee, Kathleen Flake, responds,

I think today’s anxiety about Mormonism can’t be compared to that of the past. The anti-Mormonism that was nearly universal during Smoot’s era is now a tradition maintained by a very small slice of the American population. The Republican primaries gave that small slice a megaphone: the artificial loudness of their voice makes people overestimate their number. That said, it will be interesting to see what happens now in the general election when you may begin to hear from another voice that is anxious not so much about Mormonism per se but about any candidate that is too religious. And if Mormonism is anything in the American mind, it is a group of people who take their religion way too seriously.

July 13, 2009: Blair Hodges looks at “The Curriculum Department and the Search for the Authentic Joseph Smith”⁵⁶ in this post from *Life on Gold Plates*:

First, a little background. The manual was published in late 2007 as the latest installment of *Relief Society and Priesthood*

instruction manuals. A flurry of discussion on the manual swept through the Bloggernacle, including many positive and negative comments. The most common criticism is the manual's seeming "proof-texting" of Joseph Smith. It seems to "contemporize" him, missing an opportunity to educate members of the Church on various historical viewpoints not common to discussion of Church history generally. The most common praise is the manual's apparently more rigorous selection and use of source material as compared to past manuals. In that regard, the manual has been called a "step forward."

January 9, 2009: Ardis E. Parshall puts on her historical detective cap at Keepapitchinin to dispel "The Great Mormon Marijuana Myth."⁵⁷ "But how do you go about combating such a myth? We could point to all the historical flaws in the paragraphs quoted above, but somehow I doubt that would persuade anyone—I may have got some of the details wrong, but you guys still passed the first anti-marijuana law. That *had to have been because of your religion.*' End of discussion."

November 17, 2008: Matthew Bowman turns his scholarly skills to dissecting "Thomas S. Monson and the Paradoxes of the Utah Jazz"⁵⁸ in this fun post for The Juvenile Instructor:

For other equally Mormon reasons, however, we could have seen that fateful Thomas-Monson-to-Jerry-Sloan, prophet-to-head-coach backslap coming. Basketball has not come out of nowhere to compete for the Mormon soul. Church leagues have a long and noble history of socializing the youth of Zion (mostly by instituting behavioral 'guidelines' upon young folk who wanted to play and whisking them away from out of door courts into the easily monitorable sanctuary of the local stake house).

July 23, 2008: Craig Harline tells of a family history miracle that happened when he was visiting Ellis Island with his family: "Let us praise pioneers. Of all sorts, but today especially the traditional sort. I myself am thinking of Carl and Mathilda, whom I came to know through one of those wholly unexpected spine-tingling unbelievable fantastic experiences." Harline's beautiful personal

essay deftly takes readers into the lives of two-not-to-be-forgotten people, “Carl and Mathilda.”⁵⁹

Dialogue

May 10, 2010: In “Behold!”⁶⁰ Kristine Haglund introduces the journal’s significant step into the digital age: “In the past few years, it has become increasingly clear that *Dialogue* cannot survive as strictly a print publication. A new generation of thoughtful Saints and scholars who would benefit from becoming acquainted with *Dialogue*’s rich history will never find that content if it is languishing in library stacks. Thus, with some trepidation, the Board has decided to make all of *Dialogue*’s archive accessible online, retaining only the last two years’ content as premium content available by subscription.”

July 30, 2010: In a guest post for *Scholaristas*,⁶¹ Claudia Bushman exclaims, “The Pink Issue is forty years old! That’s two generations. That’s considerably longer than I was old when I worked on it. I’ve told this story many times over the years, and I will begin with the most important lesson from the whole business. WRITE! It’s the best way for powerless people with no money to make a difference. With something written, and it helps to be published, too, a document will be reinterpreted over and over in the coming years.”

Personal Essays

January 24, 2009: Natalie Brown reminisces about “My Blogging Life: How Blogging Continues to Change My Faith”⁶² at *By Common Consent*:

I started my first (and now inactive) blog, *Mormon Rhetoric*, with little expectation that anyone would read my musings and with the assumption that my identity on the web was entirely anonymous. However, within a few months I was shocked to discover that people in fact did read the blog and that the blog was traceable to me. Through a series of connections, I was invited to blog on BCC, and I thus ceased to be a private blogger. In

a startlingly short amount of time, my experience shifted from one of anonymity to one of community. With this shift came a parallel shift in my focus as a blogger: knowing that I had a readership caused me to think of blogging less as therapy and more as an act of community building.

March 26, 2008: “One night, in a state of insomnia induced by pregnancy, I searched the doctrines of the Church for an answer. They ranged from Brigham Young’s insistence that life begins when the mother feels the baby move, to ideas that—just like Adam—life is not received into the body until there is a breath. From the Church’s Public Issue’s website it is declared that, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no official position on the moment that human life begins.” Courtney Kendrick tells three stories that helped her figure out “The Hourglass Theory,”⁶³ her personal comforting explanation for the tragedy of miscarriage.

May 13, 2008: In describing her father’s decline, Lisa Butterworth breaks hearts with this incredibly poetic post titled simply “Hollow”⁶⁴:

It’s an aromatic chair, it smells like hard work and long naps and my dad. My mother covers it with throws and towels, hoping to absorb aroma, but her efforts fail. I’ve always hesitated to sit in the smelly chair, because, well, it’s gross. All stinky and sweaty and earthy and fathery. It’s the same smell that now hollows me out. I kiss my dad and that smell fills my senses. I rub his rough cheeks and pound on his chest and yell “open your eyes dad, look at me dad,” but he never does. His heart beats, his lungs fill with air, he sweats and smells like the man who taught me to tie my shoes and build bright pink pine-wood race cars, but is he hollow too?

November 22, 2007: Heather Oman learns a simple lesson about gratitude in “Last Thanksgiving.”⁶⁵ Here’s a taste: “Cramping, spotting, unable to move without pain, I spent the day listening to my mother-in-law prepare the entire meal, which she did with amazing cheerfulness. I looked out the window at the bare trees in my yard, too distracted and worried to do anything else. I ate my mother-in-law’s delicious feast, tried to help with

the dishes, but then I doubled over in pain and started spotting. I promptly went back to bed. I settled back in the cushions, and stared out the window once more.”

August 7, 2006: Genevieve Taylor Oliver gives a glimpse into her lifelong struggle with depression in this incredibly personal but must-read post, beautifully titled “The Grace of This Darkness: Surrendering to the Mystery of Suffering and Creation.”⁶⁶

The first and most severe episode of depression began the winter I turned thirteen and lasted eighteen months, at the end of which I was numb, seared, barely alive. During the summer that followed, as I began the slow process of putting my life back together—a process which would take many years, and continues still—every weekday morning I would get up, put on my old jeans or shorts and a T-shirt, go out into the desert heat, and cross the street and the blazing, empty parking lot where the seagulls congregated on the dumpsters to the junior high, where I had to attend summer school. This winter I will turn thirty-five. During most months of most of the intervening years, despair has been my quiet, constant companion, in Lauren Slater’s words, my country. After more than two decades of struggling against the illusion that comes with every intermission, the illusion *I have conquered*, and the fatal false hopes that it will not return, I struggle to face the prospect that despair may be the condition of the rest of my life.

November 1, 2004: Karen Hall uses the blog platform to send a heartfelt letter to her birthmother in “Thank You, 31 Years Later,”⁶⁷ an early post at By Common Consent.

I don’t remember meeting you, although I’m sure that I made quite an impression on you 31 years ago. I know it must have been hard to make the decision to put me up for adoption. But I wanted you to know that I consider it to be the most admirable selfless act that I can imagine. My parents are amazing, supportive, loving people, and they raised me in a stable, spiritual home, along with my older brother. They aren’t rich, but they had the financial stability to support me and encourage my education. They also are happy, well-adjusted people, who raised me to be

practical and strong—but still call me princess. I am so grateful that I was raised in that home, and I know that you made it possible. I imagine that you were pretty young when I was born, and I also imagine you realized you couldn't give me everything you wanted to yourself, so you shared me with people who could. I like to think that you passed on to me the ability to make mature selfless decisions, because that is something that I admire about you, and am striving to develop myself.

Miscellaneous

July 26, 2013: Tracy McKay describes “Ministering on the Spectrum, Primary Help for Special Education Children”⁶⁸ in this important post:

Frequently a child with Autism will function better when an individual is called to be their teacher in a one-on-one capacity, rather than as a group setting. This may not always be possible, but depending on the needs of the child and the resources of the ward, this can be a very successful starting point. If the child has one person with whom they feel comfortable and trust in a small classroom, they can often manage the louder, less structured Sharing Time lesson with less anxiety or disruption, and can be easily taken out, if the need arises.

May 25, 2009:

Noah stared at Japheth in horror. His voice shook a little, “What do you mean an Opossum escaped at our last stop?” Noah was angry. “YOU KNOW ALL THE MARSUPIALS ARE SUPPOSE TO GET DROPPED OFF IN AUSTRALIA!” It was another blunder in a long series of blunders. Sailing around the earth dropping off the animals in their appropriate habitat had been hard, and he only dimly understood why it had to be done, but a marsupial in North America was going to get him in trouble.

So begins Steven Peck’s delightful, perhaps irreverent, but brilliant imagining of “Noah’s Lament” in having to place each and every animal in its proper habitat.⁶⁹

August 17, 2008: Kynthia Taylor pokes fun at *Sunstone* with this “Sunstone Program Parody”⁷⁰ that somehow manages to be both hilarious and heartfelt. One example of a faux program session: “Armpit Hair and the Gendered Dynamics of the BYU Honor Code.’ Recognizing that armpit hair is a secondary sex characteristic not dissimilar to facial hair, our panel explores the following pressing issue: should female BYU students be required to apply for armpit-hair cards before being allowed to cultivate a (well-groomed) thicket of hair in the underarm region? What about males?”

June 5, 2007: In one of the most commented-on posts at Mormon Mentality, Devyn Smith wonders about “Married Mormon Graduate Students on Welfare—Is It Right?”⁷¹ and concludes, “Perhaps the problem is with all of the pressure in Mormonism to start having kids the instant you get married, regardless of your financial circumstances. Am I off base on this? Should I be frustrated or am I just jealous that I did not ‘milk the system’ when I was in graduate school.”

April 5, 2007: Joanna Benson (Joanna Savage Briscoe) discusses the surprise findings when she takes a DNA test in “DNA Mormons?”⁷² and concludes,

The time has come to reveal the great gathering within myself. I gladly step out of the small dark box of Euro-centrism, into the big tent of humanity where the real party is going on. I know that I have been led to find them. I can see their dear faces lightly imprinted not only on my face, but the face of my loved ones. The gift I have been given is one of love and a shared identity with all of God’s children. Now when I meet someone of another nationality I can truly think perhaps you are my cousin. And that, my friends, is a wonderful gift.

March 23, 2004: At Times and Seasons, Kaimipono Wenger notes “The Nameless Mormon Blogosphere”⁷³ and asks for suggestions. The Bloggernacle comes to pass in comment #3.

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