

## LETTERS

### *European Mormons and Napoleon Mormons*

Due to my interest in religion I'm in the habit of browsing periodicals of various faiths. This has greatly broadened my perspectives as I do pastoral counseling as a Christian. It was thus I came upon the winter 2005 issue of *Dialogue*.

The first article to catch my eye was Walter E. A. van Beek's ("Mormon Europeans or European Mormons? An 'Afro-European' View on Religious Colonization" 38, no. 4 [Winter 2005]: 3-36). He articulates well the concerns and realities of Americanisms in Mormon culture abroad. This and the next two articles expressed my dismay over past missionary efforts that all too often wiped out indigenous beauty and customs, imposing Western ways. (Devyn M. Smith, "The Diverse Sheep of Israel: Should the Shepherds Resemble Their Flocks?" 38, no. 4 [Winter 2005]: 56-74; R. John Williams, "A Marvelous Work and a Possession: Book of Mormon Historicity as Postcolonialism" 38, no. 4 [Winter 2005]: 37-55.)

But I was delightfully impressed with the "Personal Voice" of Cetti Cherniak ("Napoleon Dynamite, Priesthood Skills, and the Eschatology of the Non-Rational: A Nonwarranted Physiotheologic Analysis," 38, no. 4 [Winter 2005]: 129-140). I am most often surrounded by ultra-rational and highly intellectual publications with very little balance. Such is not the case here. "*Napoleon Dynamite*" is an excellent foray into theologizing our pop culture! First,

the idea of right brain/left brain approaches is absolutely correct as a means of evaluating our theological approach, worship styles, importance of ritual and symbol, etc. In our area I see many churches bringing back rituals thrown out by the Reformation.

Jesus taught most frequently with stories and parables. It was a pleasure to see intelligent and playful comparisons of characters in a movie and everyday happenings to theological concepts and symbols, e.g., Pedro as Peter. I giggled, I agreed, questioned, pondered, and even argued with the author as I read it. I have rarely been so engaged by a piece. Indeed, can it be an accident that Mexicans and African Americans are moving into Utah and Idaho? Any good theology engages the participants, enticing them to stretch and grow. Ms. Cherniak is profound and proficient, with a delightful, humorous style, too.

I am impressed with the overall quality and broad scope of *Dialogue*, but in all honesty, "*Napoleon Dynamite*" is a dynamite piece. Bravo! Keep it up.

Chaplain Monica Cichon, B.S.M.T.  
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### *Napoleon Is Dynamite*

I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed the most recent issue. The "Mormon Europeans" piece was smart and insightful (Walter E. A. van Beek, "Mormon Europeans or European Mormons? An 'Afro-European' View on Religious Colonization" 38, no. 4

[Winter 2005] 3–36) and the critique of the Alma 36 chiasmus is an important (if controversial) corrective (Earl M. Wunderli, “Critique of Alma 36 as an Extended Chiasmus,” 38, no. 4 [Winter 2005]: 97–112). My favorite article, though, has to be the Cetti Cherniak essay: “*Napoleon Dynamite*, Priesthood Skills, and the Eschatology of the Non-Rational: A Nonwarranted Physiotheologic Analysis,” 38, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 129–40.

I didn’t understand about half of it, but I didn’t mind, because the half I did understand alternated between being brilliant and hilarious. That’s the kind of thing you simply won’t read anywhere but in *Dialogue*. It is an absolute gem. I wonder if you could provide more information about the author, who seems to be a fascinating person.

Patrick Mason  
South Bend, Indiana

*Note: Cetti Cherniak is a wife, mother, and grandmother, a certified auto mechanic, electronics and optical lab technician, herbalist, Vipassana meditation practitioner, and fiction writer. She has a B.A. in Slavic languages and literatures from Indiana University and pursues graduate studies in systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame with an emphasis in aesthetics.*

### *Mormons for Reincarnation*

In Kent Condie’s article, “Pre-Mortal Spirits: Implications for Cloning, Abortion, Evolution, and Extinction,” 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 35–56, he quoted Brigham Young on the topic. I looked up the full quotation, which reads: “President Young said when some people have little children born at

6 & 7 months pregnancy & they live but a few hours then die they bless them, name them etc[.] but I don’t do it for I think that such a spirit has not [had] a fair chance FOR I THINK THAT SUCH A SPIRIT WILL HAVE A CHANCE OF OCCUPYING ANOTHER TABERNACLE AND DEVELOP ITSELF. THIS IS NEW DOCTRIN [SIC] YET IT LOOKS CONSISTENT” (Brigham Young, quoted in Wilford Woodruff, in *Waiting for World’s End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff*, edited by Susan Staker, on Infobase Library, CD-ROM [Orem, Utah: Infobase, 1998]; emphasis in original).

Brigham Young opened a door wide enough to drive Hinduism into Mormonism. I have often thought that reincarnation would solve all the problems which Condie alluded to. If we have only one life, there would seem to be too much arbitrariness and too many injustices in assignments, gifts, and chances. If we have as many lives as needed to get it right, then one bad one, or a natural or intentional abortion, or other unfortunate event will not affect the ultimate outcome of the course of our eventual karma.

I have collected substantial heat for this suggestion, but here is Brigham affirming my supposition. Brigham said that he thought people needed a “fair chance.” Now, his idea of a fair chance was something longer than a few hours. My idea of a fair chance is a whole lifetime or many lifetimes—time enough to get it right, as many times as it takes to progress onward to some nirvana like the celestial kingdom.

I have often thought that it would

be perfect symmetry if we, who helped in the creation of this world, were the spirits who matured as the world matured through all these long, long years.

The problems of the last judgment and reward of heaven or hell after only one life are pointed out in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. I was absolutely shaken by the vision of this cruel god who would damn souls for eternity for poor judgment or even true love. It is like dying for not seeing a stop sign, only this death is eternal. We Mormons are somewhat more forgiving than Dante's Catholicism, but not much.

Therefore I vote for reincarnation along with Brigham Young.

Bob Wrathall  
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#### More on Premortal Spirits

*Editor's note:* This letter was initially posted at *Dialogue Paperless, Letters* (Spring 2006), <http://www.dialoguejournal.com/> and is printed here with the author's permission.

Kent C. Condie's article on premortal spirits ("Premortal Spirits: Implications for Cloning, Abortion, Evolution, and Extinction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, No. 1, [Spring 2006]: 35-56) centers on a problem concerning the relationship between our physical bodies and our premortal spirit bodies. Traditionally, Mormonism has argued that these two bodies look alike. However, our physical bodies are largely a result of the particular parents we have and the genes they pass on to us. How can these two ideas both be true? One possible explanation is that

the entire genetic history of the earth was predetermined, but this is unworkable in the context of Mormon theology, so Condie rightly rejects it. Instead, he offers two possible explanations which I paraphrase as follows:

1. God does not create spirit bodies until conception, when the genetic make-up of the physical body is known.

2. God creates generic spirits that are not predestined for a specific physical body.

The first possible solution strikes me as untenable for the following reason: Although our physical bodies are *largely* a result of our genes, they are not *fully* determined by our genes. Thus, even if God waits until the moment of conception (or thereabouts) to create our spirit bodies, he still does not have enough information to know what our physical bodies will look like. For example, the appearance of our physical bodies can be greatly influenced by poor nutrition, by disease, or by disfiguring accidents.

This means that even if God does wait until conception to create a spirit body, Mormon theology will still have to account for differences between the appearance of that spirit body and the physical body it inhabits. That is, we will still need explanation 2 or something like it.

As a defense of explanation 1 against this criticism, one might be tempted to argue that the spirit bodies God creates are not "supposed to" match our physical bodies with respect to disfiguring injuries. For example, if a person loses a limb in a farming accident, no one expects that this amputa-

tion will affect the person's spirit body. On the contrary, we take comfort in the fact that this limb will be restored in the resurrection, and we assume that the spirit body has the limb throughout. This argument, taken to its logical conclusion, seems to suggest that our spirit bodies do not match our physical bodies as they are in mortality but rather our physical bodies as they are in the resurrection when they are restored to their "perfect frame."

While this may seem like a good way to account for differences between spirit and body due to a lost limb, it doesn't really solve the original problem. Lost limbs are straightforward differences, but what are we to say about the effects of nutrition on our height and features? Do we sweep these under the rug in a similar way by assuming our resurrected bodies look as we would have had we been properly nourished? The problem with this approach is that it treats all the differences in appearance due to accidents of life as unimportant, while treating differences due to the accident of our genetic make-up as all-important.

It seems to me that our theology will have to account for differences in appearance between our spirit bodies and our physical bodies. If explanations 1 and 2 are the only possibilities we can think of, we should start getting comfortable with 2.

Stephanie Corey  
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#### *British Non-Mormon Writes*

*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from a letter sent to the business office with*

*a subscription request. We thought Mr. Baker's perspective would be of interest as it refers to the international church.*

I guess everyone has a different story to tell, so as a non-Mormon I'll try and explain how I first made my acquaintance with Mormons. Many years ago when I was attending a Catholic school operated at the time by the Jesuits in the city of Leeds, which is in Yorkshire, a group of us students, all about sixteen years old, used to walk to the town hall at lunch time to listen to open air speakers. Catholics were one group that regularly spoke, another day it might be the British Communist Party, another day those against vivisection, and on another day, some American Mormon missionaries. It was very interesting for a group of impressionable youths to listen to such diverse views and to heckle the speakers occasionally.

The Mormons made a good impression, though to my recollection none of us were really convinced. The things they had in their favour were that they were American, their accents were different, they looked good, they were friendly, and we liked them as individuals. Their leader was called Calvin Smoot, which sounded very exotic in industrial Yorkshire. Besides this was the novelty value that they were the first Americans we had met and they spoke with fluency and confidence. (We were all at the tongue-tied stage.) Furthermore, they had this strange message about the international migration of a group of Jews to America. It was all new to us. The Jesuits we asked about the missionaries explained what they perceived as the

weaknesses in Mormon views (e.g., the Asian origin of Native Americans, anachronisms in the Book of Mormon, etc.) but they didn't try to dissuade us from going to listen to them.

After leaving university, I became a geography teacher, which may also help account for my interest in the history, geographical distribution, and culture of the Mormons as a people. I then worked, until I retired last year, for the British Ministry of Defence, finishing as a consultant (not as grand a position as it sounds). During my twenty-five years with the Ministry of Defence, I never met a single British Mormon, which perhaps illustrates that they occupy a rather peripheral role in Britain.

There are, I believe, officially around 180,000 British Mormons, with perhaps 30,000–50,000 active members (i.e., less than 0.1 per cent of the population). The claimed number of adherents seems to have been static for some time; and the impression I have is that, to use management terminology, there is a large input in terms of personnel and capital simply to retain market share. In Reading, where I live and which has a population of approximately 148,000, I have been told that the weekly attendance figure at the local LDS meetinghouse is around 120.

Keith Baker  
Reading, Berkshire, England

#### *Our Pardon for Christ's Sake*

Jacob Morgan's article, "The Divine Infusion Theory: Rethinking the Atonement," 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 57–81, is an ingenious, though finally unconvincing, synthesis of the much sought

after "mechanism" of the atonement. As Morgan himself admits, "It [infusion] does not answer the question of why Christ's suffering was necessary" (76–77).

The penal substitution theory discussed by Morgan fails in positing the suffering and death of Christ as his vicarious payment of the penalty due to us for our transgressions. Again, according to Morgan: "If justice was fully satisfied by Christ it seems that everyone should be forgiven of their sins automatically" (61).

Morgan's atonement theory does not explain the necessity for the sacrifice of the Redeemer. Still, he asks the right question. "The more difficult problem is explaining why his [Christ's] suffering should allow us to be pardoned" (60). Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus himself would just plainly and directly answer that one question? I believe he already has:

Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is *pleading your cause* before him—

Saying: Father, *behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin . . . whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified.*

Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life. (D&C 45:3–5; emphasis mine.)

Jesus here presents the one and only, absolutely irrefutable "wrongful death suit" in that the injustices Christ suffered for his Father's sake justify the Father in forgiving us for Christ's sake. Paul appears to have understood this: "And be ye kind . . . for-

giving one another, even as God *for Christ's sake* hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32; emphasis mine).

By right of his perfect obedience and innocence, Christ has the one and only undeniable right to perfect justice: "For do ye suppose that ye can get rid of *the justice of an offended God*, who hath been trampled under feet of men that thereby salvation might come?" (3 Ne. 28:35; emphasis mine).

As God the Father considers the lawful penalty due to fallen man and the counteracting request for the forgiveness of men as recompense to His violated, innocent Son, His only option is to appease the greater of the two injustices while minimizing the loss to the lesser one. The Father must spare the brethren (and, of course, the sisters) of Christ as he has requested, but only on condition of our remorse for our sins and acknowledgement of His Son as our only savior. "Behold, he [Christ] offereth himself a sacrifice for sin . . . unto all those who have a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered" (2 Ne. 2:7; emphasis mine).

Of his suffering in Gethsemane, Christ said, "I partook and *finished my preparations* unto the children of men" (D&C 19:19; emphasis mine). Gethsemane was a finishing "preparation" for the atonement, but it was not *the* atonement. Only from the cross did Christ proclaim: "It is finished" (John 19:30). Gethsemane gives him empathy and judgment in bearing in his own person the pain-filled confession of our sins. Golgotha gains him the recompense of our captive souls by his wrongful death: "Thou hast led captivity captive" (Ps. 68:18).

Morgan asks rhetorically: "If Christ volunteered, where is the injustice?" (60) I reject the concept that, because Christ "volunteered" for his earthly sojourn and mission (so did we all), then all violence against him is justified as if, in essence, "he asked for it." Those who do evil against him and all the rest of us "volunteers" are still violators, and the innocent victims of these violations must still be recompensed—he, most of all. If Christ's voluntary status as the sacrificial lamb justifies any injustice against him, then again how can the scripture say: "For do ye suppose that ye can get rid of *the justice of an offended God*, who hath been trampled under feet of men that *thereby salvation might come*?" (3 Ne. 28:35; emphasis mine).

The innocent, just, and beloved Son of God, in perfect obedience to his Father's will, suffered infinite injustice at the hands of devils and men, that he may justly claim of the Father his right to an infinite recompense of the countermanding of every demand of justice against every repentant soul who loves him.

I think that the atonement as the recompense of our lives given to Christ for his wrongful death is so simple that even a little child can understand. Remember: "By very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls" (Alma 37:7).

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