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READERS' FORUM

A PAROCHIAL PARODY

I FOUND Hand Carré's "Directing the Shine of the Light" (SUNSTONE 13:6) to be both enlightening and thoroughly enjoyable. But I did notice one conspicuous omission, the Roman Catholic Church's advertisement recruiting candidates to the priesthood. It features Father Guido Sarducci and the headline, "Eat Free At Italian Restaurants." This is the only religious advertising I am aware of that intentionally parodies itself.

J. FREDERIC VOROS, JR.
Salt Lake City

ONCE MORE INTO THE BREACH

I AM SORRY to see that Mark Thomas feels the need to defend himself on my account (SUNSTONE 13:6). But my sorrow is even greater when I see that his idea of defending himself includes pejorative and contemptuous insults. I do not mind a little intellectual sparring, but this feels more like a street fight.

Actually Thomas and I are too close in thinking to ever be true opponents. For underneath the flurry of blows and counterblows lies a fundamental agreement. Indeed, it almost looked like a real fight until I read Thomas's last sentence in which he concluded that both Mormonism and "conservative Arminianism" were "mediation[s] between liberal Arminianism (with its optimistic view of human nature)." I have no gripe with that statement.

I said nearly the same thing in my book *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism*, though a little less precisely and confidently as Thomas. After describing the Book of Mormon as essentially Arminian in theology, I added this cautionary paragraph (the paragraph that initiated this discussion): "Still, as Marvin Hill has pointed out, there are 'remnants' of Calvinism both in the Book of Mormon and in early Mormon doctrine. For example, the Book of Mormon states that 'the natural man is an enemy to God' (Mosiah 3:19) and that 'because of the fall our natures have become evil continually' (Ether 3:2). Yet

such 'remnants' were characteristic of other contemporary Arminian groups as demonstrated by the rhetoric of the revivalists. Early Mormon convert Eli Gilbert placed Mormonism somewhere between 'mongrel Calvinism and crippled Arminianism.' Certainly early Mormons, like Seekers and other Primitivists, participated in the general rejection of Calvinism characteristic of the times" (71-72).

In this paragraph, I tried to avoid making a definite conclusion about the source of the Book of Mormon's concept of innate depravity: Was it there because of Calvinist influence? Because of revivalist of Arminian influence? Or a combination of both? Thus while I was certain that the concept was definitely Calvinistic, without a thorough investigation I could not decide whether it came to Mormonism via the Arminians or some other way. Besides, I was not trying to identify Mormon theology with any specific group besides the Seekers. Rather, I was supporting the thesis that Mormons and Seekers participated in the general swing of American religions away from Puritan Calvinism toward Arminian theology, and I was happy to establish that point. Furthermore, I see nothing wrong with my leaving the matter unresolved—it certainly did not deserve the narrow, presumptuous kind of criticism Thomas gave it.

Thomas, on the other hand, is sure that "the notion of depravity in the Book of Mormon is clearly not derived from Calvinism but rather conservative Arminianism." Further, Thomas believes the Book of Mormon is "completely Arminian" and "consistently opposes all forms of Calvinism." Underlying this assertion, however, is Thomas's assumption that Joseph Smith adopted wholesale conservative Arminianism, which included the idea of innate depravity. This is a lot to swallow in one bite, but Thomas may very well be correct. Indeed, after reviewing Thomas's most recent arguments, I believe he has grounds for maintaining his position, at least in the area of soteriology.

Thomas may have even clarified some of my own suspicions. If Thomas is correct that both the Book of Mormon and conservative Arminians were mediating between liberal Arminianism (particularly Unitarian/Universalist versions) and Calvinism, then Joseph

Smith may have adopted conservative Arminian theology in order to mediate between the Universalism of his father and the Presbyterianism of his mother, a point I tried to make in my book (25-41, 67-77, 171-72, 215-16). Further, this may have been the reason for Joseph Smith's early attraction to Methodism.

Since the study of Mormonism is an ongoing investigation, all interpretations are subject to modification and refinement, including mine. Certainly I would have made use of Thomas's theories had they been available to me. I would therefore like to counter Thomas's challenge by issuing one of my own: I challenge Mark Thomas to write his ideas down in greater detail. I also challenge SUNSTONE to publish Thomas's paper so that all can benefit from his research.

DAN VOGEL
Westminster, CA

SPIRITING THE INTELLECT

MEDIOCRITY IN THE Church is a matter I have long pondered, particularly regarding the quality of Church instruction. It was therefore with much interest that I read David

Bailey's "Mediocrity, Materialism, and Mormonism" (SUNSTONE 13:3). Having served in the Sunday School program for a number of years, I agree with Bailey's observations that the lesson manuals are "filled with simplistic, mind-numbing lessons." But asking the LDS curriculum department for advanced supplementary material, as Bailey suggests, would do little to alleviate the problem.

First, there is a mechanical problem with the block system that contributes to the quality of instruction. Often it is the amount of class time alone that determines the quality of the lesson, no matter how good the teacher may be. Thirty to forty minutes on a good day, even less if the opening exercises run over, leave the teacher with little opportunity to do more than to summarize the lesson plan, much less to develop a good discussion.

Even if class time could be expanded to give teachers an adequate amount of time to teach the gospel with greater depth, the predominant attitudes in Mormonism toward education stands as an even greater obstacle. With education weeks, seminaries, institutes of religion, priesthood meetings, Sunday School, and Relief Society, Mormons enjoy the appearance of an education-minded people. But in reality, most of these programs provide little more than entertainment because they

do not require outside work or demand intellectual rigor from their participants. Likewise, gospel instructors are expected to be reasonably prepared, knowledgeable, articulate, and motivated, but the people who attend their classes usually do not expect the same kind of effort from themselves, seldom remembering what was discussed in the previous lesson or giving a thought to the next reading assignment.

The attitudes that many in the Church have toward learning is due, in part, to the kind of knowledge that Mormons choose to emphasize: emotional intuition is more valued than the intellect. For example, missionaries are discouraged from intellectualizing the gospel. Rather than presenting a rational treatise on the philosophy of Mormonism, or engaging in a scholarly exchange of theological principles with investigators, missionaries are taught to give an overly simplified presentation of basic Church doctrine, interspersing their visit with prayer and emotional testimonies that what they are saying is true. The investigator is likewise encouraged to repeat the process by reflecting on the presentation of the testimonies, reading simplified pamphlets and emotionally stirring passages from the Book of Mormon, and praying. Missionaries will often conclude, furthermore,



that the spirit was present during their lesson when an emotional moment was shared with their investigators. Thus, the missionary process appeals to those who are inclined toward subjective reasoning and emotionalism. After the conversion, the same emphasis on subjective reasoning is reinforced by the way many members approach learning and knowledge. While Mormons believe that the glory of God is intelligence, many seem to be uncomfortable with the kind of education that emphasizes the intellect.

What we need to improve the quality of teaching in the Church is personal innovation and initiative from the members and the leaders. Rather than sitting through boring lessons, why not volunteer to teach? Much of my teaching experience in the Church has come about because I walked up to whoever was in charge and asked for the calling. Local leaders need to find teachers who will challenge spiritual complacency, encourage exploration, and teach with daring, rather than relying upon trusted and faithful souls to drone in front of a class for half an hour. As a Sunday School president, I have often found such people on the margins of the ward. I called one woman to teach Sunday School, for example, who had probably violated every commandment there was, and only attended church because her daughter wanted to be with her young friends. Another man was a recovering drug abuser. Were Jesus Christ's disciples any less marginal or any less controversial? Given the proper care and guidance, teaching the gospel has just as much power to change lives as hearing it.

Whoever accepts the challenge to teach, however, must learn to walk with greater faith and exercise greater initiative if he or she is to be effective. Throughout my years as Sunday School president, inservice instructor, and teacher development teacher, I have advocated a method of preparation and teaching that has often been viewed as quasi-heretical: relying on the spirit for direction while using the scriptures for support. The hardest thing to get people to understand is that lesson manuals are like crutches; they are to be used while the teacher learns to trust his or her own legs. A central planning committee in Salt Lake cannot foresee the needs of a particular class in a particular time. It is up to the teacher to prayerfully assess the spiritual and intellectual needs of his or her class and to meet them with the aid of the scriptures. I don't believe that lesson manuals would be needed—other than for finding out what pages should be read that week—if the gospel was studied and taught as it should be.

Jesus Christ was the ultimate model of how one should teach; note that in JST Matthew 3:25, his peers did not say to him, "Wow, what a great lesson manual he taught from." They marveled, instead, that "he spake not as other men."

EUARDO PAGAN
Princeton, N.J.

THE BUDGET BALANCE

I CELEBRATE Elbert Peck's communal commentary springboarding off the new ward budget policy ("Equality and the Diversity of Gifts," *SUNSTONE* 13:6), and, personally, I am happy to have my Church donations consolidated and reduced. However, we should also note the down side of the new arrangement.

This new policy of having a ward's budget funded from Church headquarters increases the centralization of control and decreases the autonomous nature of the ward and bishop. Specifically, stake presidents now oversee ward finances in minute ways they never did before. And with the bishop's annual budget now being approved by the stake president, the bishop's allegiances and loyalties are

unavoidably turned from the congregation to the stake president. I wonder whether bishops will now present the ward budget to the priesthood for a vote as many did previously. Will we, too, lose this tiny bit of democratic participation and openness? There is something very healthy about the bishop having to maintain a good rapport with his members in order to raise the funds necessary to support the ward's activities. I am afraid that this change has the potential to diminish the community Elbert Peck desires to enhance.

GEOFFREY ARTHUR JONES
Salt Lake City

R-RATED FICTION

WE NEED TO talk about your claim on the table of contents page: "SUNSTONE—Mormon Experience, Scholarship, Issues, and Art." That statement is hardly accurate in view of the quality of the fiction and poetry I find in the magazine, and if you understand what I'm about to say you will surely see the need to remove your reference to Mormonism.

I learned decades ago that there is a covert, extra dimension of subliminal manipulation



"Okay, now break into small groups and brainstorm ten ways to sincerely home teach. Then we'll reassemble and share the ideas."

inherent in fiction that does not lend itself to straight forward honesty, and which has great potential for mischief. Also, while I've always seemed to understand words and meanings fairly well, I have found little enthusiasm for the mental gymnastics of unraveling the cryptic ravels that many so-called poets and their admirers seem to imagine to be poetry. So, just recently I casually checked to see why you would spend so much space on poetry and fiction.

But even the disarming mask of "entertainment," per se, is not directly my disenchantment. Rather, it is in the X- or R-rated, "soap-opera" license you seem to think is somehow acceptable—even appropriate—as long as it is disguised as fiction or poetry and entertainment. Do you think us as too dense to see that the emperor doesn't have the clothes on you want us to think he does?

Take, for instance, Loretta Randall Sharp's poem "Breathings" (SUNSTONE 13:3). We do not use, need, or accept her kind of degraded language in my home. My children never heard it here nor used it here. I never heard gutter language like that in the home I was brought up in, and it was never so callously normal in my extended family. By definition, real Mormons don't talk like that.

Sharp's poem "Watching 12N" (SUNSTONE 13:4) is obsessed with sensuality. What is there of Mormon-level entertainment (not to mention that subliminal dimension of doctrinal manipulation in fiction and poetry) in picturing a yellow nightgown, a skin-like garment stretching against Beth's breathing? Or Willene's unzipped skirt, buttoning of a blouse, and the need to strip off all her clothes?

Check Lewis Horne's short story "Mona's Family" (SUNSTONE 13:3). A crude "mystery" story—jumbled, coarse, and vulgar language, starting nowhere, going nowhere. Totally non-Mormon in context, it is just a forum for Lewis Horne to spill his decay on anyone unfortunate enough to read it, and an attempt to pull Mormonism down to the level of moral values he is legitimizing through you.

And you let him. You let him smear your pages with profanity and pornography—some even a little sick. Did he mesmerize you until it didn't seem like pornography? Is that desensitization the reason why this garbage won second place in the 1988 Brookie and D.K. Brown Contest? You need a *real* Mormon to evaluate Mormon submissions. This stuff does not remotely qualify as anything connected with Mormon values.

Then there is Michael Fillerup's story "A Game of Inches" (SUNSTONE 12:5), yet another

contest "winner." This is not quite as disgusting as his story published in the same time period in another publication claiming to represent "Mormon Thought," but it still reeks with shallow, un-Mormon crudeness. We see in it a headlong rush of fast-paced, static-like episodes accorded into frenzy—but bland and negative, with considerable rude prejudice. It is mostly material description—very little emotion—no emotional highs and lows. Even his report of being happy is just cold wordage. Nothing backs it up. But aside from a picture of a strange being that I cannot recognize, and whatever must have tickled profane ears, that level of language doesn't belong in a magazine claiming positive connection to Mormonism.

Take Robert Frederick Lauer's "award winning" play "Digger" (SUNSTONE 12:6). BYU contest winner or not, how does Lauer know that Joseph Smith swore like that? Or that he was a drinker? Lauer paints Joseph Smith as a sly manipulator, or a sorcerer or magician—maybe a nice, benign one—as well as borderline vulgar and rude. Maybe a liar, too. He clothes Joseph in an aura of spells and magic: hearing voices at night, perhaps like Joan of Arc. Lauer seems purposely to attempt to make Mormonism's founding revelations just wishful fantasy or witchcraft. But maybe, more simply, Lauer is the sly one, and he just found a naive audience whom he could convince he had his new clothes on. Why would you print this play without at least an appropriate critique, like you do in your symposiums? I didn't hear crudity at your last symposium. Do you imagine that fiction is somehow any less a declaration of philosophical belief or any less a crafty missionary tool? You seem to have been netted whole by that subliminal, covert manipulation that is fiction's special danger.

One other thing. Your choices of fiction and poetry seem to have been solely for their purely artistic structure—as if content were irrelevant. Art is validated as it rings the bells of the human soul, but you are saying that it doesn't matter what bells are rung, that the talent to ring bells is greater than content.

Genius is not an icon of human value. Satan is a genius. Talent, per se, is irrelevant to righteousness. Our icon is goodness. I cannot see any redeeming excuse for why you ignore Mormon moral boundaries.

Is trash, like in these examples, the broader voice you want heard in Sunday School, or over the pulpit? Does boredom with the kindergarten simplicity you find in regular gospel discussion in Church come from the desire to freely curse and blaspheme and bask

in sensuality and pornography? Are you trying to lower gospel sights to justify searching for the Holy Ghost in, say, "R" or "X" or even most "PG" rated life-styles? What do you imagine a real Mormon can say in public (or mostly even in private) that could not be said in Church?

I don't know—maybe you all swear and curse and tell crude jokes and use profanity and all the four-letter words at Sunstone. Maybe worldly-wisdom has desensitized you to the purpose for which that communication was invented and should be used. Maybe that is the "freedom" you want in the Church—to talk in the language you are used to—to desensitize us all to such expletives and the moral landscape they represent. Maybe you entertain that tunnel-vision hoax that free speech means a person has the right to say anything anywhere—ignoring the superseding rights of "victims" to not have to hear it. If not I suggest you recognize the problem and decide whether you want to dine at the restaurant or at the landfill. The very real option is to remove all references to valid Mormonism from your claims and further pursuit.

RAEO PASSEY
Midvale, UT

Editor's reply:

SUNSTONE is not Hyde Park—an unscreened forum. The job of an editor is to select based upon established standards. SUNSTONE'S poetry and fiction are selected by individuals regarded as expert in the Mormon literary field.

Among other things, art can be prescriptive or descriptive; a utopian vision or a horrifying honest mirror. We need both. We cannot establish Zion on false assumptions of our human condition. Let's face it, some Mormons swear and others think and do worse things. I am not inclined to put blinders on those who, in part, serve as the eyes of our societal body; but neither am I desirous to make them the head.

SUNSTONE ENCOURAGES CORRESPONDENCE. LETTERS FOR PUBLICATION SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO "READERS FORUM." WE EDIT FOR SPACE, CLARITY, AND TONE. LETTERS ADDRESSED TO AUTHORS WILL BE FORWARDED TO THEM. ☒