



BY COMMON CONSENT



VOLUME 8, NO. 2

MARCH 2002

APRIL CONFERENCE CRITIQUE

So the Olympics are history—nearly all of it good for Salt Lake City and the Church, Mitt Romney* is roaring down the gubernatorial campaign road in Massachusetts, Sheri Dew just became the first woman CEO of a Church corporation, Rob Foster became the first African American elected as BYU's studentbody president, and it's turnover time for the Relief Society general presidency. So what will April conference bring?

The semi-annual conference critique will explore trends and topics that emerge from April conference on Monday, April 8, 2002, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the main library downtown (209 E. 500 South). We will be gathering in the study room just east of the second floor meeting room—the usual site. Janice Allred will lead this freewheeling and insightful exchange.

The best parking is still on the south and east sides of the block and across the street on the City-County Building block. We apologize about the tight parking. We investigated switching to another library until the construction is completed on the library block, but all of them have a children's story hour on Monday evening, and the main library is one of the few with more than one meeting room. So, in the interests of following up promptly on conference while the talks are still fresh in everybody's mind, we decided to grit our teeth and come a few minutes early to deal with the parking.

*Although incumbent Jane Swift exited from the race, she did it on a good quip: "Romney wasn't sure he was going to run for governor because of the Massachusetts drought: 'His handlers were concerned that there wouldn't be enough

water for him to walk on.'" (Ellen Goodman, "Gangway! 'White Knight' Romney Is Back," *Deseret News*, 22 March 2002, A-13.)

JANUARY MEETING

WEBS OF SIGNIFICANCE

How do Mormon women understand their experience in LDS religious culture? This was the question explored at the winter quarterly meeting of the Mormon Alliance in a discussion led by Becky Johns, Ph.D., a specialist in rhetoric and an assistant professor at Weber State University, with the assistance of one of her students, Gracia Reomer.

They had just completed a first-ever course called "Women and the LDS Church," team-taught with Sandra Powell, director of the Women's Studies program at Weber State, and were reporting on perceptions and experiences that emerged during the course. They took as their motto a statement by Clifford Geertz, "Human beings are animals suspended in webs of significance they themselves have spun" (recast for gender-inclusiveness).

First, and probably most important, women are famished for opportunities to explore their experiences because there are so few safe places for reflection in the culture. "We were surprised at the range of questions that women brought to class," commented Becky. "Theology, doctrine, history, policies and procedures—you name it. Many of them lay outside the scope of the class, and we often couldn't even come close to answering them. But over and over, they said things like, 'I've had this question for years and I've never been able to talk about it.' Or 'I've never told anybody I feel this

way—not my mother, my sister, my husband, my best friend. . . .”

Second—and this observation “is really the flip side of the first”—is “how unsafe LDS women feel in talking honestly. There’s a sense of danger, of risk—that asking questions or thinking through a problem systematically is hazardous, whether that means a sense of spiritual risk or the possibility of social disapproval.” Becky reported that some potential students shied away from the course title and that a few students did, in fact, stop coming. “Part of it may have been that the readings and course requirements were quite rigorous,” she acknowledged, “but I think that some people who were genuinely interested in the topic were also genuinely nervous about it.”

Becky was quite startled, when she brought up the topic in her department (the course was cross-listed in communications and women’s studies) to find fellow faculty members expressing anxiety about her safety. “Are you going to get excommunicated for teaching this class?” one colleague asked her bluntly. It was just another reminder of how fraught with tension the topic of women’s issues has become in the Church.

The third observation drawn from the class was the genuine respect and careful listening that the women extended to each other. “Creating a safe zone was one of our goals for the class, and that meant respecting and working to understand very divergent positions,” Becky pointed out. The class was small and membership was fairly fluid; “students started bringing their friends, or someone would hear that we were going to discuss a certain topic and ask to attend.” The students attending represented a wide range of diversity—from a recently temple-married woman pregnant with twins to current but marginalized Mormons, to former Mormons, and to women of other faiths who were curious to find out more about Mormon women’s lives. Gracia, who is also part-time staff at the Women’s Studies Center, has belonged to or attended several churches and frequently brought a multi-religious dimension to the discussions.

Having an academic vocabulary with which to discuss issues of faith and doctrine

also had the unexpected benefit of providing a “common language” that was not associated with either a requirement to defend the faith or to proselytize.

Questions from the audience also drew the discussion into the broader topic of women’s studies in general—the perennial topic of why women “need” classes on women’s issues when there aren’t classes on men’s issues (and how such an attitude points up the “general obliviousness” of the privileged vs. the marginalized) and the difficulty of finding academically rigorous ways of dealing with topics that are frequently dismissed as “soft” or “gossipy.”

Will the class be taught again? At this point it depends on registration which, despite the large number of “walk-ins,” hovered perilously close to the cut-off line. “Some people might interpret the enrollment statistics as the topic’s lack of relevance,” observed Becky. “I think what it really shows is the level of anxiety associated with this topic and, therefore, the acute need for it.”

Before starting the class, Becky checked with Brigham Young University, Utah Valley State College, and the University of Utah about similar classes on this topic. No other school is currently offering such a course, although Vella Neil Evans at the University of Utah taught “Women in Mormon Culture” on LDS women’s discourse and issues during the 1990s, assisted by Maxine Hanks.

Becky distributed copies of the reading list that she and Sandra organized for the class, which also generated lively questions from participants in the evening’s discussion.

READING LIST

Introduction

Lynn Matthews Anderson and Molly Bennion “Mormon Women in the Twenty-First Century,” Sunstone Symposium, August 2001, audiocassette

The Experiences/Voices of Mormon Women

Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet’s Wife, “Elect Lady,” Polygamy’s Foe* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), xi-xii, 296-309.

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “The Eliza Enigma: The Life and Legend of Eliza R. Snow,” in Vicky Burgess-Olson, ed., *Sister Saints* (Salt Lake City: Burgess-Olson, 1974), 1-20.

“Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts,” Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Mormonism: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books,

- 1992), 69-150.
- Jean Bickmore White, "Dr. Martha Hughes Cannon: Doctor, Wife, Legislator, Exile," in Burgess-Olson, *Sister Saints*, 383-98.
- Newell G. Bringham, "Fawn McKay Brodie: Dissident Historian and Quintessential Critic of Mormondom," in Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher, eds., *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 279-300.
- Alice Allred Pottmyer, "Sonia Johnson: Mormonism's Feminist Heretic," in Launius and Thatcher, *Differing Visions*, 366-90.
- Sonia Johnson, "The Great Divorce," in her *Wildfire: Igniting the She/Volution* (Albuquerque: Wildfire, 1989), 59-78.
- Linda Sillitoe, "He Called Us Mormon Nuns," *Windows On the Sea and Other Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 65-78.
- Carol Lynn Pearson, "Mother Wove the Morning," Videotape. Carol Lynn Pearson, "A Walk in the Pink Moccasins," Mormon Women's Forum Presentation, January 1989.
- "Anonymous Voices," in Lavina Fielding Anderson and Janice Merrill Allred, eds., *Case Reports of the Mormon Alliance*, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Mormon Alliance, 1995), 8-16.

Roles and Images of Mormon Women

- Marie Cornwall, "The Institutional Role of Mormon Women," in Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young, eds., *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 239-64.
- "Epilogue: 'The Same God . . . Worketh All in All,'" in Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, eds., *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 421-34.
- Margaret Toscano and Paul Toscano, "Beyond Matriarchy, Beyond Patriarchy," *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 71-97.
- Lawrence Foster, "Polygamy and the Frontier: Mormon Women in Early Utah," *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse Press, 1991), 182-201.
- Marybeth Raynes, "Mormon Marriages in an American Context," in Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 227-48.
- Jessie L. Embry, "Participant Evaluation of Polygamy," in her *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 187-94.
- Mary Batchelor, Marianne Watson, and Anne Wilde, eds., *Voices in Harmony: Contemporary Women Celebrate Plural Marriages* (Salt Lake City: Principle Voices, 2000).
- Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, "Birthing," in Mary L. Bradford, ed., *Personal Voices: A Celebration of Dialogue* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 139-48.
- Linda P. Wilcox, "Mormon Motherhood: Official Images," in Beecher and Anderson, eds., *Sisters in Spirit*, 208-26.

Doctrinal Issues and Mormon Women

- Jolene Edmunds Rockwood, "The Redemption of Eve," in

- Beecher and Anderson, *Sisters in Spirit*, 3-36.
- Linda P. Wilcox, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," in Hanks, *Women and Mormonism*, 3-22.
- Janice Allred, "Jesus Our Mother," and "Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother," in her *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 20-68.
- Sonja Farnsworth, "Mormonism's Odd Couple: The Priesthood-Motherhood Connection," in Hanks, *Women and Mormonism*, 299-314.
- D. Michael Quinn, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843," in Hanks, *Women and Mormonism*, 365-410.
- Margaret Toscano and Paul Toscano, "Women, Ordination, and Hierarchy," in their *Strangers in Paradox*, 209-20.
- Margaret Toscano and Paul Toscano, "Rending the Veil," *Strangers in Paradox*, 265-77.
- Becky Johns and Sheree Josephson, "Visual Images of Mormon Women in LDS Literature: A Case Study," paper presented at the National Communication Association Convention, November 1997. (On Mormon women and self-concept/empowerment)
- Vella Neil Evans, "Empowerment and Mormon Women's Publications," in Hanks, *Women and Mormonism*, 49-68.
- Mormon Women and Depression.
- Janice Allred, "Equality and Diversity," in her *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays*, 250-68.

LETTER

In Search of a "Safe Place"

I was most interested to read the announcement in the January issue of *By Common Consent* about the upcoming presentation on "Life Issues for LDS Women." Women aren't the only ones who need a "safe place to talk." I have issues I would like to discuss and none of my LDS friends is willing to discuss them. And it's not just finding the *place*—meaning where no prying eyes or ears can intrude. A lot of people have an internal censor that forbids them to speak even in a place that is safe. Even one-on-one, a lot of people are terrified to express anything except the orthodox line. So congratulations to Becky Johns for her class.

Whenever I seek to dialogue with fellow Mormons on difficult issues of doctrine or church practice, I get one of three stock responses: (1) A shrug of the shoulders and the words, "Gee, I don't know." And that's the end of their concern. (2) "Gee, I'm not a scriptorian." As if being a scripturalist ("scriptorian" is not a word) is necessary to understanding the plain and simple "peaceable things" of the gospel. All of us are supposed to be scripturalists, anyway. (3) "We shouldn't worry about the mysteries,"

with a tinge of fear or anger or hatred in the voice. Just because a question is difficult does not mean it's a "mystery." All of these responses are dodges. They avoid real engagement of the issues.

Some years ago I went into the little LDS bookstore run by the Honolulu Stake and asked the woman there if the store had a copy of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. She looked at me absolutely bewildered. She had never heard of it! I explained that it was sometimes called "the Inspired Version." She exhibited even greater confusion, and I could see fear come into her eyes. "We accept the King James Version," she replied defensively. I think she thought I was some kind of apostate troublemaker.

I cannot tell how representative she was, but I have seen that fear before and since. It is the fear of saying or doing or believing anything that is not pre-approved by SLC. I think this dear lady will not attend Becky Johns's class or read *By Common Consent*. And that's sad.

Robert J. Morris

<aikanealoha@hotmail.com>

CONCEPTS OF GOD

Lew W. Wallace

<lewxml@juno.com>

A careful and thorough study of the Old Testament reveals the painfully slow evolution of man's concept of deity from a local tribal war god (an irascible and vengeful micromanipulator of all events, who had to be constantly appeased and placated by sacrifice and whose earthly residence was the beautifully crafted ark, to a monotheist and universal God (Isaiah) of justice (Amos), mercy, and forgiveness (Hosea and Micah).

The next leap was the God of love and compassion described by Jesus. Then concepts of God stagnated until our day when Joseph Smith jerked theological concepts of deity forward a couple thousand years. In the short span between the Prophet Joseph's First Vision and his martyrdom, his concepts of deity evolved dramatically and were still changing at the time of his death. (He gave the King Follett discourse only two weeks before Carthage.) There has been some regression since then, as

Bible-believing converts and theologians have introduced more primitive concepts.

In my opinion, our concepts of deity must continue to develop as we progress. They must be in harmony with the laws of evolution, and with the findings of astronomy, physics, medicine, and psychiatry. The Newton's-apple theory of gravity has been replaced by complex black holes and subatomic particles. Our theology must accommodate this new understanding of tremendous time, distances, and power. The forces of the universe must be incorporated into our concepts (maybe God is the single force which unifies all four?) and then must be translated into our daily actions. It is going to be a difficult but fascinating and rewarding job—one that challenges our intellects and our spirits and that will last for eternity.

We will have the opposition of the established "true believers" who are sure that they have the perfect and final word. Ironically, although they profess continual revelation, they resist change with irrational stubbornness. We must often rely on personal experience and personal revelation, insist on using our cherished "agency"—inborn with identity, but all too often hedged about by other Mormon members and by some authorities.

Good luck and God bless, fellow travelers!

SO MANY QUESTIONS, SO FEW GOOD ANSWERS

Reed S. Roberts

There are dozens of questions that I would like to ask about Mormonism and about religion in general—but it is considered "inappropriate" to ask them at Church. Here are just a few:

1. Is the word *religion* neutral in meaning?
2. Which religious stories are factual and which ones are myths?
3. How many years was the Garden of Eden known as the Garden of Eden?
4. Were there human beings (*homo sapiens*) on the Earth before the advent of the Garden of Eden?
5. Were there live dinosaurs in the Garden of Eden before Adam arrived?
6. Were there blacks (Negroes) on the Earth before Cain appeared on the scene?
7. There are dozens of different tribe of

Indians in the western hemisphere. Which of these tribes are descendants of the Lamanites and which are not? How can a person tell a Lamanite Indian from a non-Lamanite Indian?

8. Will all of those who die and are resurrected receive salvation?

9. Is it possible for children under eighteen years of age to know which of the world's religions are true and which are not? Is it possible for adults to make the same determination?

10. Where is a documented list of all of the prophecies made by the Prophet Joseph Smith?

11. Should a church that abuses its women and children be allowed to call itself a Christian religion?

The questions could go on and on but where are the answers?

NEWS 'N' VIEWS

[Family Reporter: Official Newsletter of United Families International is an LDS NGO that lobbies the United Nations and other government entities for legislation in keeping with "The Family: A Proclamation to the World. This item appeared in Vol. 6, no. 1 (first quarter 2002): 6.]

California Passes Gay Rights Legislation

On the day after September 11th, while the world was looking elsewhere, the California Legislature passed AB 25 which confers 13 marital rights and benefits on homosexual "domestic partners." This happened in spite of the fact that last year, California voters approved Proposition 22, the Defense of Marriage Initiative, by 61 percent.

California Governor Gray Davis after signing the bill into law stated, "This bill is about responsibility, respect, and most of all about family--and it's about time." Several California senators have made it clear they will not stop until gay marriage is legalized in the state. The passage of AB 25 is the first step. UFI of Northern California has their [sic] work cut out for them.

"A Work of Fiction"

CALIFORNIA CATHOLICS LAUNCH "NATURAL MARRIAGE" INITIATIVE

Terry Redd

(San Diego.) Emboldened by the over-

whelming passage of Proposition 22 this week, Catholic leaders here have announced a new initiative they term the Defense of Natural Marriage Initiative. The measure would refuse legal recognition to any marriage in which either partner is an ordained priest.

Father Joseph Silvera of the San Diego Diocese announced, "While same-sex marriages are repugnant to our shared notion of the sacrament of marriage, other apparently benign social arrangements masquerading as marriage are even more insidious. Among these is any union in which one member is a priest." Such a marriage he termed "unnatural." "Priestly celibacy has been a cherished tenet of our culture for nearly twenty centuries," added the unmarried Silvera.

The text of the proposed initiative, based closely on Proposition 22, reads: "Only marriage between an unordained man and an unordained woman is valid or recognized in California."

Proponents of the Natural Marriage Initiative predict that the 2000 census will show a massive increase in the number of Latinos in California. They believe that a combination of Latinos--who are overwhelmingly Catholic--and non-Latino Catholics now form a majority of California voters.

Announcement of the Natural Marriage Initiative has raised concern among some members of the Mormon Church, which was instrumental in the passage of Proposition 22. Unique among Christian churches, the Mormon Church is operated by a "lay clergy" in which virtually all adult Mormon males are ordained priests and perform sacred rites and other ecclesiastical duties. The initiative would invalidate all marriages in which the husband is Mormon.

When asked about the application of the initiative to non-Catholics, Father Silvera cited Proposition 22 and stated that the application of any law is not limited to those who share the viewpoint of its proponents. "The reference to unordained women was included to make this crystal clear," stated Silvera. "Catholics obviously do not ordain women, but this would apply to women ordained in the Episcopal, Mormon, New Age or any other church."

Announcement of the initiative appeared to catch Mormon Church leaders off guard. Roger Bodily, a married Mormon priest and church spokesman, stated, "Obviously, we did not see this coming. It's a real revelation." According to Bodily, the Mormon Church "has consistently opposed any attempt by any church or group of churches to impose their private beliefs about marriage or anything else on those who do not share those beliefs."

Silvera responded that the initiative addressed "a moral issue on which we cannot remain silent and watch California go the way of Sodom and Gomorrah." Some Catholics seem to agree. Maria Nunez, a married Catholic, stated, "The thought of a priest having sex with another person, especially a woman, is, well, disgusting. It's an offense to God. Why should the State have all these laws that say this is okay when we all know it's unnatural?"

Bodily denied that Mormon marriages are "unnatural" and contended that his church discourages unnatural acts even between spouses. Bodily speculated that the initiative's effects could be sweeping, rendering children of Mormon parents illegitimate and permitting health care providers to deny coverage to the often sizable families of Mormon employees.

When asked about this possibility, Emmet Lonsdale of the Sacramento-based California Association of Insurance Executives anticipated that his group would actively support the initiative. "Our organization has always tried to come out strong for traditional morality," he stated. He insisted that the fact that members of

his association "could save millions if not billions in maternity benefits alone" would play no part in their decision whether to support the initiative.

Initiative backers deny that the measure would unfairly discriminate against Mormon men and other married priests. Silvera quoted from a leaflet distributed at a Mormon chapel in Poway, California, the previous Sunday. The leaflet stated that the legal rights of unmarried cohabitants are "fully protected by California's new Domestic Partnership Act and Hospital Visitation Act."

When asked whether initiative proponents were concerned about Mormon opposition, Father Silvera described California's 800,000 Mormons, most of whom are not of voting age, as "a blip here and a blip there. Besides," he noted, "we expect their opposition to be largely counterbalanced by the support of California's gay and lesbian community," many of whom were disheartened by energetic Mormon electioneering for Proposition 22. (Election officials estimate that although Mormons account for less than 10% of the population of the state, they posted 80% of pro-Proposition 22 yard signs.)

Robert Guildfoil, head of the San Francisco-based Gay and Lesbians for Equal Rights, confirmed Silvera's assessment, stating that he would expect gays and lesbians to flock to the polls "with their families" for a chance to turn the tables on their Mormon antagonists. "We love Mormons. They are good people," he said. "But for us, this is a moral issue."

MORMON ALLIANCE
1519 ROBERTA STREET
SALT LAKE CITY, UT 84115