



BY COMMON CONSENT



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IT'S CONFERENCE TIME

Once again, it's time for the faithful to gather--at the Conference Center, in front of their televisions, and at the Salt Lake Public Library for the semi-annual conference critique. Janice Allred will, as usual, moderate the discussion of trends, doctrinal innovations, and particular emphases in Conference Room A of the Library mall (reached by the elevator or the main staircase in the mall, not within the library proper). We will meet from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Everyone's opinions welcome--informed opinions get priority.

Here are some highlights from the April conference critique.

The health of a ninety-five-year-old Church president, particularly after cancer surgery and especially since he was on the schedule to speak Saturday morning (but didn't), started the discussion rolling at the semi-annual conference critique for April 2006. Spencer W. Kimball started the tradition during his presidency of giving an opening ("state of the Church") address, a major address during a general session and at priesthood meeting, and also giving a few closing remarks of exhortation and blessing. President Hinckley has followed this model without variation up until this conference when, in addition to not opening the conference, he conducted no sessions, and gave only a couple of minutes of obviously spontaneous closing remarks.

He appeared vigorous, waving his trademark cane as often as he leaned on it, and speaking articulately and energetically during his three remaining addresses. Although admitting to "residual" problems lingering from his January surgery, he specifically said that he was not giving an obituary and looked forward to addressing the October general conference.

The conference critique group spent considerable time discussing his "headliner" denunciation of

racism and racial hatred. Were his remarks prompted by the explosion of illegal immigrant activism currently in the news? Was it the recent complaints about racism at Timp High in Orem, Utah, about which faculty seemed quite lackadaisical? Was it triggered by the firing of Darron Smith, a black faculty member at BYU, for his persistent attention to continuing Mormon racism? Were the remarks even aimed at Darron as manifesting anti-white racism?

An attendee at the priesthood session, which is not publicly broadcast, said, "There was no context at all for President Hinckley's talk. He didn't say why he was talking about it, but he did mention being present for the 1978 revelation granting priesthood to worthy black men, which seemed to give it a black-and-white, rather than immigration, focus." This same participant also commented with a laugh that Hinckley's mention of the revelation was "typical"--no details about the experience itself, but "it happened, I was there, that settles it."

President Hinckley's second major topic at priesthood meeting was apparently a response to a letter from an overburdened wife whose husband had refused to get a job, leaving her to support him and the family. Hinckley vigorously denounced such male attitudes, although the context made it clear that he was talking about men who refused to

work, not those who were disabled or unable to find work. The group wondered how big a problem this was really, but it seemed relevant in terms of broader official Church concerns about gender roles.

A minor theme was President Hinckley's deploring of war and the destruction it causes but, as one participant observes, "He denounces the effects but doesn't address the root causes. He could exclude the doctrinal excuses that create scenarios of acceptability, but he doesn't"--not only about war but also about racism and gender roles.

Speaking in the general session Sunday morning, President Hinckley gave an uncharacteristically personal talk, which was received with sympathetic laughter and appreciation by the audience. His musings over his long-term and close association with other General Authorities "may have confused some listeners who didn't realize that he was hobnobbing with them because he'd been working for the Church since right after his mission. He was a counselor in a stake presidency, but even in the 1940s, stake presidencies didn't have that kind of access. He's had almost seventy years of experience at Church headquarters, which gives him a phenomenal institutional memory," pointed out one participant. "That's unique. Nobody before has ever had that kind of experience."

President Hinckley's mention of his medical condition was also unique. Past presidents have not discussed, however generally, their health. And even when they are unable to attend conference, whether speaking or not, the public explanation is that they are resting, by doctor's orders, and watching the sessions on TV.

Another participant mentioned the "between-sessions" specials prepared by Church Public Communications and/or KSL-TV. One of these, which showed President Hinckley's travels, focused on less-formal settings: President Hinckley greeting young people in native dress and watching their dances with obvious appreciation, smiling and patting children who presented him with flowers, walking through an obviously poverty-stricken area (Soweto in South Africa?). "He just seemed a lot more real than he does when he's standing at the pulpit."

Another "tweener" was the Church's provision, through health service missionaries taking regular trips from their Idaho home, of training for health-care providers in Latin America to resuscitate infants born with breathing problems. This aspect of humanitarian service strongly reinforced Bishop H.

David Burton's report on the impressive range, quickness of response, and overtly non-denominational nature of Church relief. Footage showed aid being distributed by Muslim relief agencies, and one segment was a truck being driven by "Sister Bertha," a pleasant change, according to an email sent in, from the somewhat patronizing reference to "not-so-nimble fingers of our elderly sisters" who made quilts for relief.

The Young Women's broadcast (with its obviously well-prepared but "zombie" choir of immobile girls in pastels) received a little attention. An emailed response complained about "the breathy, so-sweet intonations of women like Anne Pingree. Her message wasn't bad, but my annoyance at her ever-so-feminine presentation made it difficult to listen."

One (female) participant was rankled by the visible presence of men "presiding" at the women's conference, although a (male) participant pointed out that even President Hinckley's counselors make it clear that Hinckley always presides "and has asked me, Brother Monson, to conduct.' It's not gender. It's hierarchy."

An email respondent had found mixed messages in the Young Women's broadcast. "Susan Tanner began by telling young women that getting recognition at school for good grades and extracurricular achievement was something they'd just need to grow out of once they were doing their 'real' work of selflessly serving others in the home (no mention of jobs, no mention of college)." One participant commented, at this point, that "Sister Tanner was just giving a realistic, rather than an idealized picture of motherhood. That actually is what happens to a large extent."

Julie Beck three times mentioned "Heavenly Parents" and stressed relying on your patriarchal blessing to become all that you can be. She used herself as an example of being told by her counselor in high school that her test scores showed she'd be better off not going to college -- but since her blessing said college, she went to college and earned a degree.

Whatever points Sister Beck had gained in this talk, however, were generally voted as lost by her general session address in which she carefully constructed a picture of males and females being "equally blessed" by the priesthood without acknowledging the "underlying enormity of the inequality"--that men both receive and give blessings, while women are always receivers, always passive. They never get to "grow up and give

back."

"Everything she said was true," summarized another dissatisfied participant, "but what she *didn't* say was more important." One participant pointed out that, in fairness, Sister Beck balanced the picture of her health-blessing-giving father with her mother who was, in vague and general terms, "inspired" to find her correct medical treatment and care for her during childhood illnesses. And "she didn't simper!"

The most mystifying of the addresses to the young women was President Faust's. One email respondent said: He did another "you can change the world" talk but his two examples were a teenager at a bus stop with other teens who waved every morning at a man driving to work rain or shine (his headlights glinting off her braces), then invited his daughter to Young Women, and now the whole family is baptized and the parents are on a mission. "That was his 'be a good example' example, but he neglected to mention that waving at passing men from a bus stop usually attracts either rapists or guys who think they've found the neighborhood nookie, who hires by the hour."

The other example was "dare to be different from the other girls" and "follow the Spirit," exemplified by Joan of Arc. President Faust did mention "standing on the spot where she was burned alive at the stake, but he didn't mention that it was the church who did it to her, or her own people who made no effort to rescue her."

Another email respondent had identified the same irony: "So there you go, young ladies: Question the establishment, raise hell, question the gender paradigm, put on some pants, and before you know it you'll be burning at the stake (center)."

Noting a generally more successful range of talks, one participant mentioned her theory that "they've got better speech writers." Two of those in attendance knew of such speechwriters. One was a Church employee who had been assigned to write talks for the now-emeritus Elder Poelman. Another had a friend whose husband wrote (or had written) speeches for two General Authorities. Another participant said that President Benson's landmark talk on pride, which uncharacteristically quoted C. S. Lewis, had been written by his son, Reed Benson, whose wife, May, had been reading Lewis.

Another participant wondered if the speakers were receiving teleprompter coaching, since several suffered from "stilted delivery" and "unnatural facial expressions that changed, as if on cue, but it

didn't go with what they were saying." Elder Nelson and Elder Scott were mentioned in this last category.

Some participants noted what seemed to be a heavy emphasis on, in Elder Packer's terms, the "wicked, wicked world," the "rhetoric of doom," and the emphasis on "the fortress self." While acknowledging that these rhetorical strategies date back to the Old Testament ("chosen people") and the New Testament ("only the righteous will be saved when Christ comes again"), there was general agreement that externalizing evils means "we can avoid confronting how we are complicit in the evils of world" and that it also means we should "flee rather than fix."

A considerable discussion was sparked by the reference of three speakers to "gender confusion." On the one hand, this term, first used in 1993 by Elder Oaks in an *Ensign* article "is code for homosexuality, transgender, and sex change," but it's also part of a larger issue of gender roles. One participant noted with considerable irony that it's religious far-right groups that use the term most frequently (166,000 hits on a Google search of the term). A "particularly silly" manifestation is boycotts of Mattel toys because Barbie's identity has been revised toward less traditional roles.

In Mormon terms, participants saw the same thinking at work in Elder Nelson's "narrow model of marriage," and his subtle but effective insistence that "Mormonism defines marriage and the family." Another noted that his definition of marriage "between one man and one woman" went further even than the language in the Proclamation on the Family" while another noted that this definition "totally erased Mormonism's nineteenth-century history." As an example of the narrow focus on "our" kind of marriage, one participant mentioned the threat to Buckley Jeppson's membership by his stake president when he married his partner, Mike Kessler, in Canada.

Highly praised (except for his mention of "gender confusion" as a condition that can be cured by the atonement) was Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's passionate plea for members to develop a first-hand relationship with the Savior and his acknowledgment that some related to it primarily through "programs and the experiences of others." His talk was also praised for the acknowledgment that the atonement not only redeems from sin but also from sorrows and losses. (Elder Nelson's talk received a belated compliment at this point for his encouragement to the repentant to stop beating yourself up for

past sins.)

Anne Pingree's use of "watchcare" received roses from one participant but her use of "determined service" ("turns it into drudgery") received onions from another listener, even though both agreed that the emphasis on service was positive.

Elder Oak's use of the Book of Mormon to preach that God loves everybody and that revelation comes to everyone was praised, although one participant, harking back to his mission days, pointed out that co-opting the Reformers as "proto-Mormons" is a much overused strategy. Oaks's strong promise mention of scripture yet to come forth was "quirky," perhaps related to his emphasis in other recent general conferences on the Second Coming.

An email respondent was "intrigued by Elder Oaks's comments when he talked about the man who was led 'by the Spirit' to convert first to a Protestant Church, and only later to Mormonism. 'Can the Spirit lead you to any church BUT the True One?' queried one participant. 'I was also intrigued that in his examples of conversions around the world he emphasized a common pattern that includes some of the more charismatic gifts of the Spirit—even dreams. The pattern was very clear: First these converts had 'felt' this or that, or 'were prompted' by the Spirit to do this or that, or had dreams, and later the conversion was mediated by missionaries, the discussions, etc.'" Concluded this participant, "I found that interesting, especially in the light of Oaks's own testimony, which according to Steve Benson, never included dreams nor anything like that, but more pedestrian feelings of devotion to what he was taught as a child."

One participant classified Elder David A. Bednar's talk as "guilt-producing" in its focus on how, in addition to doing things that offend the Spirit, which then withdraws, that we also "withdraw ourselves from the Spirit." Other participants noted that he didn't quote Doctrine and Covenant 121, and another quoted her teenagers as concluding, "The Holy Ghost is a wimp. It's only present when you're on your best behavior." Another participant returned to Elder Nelson's talk to protest, "His message is so clear that God only loves the obedient, but he means 'obedient to us.' When you're the lowest is when you need God's love the most, and the promise is that nothing we can do will stop that love."

On random topics, one woman asked why the women's session is broadcast and but the priest-

hood session isn't. The answers included: It's safe to broadcast the women's fireside because the men won't listen anyway, and the way you can prove you have a club is who you exclude. If women could listen to the priesthood session, it would stop being a men's club.

Unanswered question of the session: General conference audiences began standing during the entrance of the president since the days of David O. McKay, but when did the custom begin of standing while President Hinckley retires?

"Thou Art That": On Mormon Divinity Part 3

Bob McCue

A Practical Method

Science teaches us all we can know with justifiable certainty, and that is little in the grand scheme of things. This bit of knowledge floats on a vast sea of mythology, primal desires, and fears littered with cultural baggage so deeply engrained in us that we don't know it is there. The better our appreciation of this situation, the humbler and more willing to learn from others we will be. Or as one of my theologian friends puts it, the more willing we will be to occasionally have our reality "fractured."¹

With little knowledge that I can objectively justify, I must acknowledge that much more of my behavior than I imagined must be chosen on the basis of what I value, and this makes forming those values my most important task.

As I continue to learn about the effects of my actions and as my perspective expands in other ways, my values evolve. And what I value directs my attention toward both doing and learning about different aspects of reality. Hence, my knowledge about reality and my values co-evolve² in the classic sense. Attending to this process is an ongoing sacred privilege; watching myself and others grow is a perpetual source of joy.

I use the knowledge science provides regarding cause and effect relationships to bring some of what I value into being. I am thus a creator, a metaphoric god, an integral part of the ultimate creative font. What seem to be my choices are manifestations of forces far beyond what I can comprehend. I release myself to this mystery of which I am an integral part, while at the same time knowing that each of my decisions matters more

than I thought. The complex web of reality is woven from our thoughts and actions. My every act (or inaction) affects countless other lives. And yet I am one microscopic cell in something so large it defies comprehension. Thankfully, we derive meaning from what we understand and are designed to ignore most of the rest.

Sacred Passion

We reserve a special passion for what we stir our foundations. This is usually the most awe-inspiring feature of reality as we perceive it; our *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.³ Karen Armstrong notes that the sacred world seemed richer and more enduring than anything else and so the ancients craved it.⁴ In this characteristic, we differ far less than we like to think from our ancestors. Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg and his co-authors explain how and why meditation induces a state they call "absolute unitary being" that is functionally similar to what Armstrong described.⁵

Meera Nanda summarizes this aspect of the religious experience as follows: "[Beware of] the noetic, or intellectualist, trap that William James identified in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when he noticed how mystical experience has the quality of a profound knowing: 'Although similar to the states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance . . . and as a rule, they carry with them a curious sense of authority.' At their peak, meditative experiences invariably bring about a feeling of having touched something far deeper and far more real than what is normally experienced by the five senses in our ordinary lives. And this conviction itself becomes a source of validation of the objective reality of what they have seen: what they see in their minds, they assume, must exist outside."⁶

This is a trap into which religious believers still often fall for precisely the reasons James pointed out approximately a hundred years ago--the experience Newberg describes is taken as confirmation that the beliefs of a particular system are correct, even though there is no evidence to support them. Such is the emotional force of seeming to touch something beyond ourselves; seeming to become part of a larger organism or reality of some kind. Millennia have not changed our desire for this experience, though our needs are now quite different than they once were.⁷

Many who study cults tell us that the induction

of the state Newberg describes is one of the hooks that brings new converts into "the fold" and holds them in place.⁸ Mormonism uses a version of this experience to induce the receipt of a "testimony."⁹

Our deepest, most sacred experiences transmit the power that has built cathedrals and temples out of human blood and sweat, produced some of our most inspiring works of personal and collective art, and caused countless atrocities including, ironically, the destruction of many of those very works of art. The current conflict between the Shias and Sunnis in Iraq is an illustration of what this power can do.

I have been interested to observe changes in myself about where I find my emotional foundation. What I most reverence has changed from a particular metaphysical conception of God within a particular social group to a combination of reality as described by science and the mystery within and beyond it. One of the first things I felt as that change occurred, to my great surprise, was ecological stirrings. This response now makes sense to me, as the things I now hold to be most sacred are in my physical and social surroundings. My current concern with science-related education at home and elsewhere was next on the agenda as my emotional center and reverence were refocused. Concerns with education, overpopulation, and the environment were simply not on my radar screen while it was dominated by Mormonism. It seems that this energy source is not easily focused on more than a single group of related issues.

I suggest that a reorientation of the religious impulse away from the metaphysical and toward the physical will release an enormous force that I believe can be harnessed to do great things. Breaking down the world's tribal barriers will, I hope, be one of these. Inspiring ourselves to live within our planet's means will be another.

The reharnessing of my life force is one of many recent events for which I am deeply grateful.

Conclusion

In his King Follett address (discussed in Part 1), Joseph Smith echoed impressive thunder so distant that few could hear it, leaving most of his followers to believe that he was delivering a revelation from God. Rather than credit his sources, he used this information arbitrage to build personal power.

Having surveyed the terrain around the idea that man can become like God, I find it now more impressive and useful than ever. (Part 2 discussed

the value of transforming this idea and others like it into metaphors.) And so while I support its metaphoric retooling and use in conjunction with its many mythic consonants, I think that those within the Mormon community who wish to preserve their tradition will here find fertile ground on which to build.

However, as a result of the way in which the personal God of Mormonism was pounded into me as a child, I find the indefinable creative ground of being implicit in "Thou art That" to be the more helpful touchstone. So I have happily traded "As God now is, man may become" for "Thou art That."

And I suspect that Joseph the Mormon prophet would approve. If there is any lesson we can take from his life, it is that we should not be afraid of new ideas—that we should roam as far and wide as we are able, to find what will be useful to us as we choose what to value, and attempt to bring as much of that as possible into being.

Notes

Address queries to Bob McCue at <http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

1. Phil Hefner, private correspondence, April 12, 2006.
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Co-evolution>.
3. Rudolf Otto, <http://www.netrax.net/~galles/index1.htm>.
4. Armstrong, A *Short History of Myth*, xv, xvi.
5. Andrew Newberg, Eugene G. D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).
6. Meera Nanda, "Trading Faith for Spirituality: The Mystifications of Sam Harris," http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_title.asp?9389.
7. Bob McCue, "How Denial Works," 119, <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>.
8. Steven Hassan, *Releasing The Bonds: Empowering People to Think For Themselves* (N.p.: Freedom of Mind Press, 2000); Stephen Kent, "Brainwashing Programs in The Family/

Children of God, and Scientology," in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, edited by Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 349-78.

9. McCue, "How Denial Works," 106.

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ORGANIZATIONAL STATEMENT

The Mormon Alliance was incorporated on July 4, 1992. Its purposes are to identify and document ecclesiastical/spiritual abuse, to promote healing and closure for its survivors, to build more sensitive leadership, to empower LDS members to participate with more authenticity in Mormonism, and to foster a healthier religious community.

By Common Consent is the quarterly newsletter of the Mormon Alliance. Comments, articles, and items for inclusion are welcome, if they are submitted thirty days before the mailing deadlines, which are the last weeks of December, March, July, and September. Please send all correspondence about articles and subscriptions to Mormon Alliance, 1519 Roberta Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84115.

Subscriptions are \$30 for each calendar year. At any point during the year that a subscription begins, you will receive the four newsletters of that year and the *Case Reports* volume for that year. Copies of Vols. 2 and 3 of the *Case Reports* (1996 and 1997), are available from Signature Books for \$20 apiece (price includes shipping) at 564 W. 400 North, Salt Lake City, UT 84116. The order line is (801) 531-0164 or 1-800-356-5687. Volumes 1, 2, and 3 are also posted on the organization's Website: www.mormonalliance.org.

To report cases of spiritual and/or ecclesiastical spiritual abuse, contact Lavina Fielding Anderson, <lavina@elavina.org> 1519 Roberta Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84115, (801) 467-1617.

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