



In recent years, evangelicals have dialogued with several religions, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Mormon-Evangelical Dialogue

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In 1992, Greg Johnson, as president of the Denver Seminary student council, organized a public forum with four of us on faculty responding to different parts of the book *Are Mormons Christians?*, then recently published by Brigham Young University New Testament professor Stephen Robinson. As an ex-Mormon, Johnson had keen interest in the evangelical scholarly world's keeping abreast of key publications by Latter-day Saint scholars, a practice then almost nonexistent, at least in New Testament studies. Robinson was invited to the forum as well, but he declined to come, with words to the effect of "I know what evangelicals do in such contexts and see no need to submit myself to Mormon bashing."

The event was videotaped, however, and a copy of the tape sent to Robinson. When he discovered the moderate tone and scholarly contents of the session, he wrote back and expressed delight, especially with the two younger of the four main presenters. I was one of those two younger scholars. Robinson's reply led to our exchanging letters and phone conversations and

finally meeting at the 2002 American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference. We visited over an extended breakfast at the 2003 meetings. By this time, we realized that, although each of us had a broad range of experiences in ecumenical and interfaith contexts and had each received a PhD in New Testament studies at major universities outside our religious traditions, there was much that we did not understand about the other's faith communities and commitments. We began to wonder if some kind of joint writing project might be worth pursuing.

To make a long story short, the early meetings led to the publication with InterVarsity Press in 1997 of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*. In this book, Robinson and I chose four doctrinal debates that appeared to us to be both the most central and the most divisive between our two constituencies—scripture, God (including deification), the Trinity (including the person and work of Jesus Christ), and salvation. We both composed half chapters on each topic, took turns leading off each chapter, and subdivided our material into three categories: a basic summary of what was generally held by most in our communities on the topic at hand, including acceptable parameters of diversity; frequently encountered misunderstandings of our views, especially by the other group; and final reasons why, even after clearing up misunderstandings, each of us remained unconvinced of the other's perspectives. We also composed a joint introduction to the volume in which each of us wrote one half. At the request of the publishers, we forced ourselves to coauthor conclusions to each chapter and a conclusion to the entire book, with wording we both could agree on, in which we summarized our agreements and disagreements.

Response to *How Wide the Divide?* was overwhelmingly positive in the academy and among ordinary Mormons and evangelicals who had good friends and some up-to-date, accurate knowledge about the other community. It was severely criticized by the so-called countercult industry within Evangelicalism, by many ex-Mormons, and by some more apologetically minded or very traditional Latter-day Saints. One of those who warmly commended the volume was Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Seminary. At the 1997 AAR meetings, he and I visited for nearly an hour about the book and its aftermath. Knowing of his long-standing interest in Mormonism and of Fuller's track record of interfaith dialogue, I suggested to him that conversations like those Robinson and I had initiated needed to be replicated on a much wider basis and that he would be an outstanding point person to

spearhead such an undertaking. Around the same time, Greg Johnson, then in ministry at an evangelical church in Utah, was developing a friendship with BYU religion professor Robert L. Millet and having many of the same kinds of conversations. They too shared the desire to impart the benefits of their dialogues among wider constituencies.

Again skipping over important intermediate developments, the result was what has now been a decade-long series of meetings between small groups of evangelical and Latter-day Saint scholars from among the various disciplines of religious studies. When the AAR and the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL) still met together, we were able to convene every year, typically during the Sunday afternoon of the national conference, and we then met for more extended conversations, alternating between BYU and Fuller Seminary, usually over a roughly two-day period in early summer. Rich Mouw did indeed become the person to head up the various evangelical delegations, and Robert Millet functioned in comparable fashion for the Latter-day Saint contingents. In recent years, conversations have taken us to Palmyra, New York; Nauvoo, Illinois; and Wheaton College. A small number of individuals have consistently participated in almost all of the gatherings, and a much larger number have come and gone as their schedules and interests have dictated. Average total group size has usually been about twelve to fifteen, but perhaps as many as fifty different scholars have participated at one time or another.

Larger public conferences, both in Utah (at BYU and several other venues) and at Fuller, have also been organized by individual participants in our conversations based, at least in part, on the success of and interest generated by the more private conversations. Additionally, Johnson and Millet have reenacted Mormon-evangelical dialogues in dozens of settings around the country and occasionally abroad, beginning about eight years ago when Johnson founded "Standing Together," an evangelical Christian ministry based near Salt Lake City, with the twin goals of uniting evangelical pastors and churches throughout the state, who often feel quite beleaguered in the midst of the Mormon "colossus," and of continuing what Mouw, borrowing from George Bush Sr., likes to call "gentler, kinder" kinds of religious conversation with Latter-day Saint friends and acquaintances both privately and in the public arena. Additional publications have emerged from several of these various interactions, dialogues, and conferences, most notably *Salvation in Christ: Comparative Christian Views*, a publication of the Religious Studies Center of BYU in 2005, with contributions from Latter-day Saint, evangelical, liberal

Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox authors; *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* by Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott (Brazos, 2007); and *Bridging the Divide: A Continuing Conversation between a Mormon and an Evangelical* (Monkfish, 2007).

Over the years, I have been involved in a fair number of different kinds of interfaith dialogues or conversations. AAR itself provides the milieu for some. What has struck me as particularly consistent and helpful about all of the evangelical-Mormon events in which I have participated are two key features. On the one hand, as in almost all forms of ecumenism, one cannot engage simultaneously in overt proselytizing *and* dispassionate description and analysis of one's own or another's belief system. The kinds of conversations initiated on someone's front porch when either Mormon missionaries or Protestant evangelists engage in door-to-door neighborhood visitation campaigns rarely lead to deep and balanced insights as to what the other believes (or, in the twenty-first-century Western world, even to very many converts). If anything, such encounters may today more often than not be counterproductive to mutual understanding and goodwill.

On the other hand, precisely by agreeing to bracket explicitly evangelistic overtures, representatives of both our faith communities have shared in great detail our convictions across the full range of theological and ethical concerns that both unite and divide us. Personal passions for our faith commitments have scarcely been absent, and rationales for why we believe what we believe and why we wish others shared those beliefs have been abundantly clear. This is in sharp contrast to so many other forms of interreligious dialogue in which anything that even begins to hint of apologetics for one's faith is censored as an egregious violation of the ground rules for conversation. I have never sensed in our gatherings any of the at-best-artificial and at-worst-destructive separation of religious studies from theology so endemic to the North American religious academy. No questions are off-limits when we gather, and no answers are demeaned, though we all understand that we are far more likely to gain greater mutual understanding by asking certain questions rather than others and that we can expect certain answers to meet with more objections or resistance than will other ones. In many instances, we have also gotten to know each other well enough to become genuine friends. I now feel a moral obligation more than ever when I am involved in a conversation about Mormonism with no Latter-day Saints present to make sure that I (and others!) represent them fairly and accurately, because the participants in the



Courtesy of Robert L. Millet

Participants at the LDS/Evangelical Dialogue at the American Academy of Religion.

conversation, whether or not they realize it, are speaking about some of my good friends. The same is true for me in the more formal contexts of teaching, writing, and being interviewed.

Not surprisingly, our dialogues have not proceeded without any hiccups. There have been occasions when conversations have become passionate and pointed enough that feelings have been hurt, and some of us have wondered if we have reached the end of our endeavors. Statements have been issued, publications have appeared, and participation in events has been canceled by several of us that have left others confused and troubled by the motivations behind the apparent duplicity. We have all grown to appreciate the in-house pressure that can be brought to bear on any of us by educational administrators or church authorities and that causes us to frame statements in various ways, to issue what appear like retractions or at least significant qualifications of what we have previously told one another, or to back out of engagements in which we thought we would be able to participate. We have also become more personally aware than ever of those elements within our own communities that function as nonauthoritative, often self-appointed watchdogs who can anathematize our activity as well as issue misleading or simply false statements about the nature of our participation and perspectives, especially in the blog world with its comparative anonymity and lack of accountability.

A major challenge throughout has been to involve from both communities church leaders whose participation really could make a significant long-term difference in attitudes and perceptions among Mormons and

evangelicals on a much more widespread scale than pure academics are usually able to generate. In the last few years, this has actually begun, though it seems too early to tell whether or not it will persist and continue to grow to the level of involvement that will precipitate long-term changes, either in clarifications of what each group itself truly believes or in external perceptions of what the other group believes. Of course, Evangelicalism is an amorphous group of theologically conservative Protestants who have no president, pope, prophet, or patriarch, while the magisterium of Mormonism more resembles Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox hierarchies. These disparities create both opportunities and obstacles.

On the one hand, it is far easier for the LDS Church to officially change in any area, big or small; all it requires is an announcement by the Church's President or those who speak for him at a general conference or via some other official means. But the LDS leadership will do this only on rare occasions and for issues they deem to be of great importance. On the other hand, it is comparatively easy for individual evangelicals, institutions, parachurch movements, and even entire denominations (especially small ones) to change, even on major issues, through formal and informal politicking, often initiated at the grassroots level. But with no one to impose such changes on the entire movement, with only a loose unity (and at times not even that) and a loosely defined unity among the various branches of the movement, seemingly unending diversity of opinion accompanied by rancorous struggles among competing camps can afflict Evangelicalism for decades on end (witness the ongoing gender-role conflicts as a classic example).

What has resulted from the evangelical-Mormon dialogues of the last fifteen or so years? How successful have they been? Usually one answers questions like those in terms of goals fulfilled. If that criterion is applied here, then the gatherings have been wildly successful because, to my knowledge, goals have been deliberately quite modest. One is reminded of reports of East-West diplomacy at the height of the Cold War. Sometimes a victory was simply agreeing to meet again, and news reports commented merely that "frank and open discussions were held." I doubt things have ever been quite that bleak with us. Instead, especially in the earliest years, we went into our meetings not hoping to resolve some conflict, nor expecting to convert anyone to our points of view, but merely for building friendships, goodwill, trust, and mutual understanding. Evangelicals had met with and even published the results of dialogues with Catholics, liberal Protestants, Jews, Muslims,

Hindus, Buddhists, and even such fringe groups as the Unification Church led by Sun Myung Moon, but where were *any* comparable efforts, at least within the last half century, with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Mormons regularly invited more liberal Christian scholars, Jews, and Muslims (and no doubt others) to conferences at Brigham Young University and participated in groups like SBL and AAR both nationally and regionally, including in deliberately arranged pluralistic settings, but, apart from the individual personal friend of someone or the other, when were evangelicals en bloc given any attention or invited to participate in these events? Now, all this has changed and hopefully not just in the short run.

But has anything more happened on the North American religious landscape worthy of the kind of full-scale scholarly scrutiny conventionally associated with the American Academy of Religion? Have the seeds been planted deeply enough in good soil that fruit will inevitably flourish that actually changes the face of either Mormonism or Evangelicalism on this continent and perhaps beyond? Or if that seems far too ambitious, have seeds been planted that will at least change the perception of one or both groups about each other in any widespread fashion? I personally believe the answer to the second question is yes and the answer to the first question is, it's too early to tell. But as we all know, unexpected developments, including larger world events, can quickly move us in entirely unanticipated directions, positively and negatively, forward and backward. So the sanest answer, no doubt, is to say that we must wait to see. **RE**