

NOTRE DAME CONFERENCE SPEARHEADS A NEW LDS-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE

BY MAURO PROPERZI

MAURO PROPERZI (mauro_properzi@byu.edu) IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY AND DOCTRINE AT BYU.

ON DECEMBER 5–6, 2013, SEVERAL Catholic and Latter-day Saint scholars from various colleges and universities met at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, for a two-day conference entitled “Catholics and Mormons: A New Dialogue.” It was jointly sponsored by Brigham Young University and the University of Notre Dame. Its purpose was to function as a “conversation starter” for scholars who have a general interest in the intersection of Mormonism and Catholicism. For this reason, the conference did not have a specific subject focus. The presentations ranged widely from theology and history to the social sciences.

The conference was hosted by the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy at Notre Dame, which is directed by David Campbell. David, a political science professor and the only LDS faculty member at Notre Dame, was one of the organizers of the conference alongside Thomas Wayment and myself (both BYU Religious Education faculty).

The group of twenty presenters was almost evenly divided between

Catholic and LDS scholars with Mark Noll, a renowned professor of history at Notre Dame, as a very welcome evangelical “outsider.” Understandably, the Catholic contingent was, for the most part, based at Notre Dame, with Peter Huff (Centenary College of Louisiana), Matthew Wilson (Southern Methodist University), and Stephen Webb (retired professor of Wabash College) being the exceptions. On the other hand, the LDS group of scholars varied extensively in geographical provenance. It included all three Mormon Studies chairs in US universities (Patrick Mason, Claremont; Phil Barlow, Utah State; Kathleen Flake, Virginia), nationally renowned scholars Richard Bushman and Terryl Givens, young LDS professors from institutions in Virginia and Michigan, and BYU Religious Education faculty. In addition to the twenty presenters, a group of about twenty or thirty interested observers, both Catholic and LDS, brought the attendance to a total of about fifty individuals.

The first session of the conference, on Thursday night, began with



Kathleen Cummings, Terryl Givens, and David Campbell. Photos courtesy of Jennifer Smith.

my introductory remarks aimed at framing interfaith dialogue in a broad context of personal encounter, authenticity, and disagreement between trustworthy interlocutors. I concluded with some comments on the word *new* in the title of the conference and explained it in the context of the increasing number of Latter-day Saints who are being trained at Catholic universities, often in subjects directly related to religion. The highlight of this session was the keynote address by Professor Terryl Givens, who spoke with his usual finesse about the need to deepen our understanding of the Mormon

concepts of apostasy and restoration in order to open the door of conversation with Catholicism. Through the use of the “woman in the wilderness” image found in the book of Revelation, Givens highlighted Joseph Smith’s view of apostasy as temporary exile rather than disappearance. He further spoke of restoration as a process (at times tentative), which makes use of light and truth found in Christian churches to expand rather than reset the doctrinal clock. Givens also highlighted the centrality of authority to any Mormon understanding of the Apostasy and rejected the view that Reformation theology is, as a whole, closer to LDS teachings than Catholic doctrine is. Professor Kathleen Cummings, director of

of Mormons and Catholics. He also compared Mormon and Catholic views of each other, highlighting the fact that Mormons feel more warmth towards Catholics than toward any other group and that Catholics feel more warmth towards Mormons than do black, evangelical Protestants and the “nones” (religiously unaffiliated), but less than what Jews and mainline Protestants feel. Matthew Bowman’s remarks juxtaposed the Second Vatican Council and the LDS establishment of correlation in the sixties as similar but also different ways of addressing the challenges of modernity and the question of meaning of “the Church.” Matthew Wilson presented a picture of American Catholicism as a wide spectrum of

parishes, one liberal and one conservative. She stressed the difference in emphasis by the two groups in relation to the meaning of their Church identity.

The second morning session began with Kathleen Flake’s exploration of the theological meaning of marriage in Mormonism, particularly in its eschatological (with reference to the end of times) significance. A recently discovered historical document recording a plural marriage celebrated by Newel K. Whitney was used as an illustration of her analysis. Mark Noll followed Flake with a historical overview of nineteenth-century American perceptions of Mormons and Catholics as well as of LDS-Catholic mutual perceptions in the same time period. He brought to light several similarities but also two significant differences. Scott Appleby then concluded the session by acknowledging that both Mormons and Catholics have historically recognized the role of the state in bringing about the common good but that Mormonism has a unique stress on being “a people,” which is often manifested in the “taking care of our own” approach to welfare policies.

After lunch, Phil Barlow began by highlighting four possible areas of concern that are likely shared by Catholics and Mormons, including crises of faith, the nature of prophetic authority, the role of the Bible, and religious pluralism. Barlow suggested that perhaps the two traditions could learn something from the other when addressing these difficulties. Thomas Wayment drew some parallels between the early Christians’ construction of their religious identity vis-à-vis a different group, namely the

The highlight of this session was the keynote address by Professor Terryl Givens, who spoke with his usual finesse about the need to deepen our understanding of the Mormon concepts of apostasy and restoration in order to open the door of conversation with Catholicism.

the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at Notre Dame, concluded the session by briefly responding to Givens’s paper and by suggesting that a possible area of dialogue between Catholics and Mormons may be found in exploring the concept and experience of holiness in both traditions.

The main day of the conference began with two morning sessions. In the first, David Campbell spoke about some of the findings that emerge from surveying the political views

political and theological views, where age, church attendance, and Latino versus Anglo ethnic identity play a defining role in the existing differences. However, he also stressed that Catholic institutional teachings are more significant than the diverging views of individual Catholics gathered through surveys. Mary Ellen Konieczny concluded the session by further highlighting how polarized American Catholics can be on issues related to the family through a report of her study of two very different



Conference presenters at the Notre Dame LDS–Catholic Dialogue, December 5–6, 2013.

Jews' and the Mormons' historical construction of their identity "on the backs" of Catholics. Wayment then argued that Mormonism does not have the need to define itself against another religion anymore. Taylor Petrey moved the focus to the topic of feminism, highlighting the existence of parallel strands of conservative ("complementarity") and liberal ("oppositional") feminisms in both Catholic and LDS traditions, whereas Peter Huff spoke about the need to transform potential obstacles to LDS–Catholic dialogue into bridges. Huff's presentation drew attention to the ecumenical Mariology (the theological study of Mary) of Vatican II and to Nephi's vision of Mary in the Book of Mormon concluding the session with a call to explore this interesting topic in comparative fashion.

The second afternoon session started with two presentations by LDS Notre Dame alumni Patrick Mason and Jeremiah John. Mason and John addressed the question of Mormon involvement, or lack thereof, in social justice and conflict resolution endeavors in comparison to Catholicism's visible efforts in this

direction. They suggested as possible factors for this disparity the historical youth of Mormonism, a history that moved from conflict with, to accommodation to the US government, and an LDS tendency for eschatological political thinking. Timothy Matovina, Notre Dame professor of theology, then spoke about Catholicism's historical attempts to find unity in diversity by highlighting the historical mileposts of the Edict of Milan and Vatican II as moments of deep introspection about this very question. Stephen Webb concluded the session with a discussion of nineteenth-century Protestant associations of Mormonism with Catholicism particularly as evident in such accusations as the use of magic, an excessive sense of place, and sexual deviancy.

The conference was then brought to a conclusion with a keynote address by Professor Richard Bushman, who spoke about Mormon loneliness and the Mormon desire to connect with other religious groups in the world after a history of both imposed and self-imposed isolation. Bushman suggested that Catholics can help Mormons find their place in history as

LDS interfaith dialogue moves beyond a conversation with Evangelicals to include Catholics. Brad Gregory, Notre Dame professor of history, responded to Bushman's address by pinpointing what he identified as key theological differences between Mormonism and Catholicism, thus wanting to curb excessive enthusiasm about the parallels between the two traditions. His remarks were followed by a lively Q&A discussion and by a closing dinner in a unique location: the press box room of the Notre Dame football stadium.

The conference was undoubtedly a success as well as a memorable experience. Several of the participants have already provided suggestions on future directions for additional conferences with more focused themes. It is certainly my hope that interest in LDS–Catholic dialogue will be expanded in both Mormon and Catholic circles and that one day we will be able to look at the Notre Dame conference as the inaugural meeting of an ongoing and fruitful conversation. For the time being, as they would say at Notre Dame, "we have got the first down." ❧