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Rejoinder

Restoration and Responsibility: The Perils of Assimilation and Accommodation

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I appreciate the thoughtful responses to my paper on the Restoration and its potential for turning the intellectual tradition “upside down” by Drs. Lane Fisher and Scott Richards. Both of these men are thoughtful and capable professionals for whom I have a good deal of respect. Their work is important and their service to the profession and to the Church is admirable. I believe they have done a great service in pushing along the sort of discourse within LDS scholarly circles and within LDS psychologists and practitioners in particular that I had hoped to facilitate when I delivered the address at AMCAP out of which my paper came. I am privileged to respond to these responses, and I hope that in doing so I can clarify some issues and occasion further reflection and discussion by interested parties whatever their response to my argument.

I resonated with Dr. Fisher’s description of his own struggles with the sorts of issues I have addressed concerning the relationship between the restored gospel and the social sciences. I believe, based on my own experience and contact with LDS students over a period of years, that this sort of struggle and discomfort is fairly widespread. I am hopeful that the present dialogue can, in some small way, perhaps, help ease the discomfort felt by many, and contribute to a spirit of courage and opti-
mism that we as LDS scholars and practitioners indeed have something magnificent to contribute. I will, however, comment on two points in particular from Dr. Fisher’s response to my paper.

Often, as I have presented my position on the role of the Restoration in overturning and redeeming the western intellectual tradition, I have been misunderstood in precisely the way that both Dr. Fisher and Dr. Richards have, I believe, misunderstood. It is assumed that, since I believe that the Restoration turns the whole of the intellectual tradition upside down, and the current theories, models, and ways of understanding in contemporary social science are deeply, profoundly, and fundamentally flawed, that I believe they are all wrong in all respects, and that they can simply be dismissed or ignored. This is not a position I would hold.

First, no one can simply ignore or dismiss the very tradition in which one lives and from which one takes departure for all analysis, even critical analysis. Rather than dismissing the tradition, I believe we should be deadly serious about it. We need to be aware of it, criticize it, and criticize our own criticisms. There are surely some things in our intellectual tradition that will not be overcome—however unfortunate it may be—at least not until divine intervention occurs on a scale more pronounced than we are currently aware of. However, this in no way obligates us to believe in nor reverence our traditions either. It seems to me that as Latter-day Saints we owe our allegiance only to Christ and to his restored gospel, and to the kingdom of God in which that gospel is found and administered. Everything else is “up for grabs.” People are deserving of our profoundest reverence and respect. Ideas, however, deserve no reverence nor do they deserve special nor respectful treatment. If ideas historically have gotten us into problems (such as apostasy), it seems that our skepticism and distrust should be deep and abiding.

My second point of response in this connection is that I am not quite guilty of the breach of logic Dr. Fisher (in a well-meaning way) attributes to me: “His [meaning mine] reasoning follows that, since Joseph Smith was told that all the extant religions were wrong, all the
other components of intellectual life were wrong as well.” My point is more modest. It may not be that all components of intellectual life are wrong; only time and rigorous analysis will tell. However, I am only asking that we grant that the intellectual tradition which provided alternative content as well as impetus and legitimacy to the Apostasy may be just as wrong as the apostate religious world was in the nineteenth century. We need not do something so irresponsible as rejecting everything, or dismissing it with the wave of a hand. But, I believe, prudence dictates that we be as cautious in what we accept and how we accept it in the intellectual world as we are with what we accept and how we accept it in the religious world. We should be as careful and as sophisticated consumers of intellectual ideas and practices as we are of religious ones. I would be perfectly satisfied with this level of skepticism and caution. This strikes me as not an irresponsible position.

Dr. Fisher also, importantly, reminds us all that we should be humble as we make truth claims, or claims about what is right and what is wrong. Again, for the reasons I just outlined above, I am innocent of the breach of logic that Dr. Fisher attributes to me: “... that if a person holds any misconception of extant truths, then the entire construction will be judged to be 100 percent wrong.” Again, my point is more modest. I believe that there is very little vitality or salvation in Mormonism if there are not some things that we can take to be truth with very little room for misunderstanding, or multiple and variegated interpretations (e.g., there were gold plates; the Father and the Son were in New York; Peter, James, and John ordained Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery). In fact, Mormonism has always been quite content to suggest to all that only those who “know” the truth of the Restoration should embrace it. The point is that while humility is always a clear and present virtue, we have very little to offer the world if we cannot make some truth claims with confidence, and with equal confidence declare some things to be simply but unmistakably wrong. We must not allow recognition of the fallibility of human knowledge nor a sense of humility to interfere with the designs and purposes of the restoration of knowledge intended to save a fallen
world. Again, I would only ask that we be as confident of our capacities to know the truth of intellectual ideas as we are of our capacities to know the more commonly recognized truths of the Restoration. If we have confidence that we can build the kingdom of God on principles of revealed truth and that we can be faithful and effective in our own work within that project, why should we shrink from the prospect of doing a parallel intellectual work with equal confidence and success? Any woman who has the sensitivity and confidence to seek divine guidance and recognize it in rearing children, or any man who can act as a “judge in Israel,” both giving counsel about the profoundest aspects of another’s life, can certainly muster confidence and acumen to see through and evaluate the truth or falsity of human ideas in the social sciences.

Some of what I have already written here is given as a response to Dr. Richards’ thoughtful comments. However, there are a few other issues raised that merit additional attention. I have long admired Dr. Allen Bergin’s courageous and consistent defense of spirituality and religiosity within psychology. Those efforts, now with Scott Richards’ collaboration (Richards & Bergin, 1997) are very important. However, the example from the Richards and Bergin book of a more moderate position than the one I propose illustrates something of what I wish to caution against. There are risks to eclectic or “moderate” positions on theoretical issues. Great care must be exercised in defining ourselves in contrast to the prevailing view. The apostate tradition is older than the Restoration. The language, definitions, and categories of thought of the (apostate) tradition are so much a part of our own culture, that moderate disagreements, or easily framed alternative positions, may end up being not alternative after all. For example, Dr. Richards includes a table of contrasting philosophical assumptions. One of the contrasts is between “Universalism” and “Contextuality.” However, contextuality, as defined as an alternative to modernistic science and psychology, seems to me to be indistinguishable from a very traditional and modernistic Hempelian view of science; natural laws apply in some contexts and not in others. While
Richards’ and Bergin’s point is to defend “transcendent spiritual experiences,” placing them in a context of positivistic Hempelian notions of science seems to leave their ontological status somewhat in question. The situation is not helped by suggesting in the same chart that spiritual experiences are “invisible and private.” The ideas that spiritual experiences are invisible and private is a very old modernist notion, traceable to Descartes, and back through St. Augustine to the Neoplatonists.

The point here is not to refute Richards’ and Bergin’s notion of spiritual experiences. Rather, the point is that we need to be very careful not to object to some manifestation of modernist philosophy that does not appeal to us, or that we feel conflicts with the gospel, while embracing an equally modernistic and problematic notion with which, for some reason, we are more comfortable. If modernism is wrong in one context, our suspicion should be that it is wrong in another (Hempelian science notwithstanding). The same point is illustrated in Richards’ and Bergin’s definition of “Theistic realism.” They posit that “Scientific methods can approximate some aspects of reality but must be transcended by spiritual ways of knowing in many realms.” Here again, modernist and positivistic notions of science are accepted, while the world is bifurcated into the scientifically demonstrable and the “transcendent.” This bifurcation is as old as apostate philosophy itself, and it has been rather soundly criticized and rejected in contemporary philosophical works. My point, however, is a strategic one. Do we really want to defend the Restored Gospel and critique the tradition in the very categories offered by the tradition? I believe that our criticisms must extend to the foundations of the tradition, as the Restoration extended to the very foundations of Christianity itself.

Dr. Richards raises the question as to whether we must really turn things upside down, which he interprets as “throwing out” and “starting over.” I responded to this problem above. Again, I would only ask that we, in our intellectual, scholarly, and professional work be no less careful and radical than we, as Latter-day Saints, are in the religious
sphere. Certainly contemporary intellectual ideas cannot be more truthful than their contemporary religious counterparts. However, Richards goes on to make a slightly different point. He seems to be more willing than I to use the word “truth” to describe the findings or results of the social sciences. In the original paper I noted that “truth” is never used in the plural in scripture. The phrase “secular truth” is never found. This makes me more cautious than Dr. Richards is apparently wont to be. Nonetheless, this point calls for close and careful attention. If for no other reason than that the word “Truth” is used by the Savior to describe himself (John 14:6), we ought to be very careful how we “take this term on our lips” (see D&C 63:61).

One common response to the issue of truth, to which Dr. Richards seems somewhat favorably disposed, is pragmatism; that is, that if something achieves some good end, one could be justified in referring to it as truth. This approach to truth as pragmatic has been effectively criticized in contemporary theoretical work. Examples of the inherent problem with using the term truth to describe any number of positions that achieve their ends are easily formulated. For example, if an infamous seducer were to share his or her secrets of success in getting what he or she wants, even if effective, we would hardly want to refer to such techniques as “truth.” Even restricting ourselves to using the word “truth” only if the results are “good” begs the question and leads to the “criterion problem” which has bedeviled pragmatic strategies from their earliest formulations. In my judgment, any contemporary formulations of pragmatism, more than an intellectual step or two removed from William James himself, are to be regarded with extreme skepticism.

I am thankful, and reverently so, for people like Scott Richards who can indeed achieve success in helping troubled people get past their problems and live happier and more meaningful lives. I am particularly thankful that Latter-day Saint practitioners can help others come to Christ. However, I believe that Dr. Richards is guilty of misattribution in maintaining that the successes he describes are due to the truth value of the theories and techniques he was taught. I
attribute them to him and similar successes to faithful, moral, caring, and effective counselors and therapists like him. For the most part, ideas do not work—people do. Dr. Richards’ successes do not speak to the truth of the ideas that he believes led him to them. They speak to the virtue of caring and spiritual sensitivity, and to practice, experience, and skill in dealing with people and their problems. Dr. Richards has done a great service in his response, however, in alerting us to the clear necessity of carrying out a most rigorous and careful analysis of the nature of truth as a foundation for any genuinely and worthy LDS psychology. I hope such an analysis is forthcoming in many forums.

Finally, I wish to comment on the nature and advisability of eclecticism. I do so because it has become an important perspective on the social scientific disciplines. But eclecticism is, in my judgment, too easy a victory over falsity. It should come as no surprise (and I intend this in an entirely good-natured way) that a committed eclectic, such as Dr. Richards, should find that my arguments against it are unconvincing—as are all arguments against eclecticism that he has read. By definition a consistent and practicing eclectic will find no argument convincing. For the same reason that no successful convention of solipsists could ever be held, and no argument that compels people to accept free will could ever be truthfully formulated, no eclectic could find an argument against eclecticism compelling. To be thus convinced is to cease to be eclectic. At best, there could be only “some truth” to mine or any other anti-eclecticism argument. In my own mind eclecticism is problematic because it requires so little of us and because it is an inherently irrefutable, and thus an entirely safe position. Again, I would argue that, as Latter-day Saints, we ought to permit ourselves only as much intellectual eclecticism as we permit ourselves religious eclecticism.

In conclusion, let me comment on the “bridge-building” metaphor attributed to Elder Neal A. Maxwell. I have always taken Elder Maxwell’s point to be that Latter-day Saints are in a position to do some very good scholarship and that we have a lot to offer the
world. I have been reluctant to take the metaphor more seriously than that. However, it offers an opportunity to make what is to me an important point relevant to this discussion. I have no objection to the building of bridges, even two-way ones. However, in building a bridge, I would think it prudent to first be very sure exactly what we are building the bridge to. That is, we want to have to be very careful what is on the other side. Bridges are needed only where there are chasms to be spanned. If there is indeed a chasm between the Restoration and the wisdom of the world, we ought to take it very seriously. A chasm between truth and error is no accident, and no mere inconvenience to be bridged for our own pleasure, convenience, or out of a desire to traffic in the goods the world has to offer. I would be more content to build a bridge after being assured that everyone recognized the reality and the dimensions of the chasm. In medieval times—times of clear and present dangers—chasms were often a protection, and they were deliberately not bridged. Often bridges were defended to preserve one’s life, the lives of one’s loved ones, and one’s culture. A bridge that could not be controlled was more threat than comfort. Finally, let me add something to the metaphor. I believe that a two-way bridge to the secular from the sacred might be all right if two conditions are fulfilled. First, let us make sure that the users of the bridge understand in exquisite detail “what’s over there,” so that they are prepared to deal with the culture shock and be neither assimilated nor seduced. Second, I would be much happier with a two-way bridge if we could have a very alert and fully staffed customs office in constant operation at the point of entry—on our side.

References