

Mormon Family Values and the role of women in LDS

Source: <http://newsgroups.derkeiler.com/Archive/Alt/alt.politics.bush/2008-01/msg02103.html>

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 - *Date:* Sat, 26 Jan 2008 16:52:42 GMT
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You can certainly tell this religion was invented by a man who wanted to subordinate women. These views are very 19th century.

The Role of Women in Mormonism

This article is used with the author's permission. I found it to be particularly insightful. This might help explain to the readers why for every letter I get from a man, I get 4 letters from women who were Mormons. This ratio has held consistent now for the last 3 months. – Eric 2/9/96.

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Religious Studies 263

March 27, 1995

Women and Mormonism

Many religions have recently begun changing in an attempt to equalize the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Mormonism is one of the exceptions. The Mormon position on women has changed little since the early 1800's, when the official view was that "woman's primary place is in the home, where she is to rear children and abide by the righteous counsel of her husband" (McConkie 844). This attitude, coupled with the doctrine of polygamy and the absolute power claimed by the men of the church, created a legacy of profound sexism which modern Mormonism has been unable to escape.

Mormonism has created an ingenious system of oppression, in which opposition towards men is tantamount to arguing with God. The Mormon religion makes no distinction between clergy and laity, at least with regard to men (Laake 9). All Mormon men are ordained as members of the "priesthood," with the absolute authority to preach the gospel, bestow blessings, prophecy, perform healings and baptisms, and generally speak for God. "Their priesthood gives them the right to advise and instruct the Saints (i.e., Mormons), and their jurisdiction extends over all things spiritual and temporal" (Snowden 134).

At age twelve, boys become members of the Aaronic, or lesser priesthood, and at nineteen become eligible for the Melchizedek, or higher priesthood. Members of either priesthood are higher authorities on everything than are non-members. Women are, of course, excluded from the priesthood. This practice in effect says that a woman's prepubescent son is more qualified to advise her than she is to advise him. The official explanation is that women are kept from having the priesthood because women are more spiritual than men, therefore, men need to have the priesthood to teach them how to be better people (Johnson 86). Women are also told that, because they have the all-important ability to bear children, men need the power of the priesthood merely to

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remain equal with them.

The most notorious example of Mormon treatment of women is, of course, the practice of polygamy. In early 1843, Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon church, announced to the press that, despite rumors to the contrary, the Latter-Day Saints did not practice polygamy and believed it was an abomination (Wallace 53). He spoke the truth as far as the vast majority of Mormons was concerned, for polygamy is expressly forbidden in the Book of Mormon. However, Joseph himself had been married to at least eleven women besides his legal wife by 1843. (Wallace 52). The first of these, in 1835, was a seventeen year old orphan who had been taken in by his wife, Emma Smith. Joseph apparently married all of these women without the knowledge of either his wife or his fellow Mormons (Wallace 52).

On July 12, 1843, Joseph Smith declared that God had given him a new revelation concerning marriage and he revealed it to his brother and other high-ranking male church members. This revelation from God, at one point, specifically instructed "mine handmaid Emma Smith, Joseph's wife" to accept this doctrine and allow Joseph to have as many wives as he liked, as long as they were all "virtuous and pure" (Snowden 191). Emma Smith was a very strong-willed woman, and Joseph was so frightened of her wrath that he sent his brother Hyrum to inform her of God's plan. Emma was understandably scornful, and threw Hyrum out of her house (Wallace 55). Later, she managed to obtain a written copy of the revelation, and while in Joseph's presence, tossed it directly into the fireplace. However, the damage had already been done. Joseph is said to have been married to twenty-seven wives at the time of his death (Snowden 282). Emma left the church after his death and later denied that her husband had ever practiced polygamy (Wallace 65).

There were many reasons given for the practice of polygamy. The one most popular during the time was, of course, that God had commanded it, through Joseph Smith. The Mormon belief is that polygamy is holy and was practiced commonly in ancient times until people began spreading false religions. Adam, in his previous, spiritual existence, had many wives, of whom Eve was just one (Wallace 291). Jesus was also a polygamist "who was married whereby He could see His seed before He was crucified" (Hoekema 56), and his wives were Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene. Mormon Doctrine states that the president of the church had to suspend the practice of polygamy in 1890 because of the conditions at the time, but "obviously the holy practice will commence again after the Second Coming..." (578).

There were other justifications for polygamy. Mormons were often fond of stating that they were better than "Gentiles," as non-Mormons are called, because their system of polygamy kept them from committing the sin of adultery. Polygamous marriage was supposed to "make possible the procreation of enough bodies for thousands of spirits which have long awaited incarnation" (Snowden 141). Some Mormons today explain that many men died from war and disease, and all of the extra women needed husbands to support them. A less sympathetic view of polygamy was voiced by Sir Richard Burton on a visit to Utah. He said, "The..motive for polygamy in Utah is economy. Servants are rare and costly; it is cheaper and more comfortable to marry them" (Wallace 94).

Polygamous marriage is basically essential to Mormon theology. Mormon Doctrine states that God was once a human man, and "He is now a glorified, resurrected Personage having a tangible body of flesh and bones" (250). As a matter of fact, "all gods first existed as spirits, came to an earth to receive bodies, and then, after having passed through a period of probation on the aforesaid earth, were advanced to the exalted position they now enjoy" (Hoekema 38). After death, a good Mormon man who has followed a few certain rules is catapulted to this same status and receives his own planet to populate and rule over (Fife 103). To receive this honor, a man must be "married for eternity" in the Mormon temple. This special marriage is binding after death as well as until it.

"Celestial" marriage, as this eternal marriage is often called, is essential for Mormon women. Without being celestially married to a holder of the priesthood, a woman cannot be "saved" (Green 154). Mary Ettie Smith, a

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Mormon woman who left the church and Utah in 1856, said that "women do not amount to much in themselves," and that women in those times were often celestially married to men they had no intention of ever living with, so that they could have a man who would be able to get them into heaven (Green 154).

In the temple marriage ceremony, women are given secret names known only to their husbands, for identification purposes, so their husbands can pull them through to "the other side" after death (Laake 118). During the marriage ceremony, until 1990, men made their temple covenants directly to God, while the women had to make their temple covenants to their husbands (Laake 328). This means that while male temple workers representing God lead the men through the cloth representing the veil between worlds, husbands, symbolically, lead their wives through. Women also promise to obey their husbands in everything as long as their husbands obey God (Laake 108). As part of the ceremony, women also receive their endowments. These are sacred ordinances and promises which make a person eligible to enter the highest level of heaven, and Mormons receive them on their first visit to the temple (Laake 93). Men usually receive their endowments when they enter the temple to become a priesthood holder or go on a mission, but women enter the temple for the first time to be married.

After death, while their husbands are creating and ruling over planets, the women have the questionable honor of bearing his "spirit children" for eternity. These spirit children descend to their Father's planet to inhabit bodies as mortals, who are then ruled over by him. Mormon Doctrine states that these celestially married men and women "will live eternally in the family unit and have spirit children, thus becoming Eternal Fathers and Eternal Mothers" (516). A man who has multiple wives can beget many more spirit children, making him much more powerful. Birth control is, of course, very strongly discouraged. Ambitious Mormon men must beget many children with as many wives as possible, for "their glory (in heaven) is in proportion to the number of their wives and children" (Snowden 141).

Mormons believe that all humans are literally the spirit children of God who are momentarily inhabiting fleshly bodies. This creates a philosophical problem for them, for how could their spirits have been begotten by a Father without a wife? Therefore, in addition to the Father in Heaven, there is "a Woman of like glory, perfection, and holiness" who is "associated with him as a Mother" (McConkie 516). This seems quite unusual for such a patriarchal religion, and indeed, there is almost nothing written about Her. There is also no explanation for God's disregard for his own commandments on polygamy.

It is hard to deny the effect of polygamy on the thousands of women who lived with it. Anne Eliza Webb, one of Brigham Young's wives, wrote of her mother, "Polygamy...was the most hateful thing in the world to her, and she dreaded and abhorred it, but she was afraid to oppose it, lest she be found fighting against the Lord" (Wallace 62). This was the main reason so many women grudgingly accepted polygamy. The elders of the church assured these women that those who refused to practice polygamy would be damned, and since the men spoke for God, the believers had to comply (Wallace 74).

Polygamy effectively reduced women to mere commodities. Heber C. Kimball said, "I think no more of taking another wife than I do of buying a cow" (Wallace 101). Missionaries, who were almost always men, made a special effort to convert women, and these newly converted women were encouraged to come to Utah. After leaving their families and homes, and depleting their savings to come to "paradise," they discovered the doctrine of polygamy.

If a man felt his wife was not behaving properly, he could always find a more compliant one. Because all women must be married to go to heaven, the pressure to conform to the expectations of men was incredible. If a man was not content with his wife, Brigham Young "recommended...that he take a plural wife or two — since this was a sure cure for a shrewish and recalcitrant female" (Fife 101). The system did not even provide the camaraderie one might expect from a household full of women, for wives were often in competition for attention. Technically, the first wife had to approve subsequent wives (Wallace 82), but few women chose to

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risk the wrath of their husbands and the church elders by refusing someone.

Polygamy was officially suspended by the President of the church in 1890, twenty–eight years after polygamy was declared illegal by the U.S. government, and thirteen years after a U.S. court had ruled that polygamous marriages were not valid (Wallace 368). Ann Eliza Webb had filed for divorce from Brigham Young in 1873, forcing the government to take a stand on the continuing practice of polygamy. The court ruled that she could not receive a divorce, since she was never legally married (Snowden 287).

The church has since become militant about preventing polygamy; anyone found practicing it is immediately excommunicated, and those who preach it are ostracized (Johnson 76). However, polygamy is still in practice in the church, just in a less obvious form. If a woman's husband dies, she may, after a suitable mourning period, marry another man as long as she marries him "for time", or only until death. After death, she will be brought into heaven to be with her first and true husband for eternity. However, if a man's wife dies, he may marry again celestially, thus providing for himself a polygamous family in heaven. The government may be able to thwart the holy practice of polygamy on earth, but they can do nothing about it in heaven.

Because of the doctrine of celestial marriage, it is very difficult for Mormon women to obtain divorces in the church. Women are told that "divorce is usually the result of one or both not living the gospel", and that a woman who wants a divorce is "untrue to the covenants she has made in the house of the Lord" (Laake 176). Legal divorces are no problem to obtain, but they create many problems in the religious life of a Mormon; a church divorce is almost impossible. After a civil divorce, a woman's temple recommend is rescinded (Laake 193). In other words, she is considered unworthy to enter the temple, until she can prove to the heads of the church that the divorce was not caused by adultery. This is done by describing one's sexual activities very exactly in a series of letters to the male church authorities (Laake 194). Believers must submit to this humiliating rule in order to avoid spending eternity with their ex– husbands, because they must be able to enter the temple to obtain a "cancellation of sealing" (Laake 210). This cancellation is required if a woman wishes to remarry in the temple, for women can be celestially married to only one man at a time. Men are not required to undergo any of this to get their temple recommends back, and they, of course, have no need to cancel the celestial marriage to one woman in order to marry a second (Laake 223).

Many Mormon men in their late teens choose to go on a mission for the church, to preach the gospel in a foreign land. This practice, in addition to increasing the church's membership, serves an additional purpose by increasing the devotion of these men to Mormonism. Once a man has spent two years of his life in a foreign country for his faith, deprived of any contact with television, music, and women (for this is required), he will almost certainly never leave the church. He has sacrificed too much, and he cannot afford to disbelieve in the religion that caused it. This system also works in the same way with regard to women, for they are the ones left behind. While a woman's boyfriend or fiancé is off preaching for two years, she spends those years waiting for him. Not only will she believe more strongly in the religion which he left her for, but she will feel more devotion for the man. He must be the right man for her, because she has waited so long for him.

Mormon women today are still brought up to believe that the most important thing they can do is "to marry the right person, in the right place, by the right authority" (McConkie 118). Deborah Laake, who was excommunicated in 1993 for writing *Secret Ceremonies*, states that "it had been repeatedly impressed on me that if I failed to marry a faithful Mormon man...in a Mormon temple, I would be denied access to the highest level of Mormon heaven" (Laake 4). The temple marriage is so important "that a longing for romance on earth should not be allowed to interfere with it" (Laake 77). Twenty–one year old Mormon men returning from missions are told they should be married within six months (Laake 51).

Girls and boys are also told that a good and proper Mormon home is a patriarchal one. A handbook written for fourteen year old boys states that, "The patriarchal order is of divine origin and will continue throughout time and eternity" (Laake 39). Husbands conduct family prayers, bless their wives and children, and generally

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control the household. They also are in charge of "family home evening", one night per week set aside for family prayer and togetherness. The Mormon belief is that Eve's roles in life, those of help-meet and child-bearer, set the pattern for all of her daughters (McConkie 844). Girls are told that God wants them at home (Laake 153), and boys are never taught to clean up after themselves, since when their mothers stop doing it for them, their wives will take over the job. These ideas, at least, have not changed at all since the nineteenth century.

Mormons, and particularly Mormon girls, are commanded to remain completely chaste until marriage. Girls grow up believing that their virginity is what makes them worth marrying (Laake 195), and they are told that "If you sully your body by allowing boys to touch it in forbidden ways...no good man will ever want to marry you" (Johnson 74). According to Mormon Doctrine, "Loss of virtue is too great a price to pay even for the preservation of one's life—better dead clean, than alive unclean" (McConkie 124). In order to enter the temple for the all-important marriage ceremony, Mormons must undergo a rigorous interview by their bishops about the intimate details of their sexual history to ensure their purity (Laake 86). Mormon colleges today have dress codes for women which forbid shorts, short skirts, and other articles of clothing that could possibly incite a young man's lust.

Mormons, like most religions, believe that the woman in a relationship bears the guilt for any sexual wrongdoing. Girls are told that if they "let" a man touch them, he will not respect them, even though he is the one doing the touching. One Mormon woman's date, at the front door of her house at the end of a perfectly sinless night, ordered her to enter her house, fall on her knees, and pray for forgiveness for the sins that she had made him want to commit (Johnson 79).

The strict chastity demanded by the church often clashes with the fact that girls are taught please their husbands and the other men in their lives. This lesson makes it very difficult to maintain the strict chastity required of women. What does a girl do when the man she is dating, whom she is supposed to obey because he is inspired by God, wants to do more than kiss her? In Mormon-dominated Utah, in 1978, seventy percent of the teenage brides were pregnant at their weddings (Johnson 39).

However, the Mormon church is more tolerant of unwed mothers or pregnant brides than it is of divorced women (Laake 217). No matter how sinful the circumstances, a pregnant woman is fulfilling God's plan and her purpose in life, by providing a body for one of the many spirits waiting to be born. Bearing children is the main purpose of a woman in this life; Sonia Johnson stated that, "I'd been conditioned to believe that if I didn't have babies, I wasn't worth much. Having children was what women were made for" (Johnson 42).

The Mormon church of today is still clinging to the beliefs of the nineteenth century; ideas which are becoming more outmoded every day. A few women in the Mormon church are trying to make a difference, but they are usually swiftly excommunicated (Laake 342; Johnson 351). In Mormon magazines, which are full of advice for women from the heads of the church, the message has changed in response to the feminist movement. In 1964, advice on marriage and divorce was fairly dispassionate; by 1972, these topics were addressed with increasing panic and harshness (Laake 175). Feminists are described as "the Pied Pipers of sin who have led women away from the divine role of womanhood down the pathway of error" (Laake 176). Obviously, the Mormon church is not going to alter its views on women in the immediate future. It is questionable whether it is even possible for Mormonism to equalize the roles of men and women, because the oppression of women is so integral to the religion. Men and women cannot truly become equal in the church, for the basic tenets of Mormonism are so fraught with sexism that equality would change the religion beyond recognition.

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