

[Below is the nearly complete text of Sonia Johnson's remarks before the American Psychological Association 1979 Convention supplied by Steve Benson at Exmormon.org. I say "nearly" because the copy of Johnson's speech in Benson's possession is a typed manuscript that appears to have been photocopied many times, resulting in occasionally illegible text at the top of some of its pages. However, despite these relatively small and infrequent gaps, the meaning of Johnson's message is not lost.]

**PATRIARCHAL PANIC:
SEXUAL POLITICS IN THE MORMON CHURCH**

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Chair, MORMONS FOR ERA

Sexual politics is old hat in the Mormon Church. It was flourishing when my grandparents were infants, crossing the plains to Utah in covered wagons. Although different generations have developed their own peculiar variations on the theme, I believe my generation is approaching the ultimate confrontation, for which all the others were simply dress rehearsals. Mormon sexual politics today is an uneasy mixture of explosive phenomena: the recent profound disenfranchisement of Mormon women by Church leaders, the Church's sudden strong political presence in the anti-ERA arena and the women's movement.

Saturated as it is with the anti-female bias that is patriarchy's very definition and reason for being, the Mormon Church can legitimately be termed "The Last Unmitigated Western Patriarchy." (I know you Catholics and Jews in this audience will want to argue with that but I will put my patriarchs up against yours any day!) This patriarchal imperative is reinforced by the belief that the President of the Church is a Prophet of God, as were Isaiah and Moses, and that God will not allow him to make a mistake in guiding the Church. He is, therefore, if not doctrinally, in practice "infallible" — deified. Commonly heard thought-obliterating dicta in my Church are, "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done" and "when the Prophet speaks, the debate is ended." They forget to mention that the debate probably never even got started since in the Church there is little dialogue or real education. Indoctrination is the prime method of instruction because obedience is the contemporary Church's prime message.

The caliber of character forged by this "education to obey" is illustrated by an encounter we had two summers ago [1977] in Lafayette Square after the national ERA march in Washington, D.C. Several of us were accosted by two Brigham Young University students, former missionaries for the Church, who tried to tear down our MORMONS FOR ERA banner. During the ensuing discussion, they solemnly vowed that if the Prophet told them to go out and shoot all Black people, they would do so without hesitation.

Another example: Under the Heavenly mandate against the Equal Rights Amendment, Mormons in Virginia last winter [1978], wearing their EQUALITY YES, ERA NO! buttons (a typical boggling example of patriarchal doublethink), lobbied not only against the ERA but against ALL bills for women — many of which were models of their kind.

The political implications of this mass renunciation of individual conscience for direction from "God" are not clearly enough understood in this country. The Mormons, a tiny minority, are dedicated to imposing the Prophet's moral directives upon all Americans and they may succeed if Americans do not become aware of their methods and goals. Because the organization of the Church is marvelously tight and the obedience of the members marvelously thorough-going, potentially thousands of people can be mobilized in a very short time to do — conscientiously — whatever they are told, without more explanation than "the Prophet has spoken."

But Mormon anti-ERA activity, though organized and directed by the hierarchy of the Church from Salt Lake down through regional and local male leaders, is covert activity, not openly done in the name of the Church. Members are cautioned not to reveal that they are Mormons or organized by the Church when they lobby, write letters, donate money and pass out anti-ERA brochures door-to-door through whole states.⁽¹⁾ Instead, they are directed to say that they are concerned citizens following the dictates of their individual consciences. Since they are, in fact, following

the dictates of the Prophet's conscience and would revise their own overnight if he were to revise his, nothing could be further from the truth.

In addition, Mormon women, who make up most of the anti-ERA Mormon army (and the leaders refer to it as an army in true patriarchal style 2), are advised not to tell people that the men of the Church have organized them, but to maintain that they voluntarily organized themselves. "People won't understand"(3), their male leaders explain which in patriarchal doublespeak means: "People will understand only too well that this is the usual male trick of enlisting women to carry out men's oppressive measures against women, hiding the identity of the real oppressors and alienating women from each other."

So many of us in the Church are so unalterably opposed to this covert and oppressive activity that one of the major purposes of MORMONS FOR ERA has become to shine light upon the murky political activities of the Church and to expose to other Americans its exploitation of women's religious commitment for its self-serving male political purposes.

The reaction of the Church fathers to the women's movement and women's demand for equal rights has produced fearful and fascinating phenomena. In the mid-1960s, Utah's birthrate was almost exactly the same as the national rate but by last year [1978] it was double the national average — evidence of a real patriarchal panic, a tremendous reaction against the basic feminist tenet that women were meant by their Creator to be individuals first and to fulfill roles second — to the degree and in the way they choose, as men do. In almost every meeting of the Church (and Mormons are noted for [next several words illegible] "good" Mormon woman, acceptable to the Brethren and therefore to God; messages calculated to keep women where men like them best: "made" (4) (created) to nurture husband and children, housebound, financially and emotionally dependent, occupationally immature, politically naïve, obedient, subordinate, submissive, somnambulant and bearing much of the heavy and uncredited labor of the Church upon their uncomplaining shoulders.

Encyclicals from the Brethren over the past ten years [1969-1979] such as those which took away women's right to pray in major Church meetings (this right has since been restored but women will not be safe from the Brethren's capricious meddling with our inalienable human rights until we attain positions of power and authority in our Church); to control our own auxiliary money and program and to publish our own magazine for communication among ourselves have put women under total male control, requiring us to ask permission of men in even the smallest of matters. These rulings — which have seriously harmed women's self-esteem, lowered our status, made us bootlickers and toadies to the men of the Church and destroyed what little freedom of choice we had — those rulings reveal the depth of the Brethren's fear of independent, non-permission-asking women, the kind of women which are emerging from the women's movement. And it is no accident that they were enacted just as the feminist tide in the United States began to swell.

But we have other, more direct, ways of knowing how badly threatened and angry our brethren are by the existence of women who are not under their control. In April [1979], we hired a plane to fly a banner over Temple Square in Salt Lake City during a break in the world-wide Conference of male leaders being held in the Tabernacle. The banner announced that MORMONS FOR ERA ARE EVERYWHERE. A reporter phoned the Jody Powell of the Church [Jody Powell was then-President Jimmy Carter's White House press secretary] to ask how the Brethren were taking this little prank and was told that they found it "amusing." Then the Jody Powell-person suggested that the reporter put a cartoon in the next day's paper showing our plane flying over the Angel Moroni atop the Temple (as the actual newspaper had) but instead of a trumpet, picture Moroni brandishing a machine gun. One does not need to be a psychoanalyst to understand how "amusing" the Brethren found our "little prank." (5)

More recently, when an Associated Press reporter interviewed President [Spencer W.] Kimball on the subject of uppity Mormon women, the Prophet warned that Church members who support the Equal Rights Amendment should be "very, very careful" because the Church is led by "strong men and able men. . . . We feel we are in a position to lead them properly." (6) The threat here is open and clear. We had better be very, very careful.

[Illegible] the men at the head of the Church are strong and the patriarchs have for millennia crushed those women who escaped from their mind-bindings. President Kimball is further quoted as saying, "These women who are asking for authority to do everything that a man can do and change the order and go and do men's work instead of

bearing children, she's just off her base" (7) — a truly appalling revelations of ignorance about the realities of women's lives.

But perhaps the image of greatest terror crawled from the psyche of Hartman Rector, one of the General Authorities of the Church, in response to my testimony before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights:

In order to attempt to get the male somewhere near even, the Heavenly Father gave him the Priesthood, or directing authority for the Church and home. Without this bequeath, the male would be so far below the female in power and influence that there would be little or no purpose for his existence. In fact, [he] would probably be eaten by the female as is the case with the black widow spider. (8)

Given this view of women, it should come as no surprise that despite the carefully calculated public relations campaign which portrays the Mormon Church as the last bastion (and probably the inventors!) of the happy family and fulfilled womanhood, all is not well in Zion: all is particularly not well among Zion's women.

In recent years, considerable hue and cry has arisen over the subject of depression among Mormon women, inspiring a spate of documentaries and articles. (9) *The Salt Lake Tribune* in December of 1977 quoted local therapists as stating that up to three-quarters of their Mormon patients were women and that the common denominator was low self-image and lack of fulfillment outside the home. (10) This depression is endemic and begins at an early age: the incidence of suicide among teenaged females in Utah is more than double the national average and rising. (11) Seven of 10 teenaged brides are "premaritally pregnant" and 40 percent of Utah's brides are teens. (12) The proportion of teenage marriages in Utah has been greater than for the nation each year since 1960, which might partially account for Utah's divorce rate being higher than the national average. (The time of the beginning of the increase is also significant, as I have pointed out earlier). Alcoholism and drug abuse among women are problems in Mormon culture, as are child and wife abuse. In the last 14 years, rape in Utah has increased 165 percent and the local index of rape is 1.35 percent higher than the national average. (13) Add to this the significant fact that attendance at Relief Society — the Church's women's auxiliary — and at the Young Women's organization meetings has dropped off drastically nationwide.

What all this says to the patriarchs is anyone's guess — they are either afraid to talk with those of us who are alarmed at their opinions and treatment of women or they do not consider us worth their time. (14) But what it says to those of us who have survived being Mormon women is that our sisters are silently screaming for help and that they are not only NOT finding it at Church, but that at Church they are being further depressed and debilitated by bombardment with profoundly demeaning female sex-role stereotypes. Their Church experience is making them sick.

Because Mormon women are trained to desire above all else to please men (and I include in this category God, whom all too many of us view as an extension of our chauvinist leaders), we spend enormous amounts of energy trying to make the very real but — for most of us — limited satisfactions of mother- and wifehood substitute satisfactorily for all other life experiences. What spills over into those vacant lots of our hearts where our intellectual and talented selves should be vigorously alive and thriving are, instead, frustration, anger and the despair which comes from suppressing anger and feeling guilty for having felt it in the first place.

Last summer [1978], a Utah woman wrote to Senate Hatch of Utah: "A sea of smoldering women is a dangerous thing." And that's what the Mormon patriarchy has on its hands: a sea of smoldering women. Those whose anger is still undifferentiated, who do not realize how thoroughly they are being betrayed — their rage is exploited by Church leaders who subvert it into attacks against feminist causes such as the Equal Rights Amendment, making scapegoats of women and their righteous desires, identifying women as the source of women's danger (a patriarchal tactic for maintaining power that has its roots in antiquity) and trying to distract us from recognizing that where our real danger as women lies, and always has lain, is in patriarchy.

But women are not fools. The very violence with which the Brethren attacked an Amendment which would give women human status in the Constitution abruptly opened the eyes of thousands of us to the true source of our danger and our anger. This open patriarchal panic against our human rights raised consciousness miraculously all over the Church as nothing else could have done. And revealing their raw panic at the idea that women might step forward as goddesses-in-the-making with power in a real — not a "sub" or "through men" — sense, was the leaders' critical

and mortal error, producing as it did a deafening dissonance between their rhetoric of love and their oppressive, unloving, destructive behavior.

I receive phone calls and letters from Mormon women all over the country and each has a story or two to tell: how two Mormon women in one meeting independently stood and spoke of their Mother in Heaven, how they met afterwards and wept together in joy at having found and named Her; how a courageous Mormon woman is preparing to make the first public demand for the priesthood. “The time has come,” she says calmly, “for women to insist upon full religious enfranchisement.” This statement is the Mormon woman’s equivalent of the shot heard ‘round the world!

Our patriarchy may be The Last Unmitigated but it is no longer unchallenged. A multitude of Mormon women are through asking permission. We are waking up and growing up and in our waking and growing can be heard — distinctly — the death rattle of the patriarchy.

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[Endnotes]

1. “New York State women’s meeting: 8,000 converge on Albany: local woman creates fracas.” *The Daily Times*, Mawaroneck, New Jersey, July 1, 1977.

The local woman who created the “fracas” was a Mormon, Sherlene Bartholomew, from the Westchester Ward in Scarsdale, N.Y., who would only say that she was “a member of a loosely-organized group of mothers of small children.” The article goes on:

Later, in a private interview, Ms. Bartholomew continued to insist she was not affiliated with any organized group. Yet in the next 90 minutes or so during which we accompanied her . . . she came in contact with a dozen or so women who greeted her by her first name, many of whom refused to identify themselves.

From the “Supplementary Data Sheet” regarding the Albany International Woman’s Year Conference, sent to “all Bishops, Branch Presidents and Concerned Members” by a New York Stake Relief Society Presidency:

The First Presidency [includes the Prophet and two counselors] urges full attendance and participation. Elements capable of destroying family unity . . . must be opposed. We should act as individuals — as citizens and residents of New York State — and not as any church or organization.

From the recorded and transcribed minutes of the first organization meeting of the Potomac Regional Women’s Coalition (later known as the LDS Citizen’s Coalition), at Vienna, Virginia, November 8, 1978, p. 13:

If you go to your state senator and say that he should be against the Equal Rights Amendment because the Prophet is against it, you are going to get nowhere. That may be why we are against it, but when you trying to convince a legislator, you better talk his language, not yours.

2. From the Virginia organization meeting minutes, p. 17:

You have got to take this seriously as a calling . . . When the call comes, you march with your forces. In other words, you are being made a general of a force.

3. From the Virginia organization meeting minutes, p. 2, Regional Representative Julian Lowe speaking:

Experience shows that if the Brethren are out beating the bushes it looks like, in the eyes of some, that we are trying to keep women subservient [note the word “keep”] and it is far from that. This is the exact opposite of what we’re trying to do but it is always interpreted that way. Why don’t I quit while I’m ahead. [!]

4. Wertz, William C., Associated Press “LDS President opposes ERA, encourages women to be wives,” *The Rexburg [Idaho] Standard*, Tuesday, June 19, 1979.

Quoting President Kimball: “The woman was made to be the wife, the one who teaches and trains the children.”

5. Oral communication.

6. Wertz, William C., Associated Press “LDS President opposes ERA, encourages women to be wives,” *The Rexburg [Idaho] Standard*, Tuesday, June 19, 1979.

7. *ibid.*

8. Correspondence from Hartman Rector to Teddie Wood, August 29, 1978.

9. A few of these are:

--Degn, Louise, “Mormon Women and Depression,” KSL [Salt Lake] TV commentary, February 17, 1978.

--Cardall, Duane, “The Three Faces of Depression: Teenage Suicide,” KSL TV documentary, February 10, 1979.

--Burgoyne, Robert H. and Burgoyne, Rodney W., “Belief Systems and Unhappiness: the Mormon Woman Example,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 1978, 3, 48-53.

--Associated Press Provo, Utah, “Depression Among Y Students on Rise, Health Director Notes,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 14, 1979.

--Warenski, Marilyn *Patriarchs and Politics: the Plight of the Mormon Woman*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978). See especially Chapter 4, pp. 81-106: “Double Dose of the Double Message.”

10. Governor’s Commission on the Status of Women, “Utah Women: A Profile,” June 1978, p. 42.

11. Cardall, Duane, “The Three Faces of Depression: Teenage Suicide,” KSL TV documentary, February 10, 1979.

12. Associated Press, Logan, Utah, “Utah Weddings 40% Teens,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 8, 1979.

13. Governor’s Commission on the Status of Women, “Utah Women: A Profile,” June 1978, pp. 23-46.

14. Recently, when a Stake President in Provo, Utah, suggested to the Regional Representative that a woman speak in Stake Conference about women in the Church, the Regional Representative replied, “We can’t have a woman talking about women in Conference.”

This fear — and disdain — is, I believe, prevalent among men in the Church and has accounted in the last few months for a truly incredible phenomenon: a book entitled, *WOMAN*, published by Deseret Book, which has as its authors 15 male leaders of the Church — not a single woman!