
PERCEPTIONS OF THE PLIGHT



A REVIEW-RESPONSE

BY LINDA SILLITOE

My husband, John, is book review editor for Sunstone. One evening he tossed a book into my lap and said, "This is just out. I thought you might want to look it over." Too casually, he added, "If you want to review it you can keep that copy."

I looked at the title *Patriarchs and Politics: The Plight of the Mormon Woman* and groaned. "I don't have time to read it, let alone review it," I excused myself. I had privately resolved to avoid soap boxes unless they contained Tide. But a couple of days later the book was still lying there and I opened it up.

"You're marking up that book," John said that evening.

"So I'll review it," I muttered, drawing brackets around another paragraph. I finished reading the book the next night.

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Patriarchs and Politics speaks with the voice of someone outside of Mormonism explaining Mormonism and Mormon women to other outsiders. Having interviewed dozens of Utah women—Mormon and not—during the emotion-charged weeks that followed last year's IWY state meeting, I think the book performs a service. I was interviewing a non-Mormon, feminist writer who was preparing her own article. She stopped short during our closing comments and asked with pain, anger, and bewilderment in her voice, "Maybe you can tell me. How can LDS women be like most of those who were at the Salt Palace? What makes them respond instantly to a phone call to attend a rally? Why do they vote any way a man instructs them simply because he's male? I don't understand how they can do that to themselves." Marilyn Warenski explains such questions at greater length and more fluently than did I.

It was not until Warenski discussed Brigham Young and the women of the early Utah church that I checked the back flap of the book cover. Yep, she has Utah roots after all, no matter how "outside" her voice now may be. Who else would care enough to write the book? She can't seem to prevent a definite sarcastic edge in her discussion of Brigham Young. Throughout the rest of the book, the tone is often ironic, usually thoughtful, sometimes sharply perceptive, and sometimes sympathetic.

Although I think this book will speak lucidly to many about the situation of Mormon women and some of the concepts that influence their thinking, it is surely not the definitive nor—hopefully—the last word on the subject. Although Warenski covers a fairly wide range of historical, religious, and philosophical subjects, she does so selectively, rather than in depth. Various criticisms have been raised concerning her scholarship and research. The bibliography is "selective" and footnoting is sometimes inadequate. Here I add my own small protest to the clamor since my article on the IWY State Meeting for *Utah Holiday* is summarized, in part, and even quoted directly in one paragraph, with nary a footnote. One wonders also if Rodney Turner's work on Mormon women and the priesthood should be given the official status it attains in this book. Warenski seems to anticipate some of these objections by stating in her introduction that the book intends to be more philosophical than historical or revolutionary. She began the work with oral interviews with Mormon women. It is obvious, however, that Warenski has selected from these discussions the material which fits her present thesis, rather than working from an interest in presenting all the opinions she gathered. There is no description of how the interviewees were chosen, whether they represent a cross-section of Mormon women—or as seems likely—those women who initially felt that there is a plight for Mormon women and wanted to discuss it. Warenski states also in the introduction that she has no interest in starting a revolution within or without the Mormon Church. It seems unlikely that she will, despite the interesting reactions since the book went on sale in Salt Lake City.

Chapters include "Polygamous Suffragettes" and the beginning of a women's movement in Utah, and traces the history of the Equal Rights Amendment in Utah in such chapters as "The HOTDOG Invasion" and "She is

My Princess." Portions of Mormon thinking, theology, and policy are so examined in chapters such as "Mormons and the Work Ethic", "Relief Society: Sisterhood of the Brotherhood," and "Unmarried in a Married Church."

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Clearly, a book which examines such integral parts of Mormonism as the work ethic and free agency in careful detail is more than a superficial scandal sheet. Mormon beliefs are frequently compared and contrasted with other religions, since they, also, are largely patriarchal—both Christian churches and Judaism. The reader, Mormon or not, can gain perspective of Mormonism in contrast to other religions, in terms of authority, leadership, and priesthood.

Interestingly, "conservative" Mormons may not be likely to agree with Warenski's premises, but, if they read carefully, may very well agree with her conclusions. For example, they will probably nod agreement when Warenski demonstrates that the thousands of women who flooded the IWY state meeting last year acted in accordance with the feelings of Church leaders, just as did the women who gathered in 1870 to affirm polygamy and woman suffrage. This paragraph, for another example, seems as at home rolling from a pulpit, spoken by a male voice, as from page 92 of *Patriarchs and Politics*:

What the Church needs now from the sisters is not their economic assistance. The greatest services Mormon women can perform for the kingdom at this time are to operate its programs, to insure continuing family involvement, and to train young members in the Mormon way of life. And by shuttling back and forth between home and church, the women of Mormonism can strengthen the ties that will protect the kingdom against the threatening influences of the outside world.

Brigham Young, Warenski insists, encouraged women to perform economic roles and develop professional skills because he needed them as a part of the work force. He also needed their votes. Polygamous wives were available to keep the home fires burning. Thus, she analogizes, the women who filled the Salt Palace to oppose the ERA, abortion, and homosexuality (all issues officially denounced by the Brethren) and in the process voted down anything that hinted at federal aid or control (consistent with Church conservative politics) were the true spiritual descendants of the "Polygamous Suffragettes" who so baffled their contemporaries.

Ironically, the Mormon women who are involved in the women's movement and/or support the ERA, find that the heritage of independent political initiative they claim to inherit from their foremothers is handed by Warenski to their sisters who are home stirring the potage.

The chapter on the work ethic was intriguing. I must have been indoctrinated without ever knowing what I

was about. When that ethic is contrasted with individual or creative compulsions, Warenski describes the results:

Critics who say women are not valued in Mormon society are mistaken. The fact is, women's services to the Church are so valuable that the system cannot afford to have them running around pursuing their own interests. In taking an arbitrary stand on women's roles, it is not that Church authorities are opposed to women's rights per se; and with its unusual work ethic, the culture naturally would be proud of high-achieving women under different circumstances. But it must be remembered that the kingdom is a group operation, and groups are not accustomed to considering individual needs before group causes.

Warenski comments with some awe about the industry of Mormons. One may ponder what is often taken for granted: that is the action-oriented nature of much of the direction we receive. From the DO IT sign on President Kimball's desk to the goal-oriented auxiliary lessons, Mormons are very prone toward the accomplishment of that which is tangible and/or measurable. Warenski comments on this industry with a sting—but not an inaccurate one:

In primarily breeding doers instead of thinkers, the high-achieving Mormon culture could be evaluated as pro-education and anti-intellectual simultaneously.

The combination of group industry and collective values can also be hard on the individual creativity that turns toward art. The pre-packaged crafts and projects can sometimes lead to a pre-packaged mentality, Warenski conjectures. For anyone who has found herself on a Tuesday morning choosing between cutting up carpet scraps to glue into throw rugs or making a tin-foil painting, there is this:

It is not easy for a devout Mormon women to turn the beauty of a summer day into painting or poetry when the peaches are ripe and ready to be canned. Utah certainly must be the canning capital of the world and the only place where canning fruit can be directly related to eternal salvation. . . . There is no lack of talent, but many potentially creative individuals settle for becoming mere dabblers, their talents compromised and energies diluted by going in too many directions at once. . . . By its very design, the system intended to produce excellence seems destined to foster mediocrity.

The primary purpose of *Patriarchs and Politics*, however, is to attack the patriarchal order in priesthood and politics and the interface between. Warenski takes pains to explain why Mormon women cannot foreseeably receive priesthood status in order to attain leadership in the Church. She tracks the patriarchal order not only through Church levels, but family order and eternal implications:

Therefore in this partnership of mutual obligations and mutual rewards, Mormon men and women are dependent upon each other for exaltation. If, in this exalted state, the rewards seem unevenly distributed,

the appropriateness of the arrangement is nevertheless consistently stressed by Church leaders. . . .

It is easy to see that if a Mormon woman asked for the priesthood, she would not be making a simple request for a leadership position of the Church. She would be interfering with the patriarchal family structure on earth, not to mention altering the entire Mormon conception of eternity.

One issue Warenski mentions only briefly, however is the *de facto* leadership many women attain both at church and at home. The Relief Society has exercised considerable clout generally and in local wards—particularly before it was correlated completely through priesthood lines, losing its publication and fund-raising abilities. Almost without exception, the Young Womens leadership dominates the Young Mens ward organization, often in a state of frustration because of the apathy and inefficiency of Young Mens leadership. Primary—a nearly all-woman auxiliary—has similarly been a strong organization for a century. Many women also manage a good share of home responsibilities and decisions—ergo, power—although many still defer to their husbands in “spiritual” matters, but then only if they consider him to be righteous. Warenski admits that, due to Mormon men’s ecclesiastical and secular responsibilities and pressures (plight?), many homes are virtual matriarchies. But Warenski is interested in official power that is nominal as well as actual, and this issue is largely ignored.

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Those readers (Mormon women particularly) who sympathize with many of Warenski’s premises, however, will most likely find themselves excluded from her conclusions. Conversely, and ironically, many “mainstreamers” who would disagree that Mormon women have any conflicts at all, are likely to agree with Warenski’s conclusions, which are stated in absolute terms. Once priesthood and patriarchal order are clearly identified as integral parts of Mormon theology and practices, once the women’s rights movement—particularly the ERA—is traced through Utah history, Warenski draws battle lines as mutually exclusive absolutes. (For her, “Mormon feminist” is a contradiction in terms, rather like “military intelligence?”) Unless a Mormon woman is the victim of “kinky thinking” she cannot consider herself a feminist and remain a Mormon. “For women to stand on a platform of both feminism and Mormonism is to stand in the middle of a battlefield.”

Warenski outlines the goals of feminism this way:

... it is the essence and most serious aspiration of feminism today that the current women’s movement will mark the beginning of the end of patriarchal societies. That full realization of this objective is a long way off, in fact it likely will not occur in their lifetime is understood.

Thus feminism is an absolute enemy of Mormonism in Warenski’s terms. Now Mormonism:

... Nevertheless, the aggressive use of Mormon wealth and power to impede progress is potentially threatening to women everywhere and has provided reason for overwhelming national concern.

... Regardless of pressure from outside, change must come from within. With their church so elaborately designed on a base of male domination, both on earth and in heaven, Mormonism stands out among religions of the world as the one least able to establish true equality of the sexes.

Much could be said about that arrangement of conflicting interests. I will leave it to readers of the entire book to work out their own responses, and, of necessity, limit my own. The Mormon women (and men) most likely to read this book because of interest in women’s issues are left no ground and given no quarter. For myself, I agree, sometimes painfully, with a number of Warenski’s assertions, if not with her tone: that the thousands of women who voted in a overwhelming bloc at Utah’s IWY state meeting are the spiritual descendants of our foremothers who sustained polygamy and suffrage; that Mormon women often feel torn and squeezed by various pressures; that there is a strong inclination toward packaged group thought and activity rather than encouragement to truly follow their own individual, creative gifts; that pressures on Mormon women are both subtle and blatant to fit the mold, and given to stereotype and extreme; that Mormon society constricts itself toward conformity and thus mediocrity, rather than individual excellence. Fortunately, I view the Church authorities as far more benevolent than does Marilyn Warenski and my years of experience as a Mormon add depth and resiliency to many of the conflicts. When Warenski links the two ends of the continuum together, she forms a full circle which nicely encloses her point of view, but excludes me.

Or so it seems. Most significantly, the gut issue in defining a feminist, Warenski emphasizes, is this:

According to (Mary) Daly’s philosophy, a feminist could be opposed to marriage or totally committed to motherhood and traditional marriage; she could believe in sexual freedom or sexual restraint; she could adhere to a conception of deity or she might not believe in any God; but putting it on the line the “gut issue” of feminism, it would be impossible to be a feminist without believing that women must be responsible for their own decisions.

This comes from page 20. On page 223 Warenski returns full circle to this definition and asserts that “feminism can never properly be perceived as compatible with patriarchal religion. But most particularly, it can never be appropriately identified with the Mormon religion... despite any and all claims to the contrary.” Thus, Warenski sets up feminism and Mormonism as mongoose and cobra with the rather arbitrary requirement that Mormon women are *not* responsible for their own decisions.

I disagree. Individual responsibility and free agency are covered at some length in Warenski’s book as basic tenets of Mormon religion. Although obedience and pa-

triarchal dominance are receiving good press right now within the Church, free individual agency remains a basic—and my favorite—principle of the gospel. What woman—what person—makes decisions without influences? Certainly I am aware of women who abdicate most or all of the decision-making ability and opportunity to their husbands or to Church authorities. Many, however, do not. As Warenski states, Mormon women are generally strong. I know many women, and include myself among them, who do not make decisions easily, blindly, or automatically. They examine their options with exacting scrutiny, using all the information and resources available to them. They—*We*—certainly take responsibility for our own decisions. Often those decisions are made despite considerable pressure from one source or another.

My own response to *Patriarchs and Politics* is that one cannot totally agree with Marilyn Warenski and remain a Mormon woman. She excludes us. But one does not have to agree totally to find the book stimulating reading. In some respects, the book is already dated by significant changes within the Church since its April publication date. There is the revelation of June 8th, pertaining to blacks and the priesthood, which was released as a policy statement but identified as a revelation. There has, as yet, been no explanation of those scriptures and theories which supported the denial of the priesthood in the past.

There is the decision at October conference to allow women to pray in sacrament meetings because they are not denied that right in the scriptures. This decision sets the precedent of assuming that all rights not specifically denied rest with the individual (rather like the U.S. Constitution versus latent states' rights). Goodness knows where it could lead. There is the statment on hunting for sport, and the realization that in an authoritarian society there are pressures and directions for all members. There is President Kimball's message to women at the October fireside inviting them to expand and improve and insisting that they should not be "silent or limited" partners in marriage.

Yet there is also Rachel David in August, once considered an ideal Mormon wife and mother, who followed her husband into an extreme perversion of Mormon principles: total obedience, husband-as-god (prematurely), devotion to family and home, and total abdication of agency to her husband. After Immanuel David died painlessly, Rachel David coaxed or threw all their children and herself into her husband's absent arms. Only the youngest child, who lived in that atmosphere for the shortest time, tore her hands trying to hang on. Those children and the obedient silence in which they fell have remained in my mind as an example of Mormonism gone mad.

There is also the strong affirmation of traditional roles at the October fireside and at the dedication of the Nauvoo Monument to women. There is Elaine Cannon's maiden speech at the October fireside and "President Kimball, we will obey!" and "When the prophet speaks, sisters, the debate is over." I still puzzle over her reluctance to ride in the same elevator as the prophet (or take the stairs) until he coaxed her to do so. It is not customary for him to ride alone with Security. Perhaps Security looked especially forbidding that morning.

The process of discussion and evaluation is ongoing and interesting. Once again I decide that for myself I care less for priesthood than for true, assumed equality in the eyes of my brothers and sisters.

If men and women were indeed on equal footing, why would it be necessary for Church spokesmen to warn the woman that she should not envy her husband's position any more than he should envy the position of her leaders?

I am bored with continual condescension and weary of occasional hostility due to pervasive sexism. There is a parallel in my own mind between the denial of priesthood to blacks and to women. Although members were warned that the denial of priesthood to blacks did not justify racism, virtually any study group or Sunday School class could provide evidence to the contrary. And although Church leaders protest (too much?) that women *are* equal (though separate) the sexism still permeates most layers of Mormon society. Again it is justified by scripture and theory.

We may be dismissed by Warenski—as is her right—but there are many wrongs to be righted within the context of Mormonism. There are men who demand obedience in every aspect of marriage by virtue of their priesthood (amittedly unrighteous dominion), and there are women who remain children by defaulting their agency or manipulating their husbands. Child abuse and wife beating are problems in Mormon society and are sometimes justified by priesthood. Depression among Mormon women is a problem (just ask KSL) and so is guilt, particularly among women who are single, childless, or simply not domestic. Every Mother's Day is Compensation Day for mother to be praised to the skies for her cheerfulness while being walked on and her perfection as an icon in the home. (And speaking of equal rights, what happens to Fathers Day?—let alone Easter!) There is much more.

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Marilyn Warenski uses the historical data, oral interviews, and research she has collected to support her point of view. There is an undertone of passion beneath her objectivity that reminds us that she is a former Mormon, not just a non-Mormon. the book is informative, thought-provoking, significant. I have responded only to parts of it which seem to me to be most interesting or crucial. Other readers will be more interested in the saga of the ERA in Utah, single women in the Church, or the Relief Society. I liked the book. I would not recommend it to those who view the plight of Mormon women as how to find a babysitter on Mutual night, but I think that most readers who read it carefully will agree either with Warenski's conclusion that feminism and Mormonism are irreversible and diametrically opposed, or with many of her opinions and insights about Mormon women. It is a valuable source for those who enjoy sifting and sorting as a process, as well as a means to an end.