

# GOING MY WAY:

# AN INTERVIEW

# WITH NEWSWEEK'S

# KENNETH WOODWARD

In the September 1, 1980 issue of *Newsweek* there appeared an article by its religion editor and senior writer, Kenneth Woodward. While not all would share the opinion of Wendell Ashton who called it "a brilliantly-written treatise," it was extraordinary for at least three reasons. First, it was not news per se, not connected to any event or development in Mormondom. Rather, it was a tightly-worded, lucid attempt to outline Mormon beliefs to an obviously non-Mormon and mostly non-religious readership. That such a piece could be printed in a national news magazine which primarily deals in the controversial and the timely is in itself a remarkable achievement. Secondly, the tone of the article was by and large neutral, free from the belittling sarcasm or the overblown praises common to Mormon-related media coverage. There was no mention of the Church's easiest institutional targets (the battle with Sonia Johnson or LDS finances) or of its much-vaunted institutional successes (growth statistics or celebrity members such as the Osmonds, the Marriotts, Johnny Miller, or George Romney). Lastly, the article gave long overdue recognition to an extremely worthy enterprise, namely SUNSTONE. "Significantly," it reads, "it is only in struggling independent Mormon journals, such as the brightly-edited bimonthly, SUNSTONE, that creative Mormon thought regularly finds a public." As SUNSTONE editors, we were immediately interested in the story behind the story and the man behind the story.

Kenneth Lawrence Woodward (for Saint Lawrence) is a committed Catholic and has been the religion editor for *Newsweek* since 1964. He is a product of exclusively Catholic education from elementary school, where he claims "the sisters glided across polished classroom floors as if on silent rubber wheels," and Saint Ignatius High School in Cleveland—which he attended with Phil Donahue among other notables—to Notre Dame and graduation with high honors in English literature. He later received a fellowship to the University of Michigan Law School where he spent one doleful year reading poetry. ("There are no connotations in the study of law," he moaned, "only denotations.") He completed his formal studies

with an MA in English from the University of Iowa.

Woodward's on-the-job training came in Omaha where he worked as a civil rights reporter for the *Sun* newspaper group from 1962-64. He was the first journalist to receive the Outstanding Citizenship Award from the Omaha Urban League for a series of articles he wrote exposing real estate profiteering in Omaha's black ghetto.

As a devoted if beleaguered father of three, Mr. Woodward has long been concerned about the condition of America's families. He has written numerous articles for *Newsweek* on the subject, including such cover stories as "Saving the Family" and "Who's Raising the Kids?" (The latter received the American Psychological Foundation's National Media Award in 1976.) "I was outraged," he said. "Kids were being incredibly neglected." He is the co-author of *Grandparents, Grandchildren: The Vital Connection* (forthcoming this March from Anchor-Doubleday) in which he examines the effects on our society of the transition from a three-generational to a nuclear family and the decided loss for both grandchildren and grandparents.

The task of reporting all religious developments in the world for *Newsweek's* two and a half million readers each week for sixteen years, while an awesome responsibility, has provided Mr. Woodward with a unique vantage point. He has interviewed hundreds of religious persons from every possible lifestyle, persuasion, and belief system, has heard their stories, has observed the ebb and flow of their religious sentiments. He often quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins: "the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods." Woodward broods too, painfully watching and reporting the decline of religion from a distance. But he also partakes, bringing to his work an invaluable if not essential element: his own faith. So his accounts are imbued with a personal understanding of what religion is all about, and a genuine respect for any sincere, religious adventure. SUNSTONE felt that its readers could benefit greatly from his perceptions of religion in general and Mormonism in particular.

This interview was conducted by Peggy Fletcher from Sep-

tember 8th to September 29th, 1980, at various locations in New York City and recorded on snatches of non-functioning cassette tapes, menus and napkins, old SUNSTONE calendars, notebook paper, and book jackets.

SUNSTONE: Which religious persons you have met while writing for NEWSWEEK have particularly influenced you?

WOODWARD: I couldn't possibly name them all.

SUNSTONE: I know. I only have a few hours of tape.

WOODWARD: Abraham Heschel, who is dead, was my spiritual godfather. He was a rabbi and a blue blood Hasid. He lived in a little room in the Jewish Theological Seminary here in New York. His books were always threatening to fall over which gave me the perilous sense of being inundated at any moment. That same sense was obvious in his conversation as well. And he always said, because he was a Hasid, "My friend, let me tell you a story." It was from him, then, that I learned the limitations of propositional or philosophical theology. Because he always told stories and he always made a point.

He taught me what the Sabbath meant, to have a day of rest, to let everything stand still (something which is virtually impossible in our society). I could see practices rising out of this which, if you really had insight and spiritual understanding, could make a day of rest all that it might possibly be.

Because Heschel was rooted in a millennia-old tradition, he was able to be very relevant without being trendy. An awful lot of people were looking for a way to be relevant because they weren't anymore (especially the Christians), and they would hop on whatever good or nefarious cause came along. Mostly the causes were good, like civil rights, but some people were so caught up that they became unstable. Heschel, because he was rooted, was always stable. That's what I really appreciated about him.

There's Martin Marty. It's incredible to find an intellectual and an academic—not to mention a superb journalist—who is also a deeply spiritual person. Marty will sit down and smoke cigars and play poker, have an investment club with his neighbors, build a cabana in his back yard for a swimming pool, and raise not only his own family but several foster children as well. Many of his acquaintances are completely unaware that he is one of the most important scholars in the country in American religious history. He's always taking a back seat when he could probably tell you anything you want to know, always pointing to somebody else, trying to bring people out—a very self-effacing man given his gifts. So I have learned a lot from him in that regard.

Dorothy Day, an incredible woman out of the twenties who ran the *Catholic Worker*. I felt I was intruding on her life to try to write a story about her. (It is so nice when somebody doesn't want to be written about because most people are dying to have their names in a national magazine.) I went into the chapel with her while she prayed. We talked about kids; she talked about her grandchild. And then we talked about her work. Her big problem was that some of the derelicts and drunks she put up and fed in her hospitality house would steal her books. But it was a thing she put up with because she preferred to have the books go rather than get rid of the derelicts.

Some of the most interesting people I've met are the gnomes, the sort of ordinary people in the ranks that you can't really write about. I'll tell you about a guy I met. . . .

SUNSTONE: My friend, let me tell you a story?

WOODWARD: Right. I don't even know his name but he looked like my grandfather. He had white hair, and I met him when I was doing a story on the Southern Baptists in the sixties. I was not sure what to expect because in the North, most writers, editors, and social action people I knew presumed that all Southern Baptists were rednecks and racists. Well, it seems that this particular man had been working for thirty years with blacks, had even put together a black seminary under Southern Baptist auspices. Then about two weeks before I talked to him (he didn't tell me this—I learned it from somebody else), he had gone to a black church and participated in the service. Afterwards, a bunch of real rednecks got hold of this man, who was in his sixties at the time, rolled him out of the car, urinated all over him, and left him in a ditch. That story never got reported. Those kinds of people, against their own religious tradition as well as the whole Southern culture, had been doing yeoman's work for many years with no publicity.

So although there is much that is bad in religion, it does summon people to their best selves. It can sustain (Mormon word) people in extraordinary undertakings without asking the *Newsweeks* of the world to come in and tell their stories. Religion in general can make good hypocrites, but at least hypocrites know they ought to be something more than what they are. We have just been through a period of pervasive self-congratulations, people constantly saying I'm ok and you're ok. The whole culture has been trying to tell us that whatever we're doing, it's ok. Well, it's not ok. It's not that what you are is necessarily bad, but you can always be better, do more, open up to something higher. I think that's what all religions offer. Certainly nothing else does. The Constitution doesn't spell out what the niftiest guy of the week is supposed to be like. Television gives us nothing but the Incredible Hulk and Laverne and Shirley for models. And on down the line.

SUNSTONE: Has it been difficult for you to write about your own church?

WOODWARD: I'd say it has been both hard and easy at the same time. Easy because it's what I know best; hard because it has made me rethink and sift through all my beliefs and experiences more critically.

SUNSTONE: I know exactly what you mean.

WOODWARD: In 1971 I did a cover story called "Has the Church Lost Its Soul?" (Interestingly, we didn't say *which* church. Lenny Bruce used to ask, "Why is the Catholic church the only *the* Church?") Sometimes in the midst of group journalism there comes a story you can wrap yourself around, and they let you write it all yourself. That one came out of my guts.

I had set myself the job of evoking a culture, describing how the Church creates a culture and infuses meaning in the ordinary things that happen to people—birth, marriage, sex, death, and, for Catholics, athletics, especially football. I tried to use specifically Catholic imagery to give outsiders a true sense of Catholicism as it had

been. But the article was definitely an attempt to say what was lost more than what remained. Some right-wing Catholics were offended, but they clearly didn't understand. It was a very loving piece. For me, Vatican II was the end of something not the beginning. What I was trying to say was that up until the 1960s there was an integral Catholic subculture in the United States which separated Catholics from other people, made them feel unique and united. Like a family so to speak. Remember, we are talking about fifty million people (the largest single church in the country), and all of different backgrounds, feeling some commonality, feeling like a people. The extraordinary thing is that this feeling lasted as long as it did given the pressures of secularism, division, and its own size. But it also disintegrated overnight which means there was something rotting from within. It was not being nourished and renewed as it ought to have been.

You see, in part what religion can do is link up the everyday with the eternal, providing meaning in ongoingness. That's what traditions are all about. But the paradox of tradition is that everything that's alive has to change. Therefore, for traditions to remain viable, they must look forward as well as backward. To reembody the past, you must give it contemporaneous meaning. Sometimes that meaning gets reversed. The Catholic church's original position on birth control was an attempt to say good things about the body, especially about sexuality and reproduction, in opposition to the Gnostics. So in order to reaffirm that same position now they ought to be fully supportive of birth control. Religion locates you in a tradition—allows you to pick your heroes, heroines, and models from other times, places, and cultures (in the case of the Catholic church, most often medieval Europe). Allows you therefore to transcend your culture and then look at it in a critical light.

Let me give you an example. In the sixties I suggested to the rector of St. Peter's Cathedral here in New York that he get all the cardinals in their red dress and have a high pontifical mass in Latin (natch, right?) and then have Daniel Berrigan preach the sermon against the war in Viet Nam. So on the one hand you use the symbolism of the mass with all its triumphalism—a Gregorian chant and everything that's old. None of it is American, after all, which would assert that we belong to a larger and more noble tradition. Then the sermon provides the contemporary relevance: out of our tradition, therefore, we do X with respect to the war. I have yet to see such a mass, but that's what traditions *can* do. (The Berrigan brothers have been arrested again. Did you know?)

SUNSTONE: Do you have any trouble, particularly in a secular environment, being a thinker and a believer?

WOODWARD: The major answer to that is no, assuming I'm a thinker. Actually, it's very easy in the Catholic tradition to be a thinker because we have an exalted respect for reason, as exemplified in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. The epistemological point to Thomism is that the mind is in touch with reality and it can know God, at least by analogy. So I don't have a problem with that at all.

I suppose there are some who would say that I'm not a believer. They would be wrong, of course, but it has been difficult for me to discover how timebound many reli-

gious ideas and practices are. I used to think that Jesus spoke in Latin. That's what happened at mass, right? I didn't mind that some popes were bad (I was somewhat glad that they were), but to realize how many things were historically conditioned was hard. Maybe it's a personal-ity thing, but I wanted to think that some things never change, some things are eternal, beyond change, beyond corruption. I guess it's part of growing up, something you have to come to terms with at some time.

SUNSTONE: What about being a believer among non-believers?

WOODWARD: That's no problem at all. They're idiots and I'm arrogant. You see, I know what they know, but they don't know what I know. The very well-educated, the ivy league types by and large know nothing about religion, absolutely zilch-o. You can tell them anything you want, because they don't know what you're talking about. So I have the best of both. (Actually, it's often harder to be a believer among believers.)

Anyway, lots of the people around here are "ex." You see, for many persons who have grown up within a subculture, be it Mormon or Catholic, the outside world is always "they"; it's always a world of danger and mys-



Bernard Goffry, *Newsweek*

## Mormons need to do a little more thinking about the logical implications of their theology.

tery, both frightening and alluring. So if the inside world becomes too inhibiting—intellectually, sexually, any which way—the outside world seems more desirable. I somehow got the notion that that really wasn't the case. Too, when most people get to the outside world, they want to make it on the outside world's terms. I was sufficiently happy to make it on the inside world's terms. I guess because the people I admired most did both. There was nothing good or right about the outside world that wasn't available to me in my own subculture. I didn't disassociate religion with any of man's endeavors, understandings, or images of himself. In addition, my religious education taught me the Blakean tradition of critiques of the culture. So again, I had the best of both.

SUNSTONE: Have your religious perceptions changed during the years you've worked for *Newsweek*?

WOODWARD: Oh sure, but not necessarily because of *Newsweek*. Views of God change with age, I think. Naturally they do. If it's a living relationship and it's between two persons (as I understand that term), then it has got to change. Instructed as I am by the lives of the saints (Catholic saints that is, not Latter-day) and by the mystics, I have learned that there are dark nights of the soul, there are times of spiritual darkness. Those who would live intimately with God are the ones who understand their distance from him/her. Also I've learned that the most important, the most significant, the most creative Catholics I know are the people who, like Heschel, are the most orthodox, the most rooted, who are able to ride out a number of things. I guess that's what I have tried to do. Simple things are often very hard for me. Those people, like you and me, who deal in ideas, who have been gifted with good brains, have to learn to shut those off at certain times and develop humility. There are some simple people, including some in my own family . . .

SUNSTONE: Mine, too.

WOODWARD: who are not complex, who have never thought about religion the way that I have and do. But if ordinary people can't get close to God, if it depends on intellect, then everybody's dead. One has to be instructed by the ordinary people. I think I have softened in that direction over time, too.

SUNSTONE: What made you do a story on Mormons at this particular time? There wasn't any news in it.

WOODWARD: The idea goes back to 1978 when Kimball announced the blacks could have the priesthood. It was a Thursday or a Friday night. I had already completed my section but it was too important a story to be ignored. I had been planning to watch the Holmes/Shavers fight on TV. (Ernie Shavers is from Ohio.) First things first; it's a matter of priority. We would like to arrange the Second Coming to meet our deadlines. I called up Charles Graves (head of LDS Public Communications for the East Coast at that time). "So, Charles," I said, "let's go to dinner and watch the fight."

Thus, over bourbon and Perrier (he was having the Perrier—it's fancy water), we began to discuss the implications of the announcement. I wanted to know why it couldn't have been changed earlier, and he launched into a description of the pre- and post-existence in Mormon theology. I had just finished a cover story on Reverend Moon and was struck by the similarities to his Divine Principle, the whole sense of marching two by two into the afterlife. It occurred to me as Charles continued that the same set of sensibilities was at work, namely that the fullness of humanity is the joining of male and female. So, taking a long swallow of bourbon, I turned to Charles, noting that his tie was in place and everything was in order, and I said, "Charles, tell me. Is there a Mrs. God?" He looked down into his Perrier, thought about that a moment and said, "Yes, there is." I said, "This is incredible. I have never heard this. Mormons have been around 150 years and if I, as a religion editor, didn't know what they believe, what about the average person who doesn't spend his time monitoring these things?"

That's when I became intrigued by it, but I tucked it in

the back of my mind. I kept saying to myself I should do that story some day. I was not interested in how much money the Mormons have, and I'm tired of growth statistics, which is what the Church wants you to talk about. But nobody was taking them seriously as a people who have, to use Peter Berger's phrase, a "cognitively deviant mythos" by which they live. They're living on a different story, in other words, than the other Christians. So periodically someone from the Church would come to me and say, "It's our anniversary. Don't you want to do a story on us?" I kept saying to them, "What I would like to do is a story on your theology. When you're ready to do that story, I'm ready."

Finally, when I went carefully over the theology, I felt that I should go out to Salt Lake City and talk to some official types. I had been thinking about it all summer. This is not the stuff of high drama, mind you, but it was a question of when Mr. Packer and Mr. Madsen and the rest would be available. And honestly, I had thought of plugging it into the Sunstone symposium because it was the only Mormon event that I could think of.

SUNSTONE: Why didn't you mention the symposium in your article?

WOODWARD: She asks accusingly. Actually, the piece shaped up somewhat differently than I originally planned. Also, the Pope just happened to make an important decision that week about converted married priests, which took some of the space.

SUNSTONE: I can see where your loyalties lie. Tell me about your methodology. How did you go about collecting information for your story?

WOODWARD: Methodology is too fancy a word for what I do. I was primarily interested in bringing to the outside world what Mormons believe. I could have read about it in books, I suppose, but that wasn't the point. I wanted to have various kinds of people in the Church tell me the Mormon story of human existence in their own words and not just repeat formulas. So I asked everyone—from General Authorities to ordinary people—the same questions over and over again. Their answers were all different, which is as it should be (not radically different, just varying emphases). Some people were very official and somewhat stilted. I didn't want that. It's not that a stilted answer is in itself wrong, it's just stilted. Some people were more nuanced. I found, too, a certain nervousness and defensiveness. I didn't want that either. I tried to reassure them that nobody was out to get them; I was not doing an investigation. ("What do you *really* think of God?") I was not interested in their money. I was strictly interested in how they see themselves and their relationship to God. And out of all my conversations certain patterns emerged.

SUNSTONE: Whom did you talk to?

WOODWARD: You want me to just list them?

SUNSTONE: Yes.

WOODWARD: Well, there was this persistent female editor . . .

SUNSTONE: Besides her.

WOODWARD: I spent one entire evening with Boyd

Packer and his family. And I talked to Truman Madsen for a few hours. Also, Marvin Hill, Hugh Nibley, James Ford (a convert at BYU), Davis Bitton, Dallin Oaks, Jan Shippo, Sterling McMurrin, Lowell Bennion, and Mary Bradford (briefly). Also, I talked to Lorie Winder. She gave me a copy of *Exponent II*. And, of course, the Church's public relations men here in New York, formerly Charles Graves, and now Steve Coltrin.

SUNSTONE: How did you decide which people to talk to?

WOODWARD: Many of the Utah appointments were set up for me by Mr. Coltrin. He was in Utah at the time and personally accompanied me to a number of the interviews. Other names were suggested in the course of the discussions. Like Davis Bitton and Sterling McMurrin.

SUNSTONE: How did you choose Jim Ford?

WOODWARD: I read a piece that he did in the literature of the Popular Culture Association on *Battlestar Galactica* and Mormon theology. He seemed intelligent and articulate, and I wanted a convert's point of view.

SUNSTONE: What has been the general response to your article?

WOODWARD: We've received somewhere around three hundred letters, which is abnormally high for a non-cover story. Not many of them are completely positive or absolutely negative. I'd say 90 percent of them are generally complimentary, thanking me for treating their Church with respect but taking issue with one or more of my specific statements. The three most common objections (and these comprise the bulk of the complaints) were: 1) Mormons *do* believe that Jesus atoned for our sins, 2) Mormons *do* believe that God is the Supreme Being, and 3) my use of the term "Mrs. God" was inappropriate and disrespectful.

SUNSTONE: Let's take the three objections individually. First of all, did you mean to be flippant about "Mrs. God"?

WOODWARD: No, I really didn't. I was trying to capture the emphasis I found over and over, that of a very domestic view of the eternities. A man needs a wife, I was told, to be exalted. The purpose of life was to gain a body and "be fruitful and multiply." The afterlife will be very much like this life. Families will be together; reproducing and raising children will continue infinitely. I used the term "Mrs. God" in all my conversations, including discussions with both Packer and Madsen, and was never told that it was offensive or inaccurate. So that reaction was somewhat unexpected.

SUNSTONE: What about the claim that Mormons *do* believe God is the Supreme Being? Have the letters convinced you that you were wrong about that?

WOODWARD: No. I am only convinced that some Mormons need to do a little more thinking about the logical implications of their theology. I was not saying that Mormons don't believe God is *more* supreme than man but rather that He is not man's creator. Obviously, if God were once as man now is, then there must have been a being who was the god who preceded him. He is therefore part of an infinite stream of beings of which there is no Supreme Head, no First Cause. This was very clear

from my discussion with Truman Madsen as well as my reading in the Doctrine and Covenants, *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, and *Mormon Doctrine*. In the latter, Mr. McConkie quotes Joseph Smith as saying, "I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea . . ." So I think I reported it fairly accurately.

SUNSTONE: In the article you said, "Unlike orthodox Christians, Mormons believe that men are born free of sin and earn their way to godhood by the proper exercise of free will, rather than through the grace of Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus' suffering and death in the Mormon view were brotherly acts of compassion, but they do not atone for the sins of others. For this reason, Mormons do not include the cross in their iconography nor do they place much emphasis on Easter." Where did you get your information and do you still think that's true?

WOODWARD: A lot of people have written in to say that Mormons *do* believe that Jesus atoned for man's sins and that that is central to Mormon beliefs. I wish I could have said more about the Atonement, but it might have been too truncated. I was trying to capture the essence of Mormon beliefs for our non-Mormon (and mostly non-religious) readership. To a traditional Christian, the Atonement was Jesus' acceptance of death. His act of dying redeemed man from the necessary consequences of the Fall of Adam, making it possible, through the grace of God, for man to be saved. It seemed to me, particularly after talking with Madsen, that while Mormons retain the rhetoric of atonement for sins, what they mean is something really quite different.

Let me quote from the transcript of my discussion with Madsen. He said, "As I understand the Mormon view, Christ somehow came and suffered. This is prior to the cross. Mormons don't stress, you'll notice, the cross as much as they stress what happened in Gethsemane. You won't find a cross in any Mormon chapel. That doesn't mean we don't believe he was crucified; he was. But crucifixion has been suffered by other men. It's a terrible way to die but it's not unique. What was unique in Jesus' suffering was that he knelt in Gethsemane (from our point of view and we have a lot of revelations to that effect). He so identified with the totality of man's sins and setbacks that it was as if he were guilty of all of them, and he sweat blood just as Luke says. . . . He experienced such a compassion for mankind that there is not one condition that you can get in in terms of sin, badness, setback, tragedy, or pain, not one condition in which you can say, 'You don't know what I've been through.' Because he can always say, 'Oh, yes I do. I've been there.' So he suffered that his bowels might be filled with compassion." Well, compassion is an important and admirable virtue, but it's not the same thing as atoning for sins, in the usual sense of that term. To atone Jesus had to relinquish his life on the cross.

Some of the letters have used the third Article of Faith as evidence that Mormons believe in the Atonement and that it is central to their beliefs. To me, however, that is one more indication of Mormon schizophrenia in its theology. The Article of Faith reads: "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the

Bernard Goffryd, *Newsweek*



Actually it's often harder to be a believer among believers.

Gospel." Again, while that uses the rhetoric of atonement, it emphasizes the aspect of *earning* godhood by acts of obedience. It's for these reasons that I maintain that for Mormons atonement may be on the books, but it doesn't mean the same as for other Christians, and it's not all that central.

SUNSTONE: What did you think of Brigham Young University?

WOODWARD: I had the strong impression that all is not well there. Every church-related institution at one time or another goes through a crisis in relation to its church and revealed truth as it has been formulated and presented by the authorities. There will always be tension between these things and disinterested scholarship. I can appreciate that. It would be one thing if they said, "Look, we see our obligation to be the spiritual formation of Mormon students (that would be a good thing—wish there were more of it), and we draw these lines on scholarship." But it seems to me in this case they don't say that; they pretend to be open on scholarship. However, I don't think they really are.

I am concerned specifically about two areas, religious studies and history. It seemed to me from talking to certain people that many Mormon scholars are not really interested in other religions per se. Rather they look at non-Mormon scholarship only as a means of authenticating their own religion and scriptures. There is no openness in that. I think that those who are doing this will suffer in the end. They may get kicked upstairs in the Mormon hierarchy, but they are not doing themselves or their people a service.

Secondly, I was appalled at the willingness to dump on their own past traditions. I don't understand why Mormons are so uptight about polygamy. Other people aren't. (Given the way our society is moving, most people would probably applaud such unique marital arrangements.) It is awful for a people who are so historical-minded to pretend this didn't happen or to sweep it under the celestial carpet. I think that's a big mistake. If you really believe in your people, you really believe that a revelation passed through and among them, then you look honestly, unashamedly at your past. Mormon history is of such recent vintage that many of the documents from the nineteenth century are readily available. If the Mormon understanding of what happened in the past is at considerable variance with the conclusions of unbiased historians, archeologists, and other scholars, Mormons might be well advised to recon-

sider some of their claims or at least to weigh alternative interpretations.

One other thing bothered me about BYU. That is I sensed a marked inclination towards an instrumental view of education. By that I mean education which has employment as its underlying goal. "What pays off is what's important." There is nothing ominous about that, just extremely limited. And it does lead to a divorce of work from belief. Education—particularly religious education—which does not instill a critical attitude towards the world allows one to become a good scientist or businessman or government official without thinking always of the larger implications.

SUNSTONE: Do you think churches should become involved in political battles?

WOODWARD: I think a church is well within its rights and responsibilities to take a stand on issues like the ERA. I personally think that this amendment is poorly drawn up, and therefore I am opposed to it. But if a person disagrees with me then he does, and it doesn't have anything to do with religion. Similarly, if the Mormon church is going to take a stand on political issues, it must realize that people who oppose the position will be critical. Mormons can't just say, "Well, that's anti-Mormon sentiment." So I would like to see them enter into the public arena in a more open and less defensive way.

Once a church does take a stand on a political issue, an obvious question arises: What pressures will be brought to bear upon church members who disagree? If, in their wisdom, the General Authorities make a political judgment and a member doesn't perceive it as all that wise, what happens to his or her relationship to the Church?

But the big point in all of this, Peggy, is that the Mormon church, as far as I can tell, has never seen it as their obligation to take on civic responsibility for other people. They have been a sect for most of their existence and are still very sectarian in their outlook. Sects see the world as "us against them." Sects tend to withdraw from the body politic and leave to others, the heathen, the unsaved, whomever, the business of trying to create justice for the whole of society. Mormons as a group don't share in the task of working out differences among people of various backgrounds—religious, ideological, economic—and don't speak for people other than themselves and beyond domestic issues.

Mormons seem to have a love/hate relationship with America. Or one might call it a superiority/inferiority complex. They see themselves as in possession of the

Truth, and therefore better than the world, and yet feel constantly persecuted by the world. They disdain the world and yet seek its approbation. Mormons, because of their belief system, see themselves as living radically different lives than traditional Christians but somehow at the foundations seem coopted by the very society they think they are different from.

In part this paradox may be internally caused. Mormons seem to have a working contradiction. Theirs is a church which historically included a communitarian movement, ethos, and ideals but presently has embraced a kind of high church republicanism which emanates from the General Authorities. The end result is a strong emphasis on free enterprise and minimal government which can't be justified by Mormon history or scripture. I think there are some real questions that have to be asked: Does emphasis on free agency necessitate this support for free enterprise? What about the people who need more than minimal government? Without the help of government some wouldn't have the civil rights they presently enjoy, social security and help for the aged, the handicapped, the children. Government can put a floor under the ragged ruins created by a freely enterprising society. Too often, the free enterprise system pushes people towards creativity and individual achievement but puts them at war with each other. Couldn't Mormons draw upon other aspects of their experience and assert other values which might be more consonant with their scriptures and those they share in common with other Christians?

SUNSTONE: What are some of the differences you see between traditional Christianity and Mormonism?

WOODWARD: One big difference I see is the strong success ethic in Mormonism. To me the Jesus story is really very different than that. It teaches us how much success fails. Jesus' project was to move his people from a conception of God which had to do with kingdoms and power and justice to a more intimate conception of the Father whose kingdom (that is, the end) is close at hand. To give yourself wholly to the Father (in Biblical language), to feel properly sustained in this, and then to go to the Cross is really extraordinary. He moved through death, not as the Mormons claim, on a perfunctory assignment worked out in the divine family room before, but with a feeling of being forsaken, of having failed. He was a failure. He was a failure by Jewish standards. To the Jews, prophets may die but here was, according to the New Testament, a sinless man, the awaited Messiah, and he fails and dies in shame. So I think we're kidding ourselves if we talk about success. All of our projects are destined to fail. It was in dying that he was exalted.

The Mormon appeal to some extent is in their notion of self-help salvation, progress, and achievement. To traditional Christianity, achievement in religion means failure in most other endeavors. It's a very corrupted, messed-up world and typically those who succeed in it are those who can compartmentalize their lives, who don't see any connection between how a corporation operates, what it takes to make money, and their commitments as religious people. I guess I don't find enough interiority about Mormonism. There should be more doubt, more self-criticism, more willingness to fail, more living with darkness.

SUNSTONE: What problems do you see in Mormonism's future? Maybe I should say, *do* you see any problems?

WOODWARD: I saw little glimpses that convinced me that the Mormon hierarchy is not particularly interested in reaching, maintaining, and sustaining their more thoughtful members. They have to be fed as much as anyone else. You can't do this by hammering home authority, authority, authority, but rather you *have* to elaborate theology, to continuously engage the imagination and intellect of your best thinkers. I agree with those who say that Mormons don't really have a theology in the sense of an internally coherent, well-developed set of principles. I am not suggesting that one is saved by theology but only that theology is one of the necessary ingredients of a healthy spirituality. You have an intellectual life as soon as you start asking why. And you can't stop people's minds. Why would you want to? To make an intellectual inquiry about God is an act of belief. It's an act of love. Without that sort of love and concern on the part of at least some of the people, the Mormon religion could become a very sterile sort of belief system.

The Church may not care about its philosophers, artists, or poets so long as there is a sufficient quantity of board chairmen, presidents, middle management people, and professional golfers, but that's because Mormon leaders don't seem to recognize the need for spirituality which is expressed precisely in thought, art, and love and *not* expressed in making money or building corporations. (I find it odd that the fact that someone is president of a hotel chain is a bragging point for a church.) But it seems to me such spirituality is critical to the survival of any religion.

Art tells us how we feel about what we believe. It's the only way that abstract statements of faith come alive, to see what they really mean. I didn't see a lot of Mormon art, and I don't suppose there is anything like a Mormon aesthetic. The Mormon church may be young (a mere 150 years) but it ought to be inspiring artists. There is something wrong with a tradition that is *believed* but not *felt*. Moral axioms may help govern behavior, but they don't calm the restlessness of the soul nor open one to the breathing of the Spirit. Without creative input and expression, a religion can slowly fossilize, lose all vitality.

SUNSTONE: Was there anything you *liked* about Mormons or Mormonism?

WOODWARD: Well, there's this brightly-edited bimonthly. . . .

SUNSTONE: Besides that.

WOODWARD: Seriously, I think it is healthy for a church to have responsible, independent publishing. To me, things like *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, and *Exponent II* reflect positively on their mother church, a definite indication of maturity on the part of the institution which has spawned them.

I liked the strong sense of maternity and active parenting that was evident among the Mormons I met. I disagree with those who say that the family is merely in a state of transformation, that it was in a bad way in the past and now is getting better. I think the family is in real trouble. It has been neglected in our legislation and in every other way for too long. So I appreciate any religious

Bernard Goffryd, *Newsweek*



community which stresses the value of nurturing. (I would like to see Mormons underscore the importance of that for men as well and in a very concrete way.) I like the fact that Mormons seem to have maintained the three generational family fairly well. Mormon grandparents do seem involved with their grandchildren. It's a fading phenomenon in America, one which I am loathe to lose. Along that line I was intrigued with the idea of patriarchal blessings which seems to provide a closeness between the generations, a spiritual bonding which can produce stability and identity for Mormon youth.

I was impressed by the fact that the Mormon mythos seems to have taken hold in many cases. That a mother would be genuinely concerned about her daughter failing to reach the Celestial Kingdom and eternal association with the rest of the family indicates to me the Mormon story is compelling to its adherents. The pre- and post-existence seem very close and operative in Mormon lives.

What else can I say? Everyone I met was courteous and cooperative. Salt Lake has a couple of nice fountains. . . .

**SUNSTONE:** I have heard you use the phrase: God's in the details. What do you mean by that?

**WOODWARD:** The phrase comes from architecture, I think. You can see it in the spires and so forth. By that I mean, we don't discover what a person or a community believes about God just from their formal affirmations and creeds but rather in the little ways in which they work their encounter with the mystery of God into the cracks and crevices of their everyday lives. Each religion has its own way to ritualize and hallow the everyday, to make it holy. We find God in the details, in the art, the painting, the architecture, the sculpture, the music but also in the ethics of each body of believers.

In other words, what sort of God requires abstinence from alcohol? Why does it make a difference? (Which it does.) Or if you go to a Presbyterian church meeting, you will find they have a preoccupation with good form. They think they gave us the Constitution. When you are among Presbyterians you will see that this emphasis is

## Mormons are living on a different story than the other Christians.

not just historical, not just sociological but somehow the way people of God ought to act. To them, God has a great respect for parliamentary procedure. Certain temperaments are displayed as a result of being Catholic or Protestant or Mormon, and again the difference doesn't come in the big affirmations but in the little things. Like modes of prayer. Only Catholics think of "ejaculations" as short prayers. Everybody else has a somewhat different usage for that word. Walking into someone else's church you can sense the differences. If I go into a Congregational church and there's no crucifix, this tells me something. I remember I went to a Congregational wedding once and the only trinitarian symbol I saw was the Pepsi machine. Some wear crosses around their necks and some, sunstones. That's how we make our commitments part of us. We don't respond to God and the divine impulse directly; we respond with our lives. And since we don't have many one-on-ones with God (basketball image), we find him in the very small moments, the whispers, the nuances.

Every religion begins with a revelation from God and then builds scriptures, traditions, and institutions upon it. All of this is an attempt to penetrate and understand human experience. A better way to say that is: We are on a journey *from God to God*. And all those who make the journey are fellow travelers. What we encounter on the journey is human experience. So that which divides us from God also unites us with each other, and those pilgrims who are making the same journey ought to understand each other. Persons who are shaped by one religious tradition can more readily understand someone shaped by another than someone who has no religion at all. They have had to wrestle with the same spiritual questions, temptations, experiences, gratifications, modes of transcendence. Those people who are superficially on a journey only know what separates us; understanding of our commonality requires profound firsthand knowledge of the difficulties of spiritual experience and commitment. If Mormons would talk honestly and essentially about their own spiritual adventures, how their experience has shaped them, their anguish as well as their success, their feelings of abandonment as well as their conversion rate, then I think they could begin the communication with other travelers. They could be understood and appreciated and accepted as never before.

### What Mormons Believe

Mr. Woodward in his two-page *Newsweek* article, tried to describe "the Mormon story of human existence" to a non-Mormon audience. Many have criticized his explanation, questioning details or faulting overall emphasis.

We would like to challenge our SUNSTONE readers, lifelong believers and recent converts, to accept the same assignment Mr. Woodward did. In a two to three page summary, try to capture for a non-Mormon audience the nuances and emphases of Mormon theology that seem critical to you.

Please send your "What Mormons Believe" to SUNSTONE by February 1, 1981. We hope to publish a series of these responses in a future magazine.