GIVE AND TAKE

THE FINAL STEP

By William J. Hamblin

DAVID P. WRIGHT'S essay ("Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth," SUNSTONE 16:3) raises two sets of important issues: one set is methodological; the second, literary and historical. This essay will examine only the methodological questions.

A disturbing aspect of Wright's essay is his condescending and inaccurate portrayal of the differences between the so-called "traditionalist" and "historical-critical" approaches to scripture. To me this is a false dichotomy. The correct dichotomy is between people operating under secularist or supernaturalist assumptions. The secularist metaphysic usually denies the existence of God altogether. "Soft" secularists, while admitting that God exists, refuse to allow him to intervene in the world in any meaningful way. The result is that in analyzing historical events or texts, one can effectively dismiss God as a causal factor. Thus, Wright's statement that "the main theoretical recommendation for the critical mode is that it is *consistent*: it treats all media of human discourse–secular and holy–in the same way" (29b) is another way of saying that Wright's "critical mode" denies God's meaningful intervention in history; all texts are therefore made by humans, with no authentic (i.e. propositional) revelation from God. If the existence of authentic revelation is denied, then revelation can be redefined so as to be reduced to states of mind that can be dismissed as internally induced by hard secularists. God's permitted behavior is limited to creating some vague emotion that is psychologically indistinguishable from creative genius, imagination, feeling good, or falling in love. Supernaturalists, on the other hand, allow God to do whatsoever he pleases. If he wants to perform a miracle, predict the future, appear to a young farm-boy, or reveal truth, he is perfectly free to do so.

WILLIAM HAMBLIN is an associate professor of History at Brigham Young University.

The differences in assumptions and approaches are thus not between the open-minded "critical" thinkers and the dogmatic "traditionalists" as Wright would have us believe. Instead, within both the secularist and supernaturalist paradigms, there are critical thinkers and dogmatists. Wright's attempt to equate all supernaturalists with dogmatic supernaturalists is highly misleading. While there certainly are dogmatic supernaturalists who enter into "little review of what qualifies for evidence in historical study"–assuming, of course, that we can come to an agreement on what is evidence—and whose "conclusions in many respects are predetermined" (29b) there are precisely the same types of people operating within the secularist paradigm. Anyone who has had any contact with the secularized academy must be aware that it is no haven of open-mindedness and rationality. One need only go to a national convention of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature to discover numerous ideologically-based presentations lacking the slightest trace of "critical" thought. The tyranny of dogmatism and political correctness among the secularists is just as pervasive and damaging as it is among supernaturalists.

Thus, the real issue should be: is there a "critical" supernaturalist paradigm that utilizes all the tools of rational discourse to interpret scripture and religious tradition? I believe there is; if so, then Wright's critique of all "traditionalists" as dogmatists is misdirected and irrelevant. Many supernaturalists (such as myself) accept and use the critical historical methods (there are many, not one as Wright implies) as useful tools, while rejecting some secularist assumptions about the texts, methods, and causality. For example, the basic methodology of scholars working with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies centers on careful and critical analysis of scripture and history. They make no attempt to "immunize scripture or claims about historical aspects of scripture from critical study," as Wright asserts (29b). They may disagree with Wright's conclusions, but is not creative disagreement part of the critical endeavor? If so, why are they excluded by Wright from the community of critical scholars?

Wright lauds what he calls "open-ended inquiry" where "no conclusion is immune from revision." But does this apply only to conclusions that fall outside the secularist paradigm? Are the assumptions and conclusions within the secularist paradigm also open to question, or must we abandon Wright's "*willingness* on the part of the researcher to acknowledge the possibility that historical matters may be different from what is claimed by a text and the tradition surrounding it" (29a)? This dialectical sword cuts both ways: if we are able to criticize the secularist paradigm, then may we not, with our critical and rational credentials intact, determine after careful study of the evidence that Wright is wrong?

I find it most disturbing that Wright and other secularists are unwilling to admit that it is possible to examine precisely the same evidence that they have seen, using precisely the same rigorous methods of inquiry, and yet come to honest, rational, and defensible conclusions concerning the historical questions surrounding the documents that differ from theirs. Yet this is what Wright seems to be doing when he writes that "*Any operation that does not have the critical element* [read secularist paradigm] *is not historical*" (29b). To me, Wright is saying that if you don't come to the conclusions derived from the secularist paradigm, you are not a "real" scholar.

Wright's claim that "the main objection of the traditionalists to the critical mode is that it requires denying supernatural elements and discounting the evidential value of mystical and emotive-spiritual experience" (29b) shows a remarkable misunderstanding on his part. The main objection is that the secularist paradigm reduces all revelation, and all forms of God's intervention in history, to *only* "mystical and emotive-spiritual experience." For the supernaturalist, God's intervention in history–the resurrection of Christ or Joseph's First Vision, for example–is just as real an historical event as the assassination of Julius Caesar or the battle of Waterloo. God's intervention in history cannot be transformed in a reductionist fashion into mere "mystical and emotive-spiritual experience." If God really did appear to Joseph Smith, or if Jesus really was resurrected from the dead, then it is the secularists–despite all their claims of superior critical analysis and

method–who are ignoring the evidence and whose conclusions are predetermined. If Wright will not allow for the possibility of authentic prophecy because *some* biblical texts can be *interpreted* as not being authentic prophecy, then whose conclusions are based on "preexisting ideas" (29a)?

It should be emphasized that most people, secularist or supernaturalist, base their conclusions about scripture and history not on a first-hand knowledge of the evidence or analysis, but on authority. How many of the readers of SUNSTONE who have accepted positions similar to Wright's can read the Hebrew texts in the original and make a judgment on these literary or historical issues for themselves? The vast majority cannot and have simply accepted the position of the secularists based fundamentally on their *authority*. In this they differ little from the Latter-day Saints who accept the authenticity of the Book of Mormon on the authority of prophets or Latter-day Saint scholars. Of those Latter-day Saints who can read Hebrew and Greek, and can therefore engage the material critically, some take positions similar to Wright's, but many others do not. On the other hand, within the secularized academic community there is absolutely no consensus on most of the issues discussed by Wright–all they agree on is that the supernaturalists are wrong. If the secularists cannot agree among themselves, why should the supernaturalists jettison their interpretation for "*clear conclusions and evidence generated* [by the critical method]," which Wright claims exists, but whose existence he has by no means conclusively demonstrated.

Wright's discussion of prophecy is interesting in that it highlights his refusal to make explicit the logical implications of his position. I'm sure that Wright must be aware that Korihor and Sherem the anti-Christs preached that "no man can know of anything which is to come" (Alma 30:13; cf. Jacob 7), clearly implying to me that such an assumption is antithetical to the gospel. What are we to do with Joseph's vision when Moroni clearly stated that ancient prophecies were about to be fulfilled and indeed uttered new prophecies about Joseph Smith (Joseph Smith—History 1:33-41)? Since according to Wright there can be no prophecy, what really happened in this vision? Was Joseph lying about what Moroni said? Was it a hallucination? Did Moroni purposefully deceive Joseph? Or was Joseph simply making the whole thing up? It seems to me that accepting the secularist assumption that there can be no prophecy logically requires one to conclude that Joseph Smith was not a prophet, or to redefine the term prophet so as to make it cognitively meaningless (shaman, mystic, and religious genius are some of the alternative terms that I've seen). Is Wright willing to take this logical final step?

Wright would have us believe that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century document, but nonetheless contains profound truths as "a window to the religious soul of Joseph Smith" (32). This is a rather ambiguous statement since even Fawn Brodie and the most radical anti-Mormons would agree that the book is a "window to the soul of Joseph Smith." The question is: what is the nature of the soul we perceive through this window? Is it the soul of a prophet, lunatic, or con-man?

And what does one do with the golden plates? If there were no Nephites, there were no plates and no angel Moroni. What, then, of Joseph's claims to have seen and spoken with Moroni on numerous occasions? Hallucinations or lies? If the golden plates existed, who made them? If not, why does Joseph repeatedly claim to have possessed and translated them? How did he convince the eleven witnesses to say they saw the nonexistent plates? I have never seen cogent and rational answers to these questions from secularized Mormons. The only consistent explanations I can conceive of is that if there were no plates, Joseph was a fraud or a lunatic. If this is the case, why follow him at all?

Applying precisely the same assumptions and methods to New Testament studies as those discussed by Wright concerning Old Testament studies, secularists have come to the conclusion that the gospels are all pseudepigraphical documents written after A.D. 70, which bear only a "mythical" relation to the "historical Jesus." Therefore, Jesus did not perform miracles or prophesy. His suffering and death atoned for nothing. He was not resurrected, and he is the Son of God only in a vague metaphorical way. Does Wright accept these conclusions of scholars operating under his secularized "critical mode"? If not, is he not guilty of selectively applying the "critical mode" when convenient, precisely as he accuses his traditionalists? If Wright accepts the secularist assumptions here, what is left of the gospel? But if one is free to reject secularist conclusions concerning Christ, why are we not free to reject their conclusions concerning prophecy, the authorship of Isaiah, or the historicity of the Book of Mormon? Indeed, from the secularist perspective, the historical reality of the resurrection is far more absurd than the trivial literary questions such as how many people wrote Isaiah.

The very unremarkable conclusion I come to is that if one accepts secularist assumptions, one naturally comes to secularist conclusions. Wright's attempt at creating a "post-critical apologetic" becomes a somewhat pathetic effort to retain the form of religion while denying the power thereof (cf. Joseph Smith—History 1:19). Thus, whereas Wright maintains that he is boldly going wherever the "truth" takes him, in reality he is simply coming to the logical conclusions that naturally derive from his acceptance of secularist assumptions, a path down which many before him have trod. Unlike most who walk this path, however, Wright is unwilling to take the final step and admit that if his secularist assumptions are correct, the gospel must be simply untrue. Fortunately, as the ongoing research by many Latter-day Saints demonstrates, there are alternative perspectives that can successfully combine the tools of the historical-critical methods with supernaturalist assumptions.

THE CONTINUING JOURNEY

By David P. Wright

THE ARGUMENT OF my paper, "Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth" (SUNSTONE 16:3, 28), is that there are alternative interpretations of certain historical matters regarding Mormon scripture that cannot be ignored, that these interpretations get closer to what actually happened in history, and that it is

DAVID P. WRIGHT is an assistant professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts.

consequently necessary for those in Mormon tradition to formulate responses that acknowledge these conclusions and yet cultivate faith. With this—and in view of the concomitant implication that traditional sources of knowledge are not sure sources of historical knowledge—I argued that Mormonism should be willing to entertain the historical critical approach to scripture which, despite its limitations, allows for striving toward a clearer understanding of history. Admittedly, these critical conclusions and approach are more secular or humanistic in character than traditional views and approaches. This disturbs William Hamblin and constitutes the focus of his response. A few points of counter-response are in order here.

(1) Hamblin tried to describe historical criticism as operating by secularist presuppositions in which the supernatural is excluded. My basic definition, it should be noted, did not require this. The definition was based on James Barr's, which should be fully cited here. He takes up separately each of the terms in "historical criticism" and says:

> Historical reading of a text means a reading which aims at the reconstruction of spatial-temporal events in the past: it asks what was the actual sequence of events to which the text refers, or what was the sequence of events by which the text came into existence. . . . Such historical reading is, I would further say, "critical" in this sense, that it accepts the possibility that events were not in fact as they are described in the text: that things happened differently, or that the text was written at a different time, or by a different person. No operation is genuinely historical if it does not accept this critical component: in other words, being "critical" is analytically involved in being historical.[1]

On the basis of this I observed in my article that the key marker of the critical method is "a willingness on the part of the researcher to acknowledge the possibility that historical matters may be different from what is claimed by a text and the tradition surrounding it" (29a). To this I added two other defining elements: an open-endedness with respect to conclusions and prioritization of the evidence of contextual study over surface claims by a text and over external traditional claims about a text. Nothing in this definition *requires* the rejection of the supernatural.

(2) But with this said, a *potential* secularizing element may be seen in historical criticism as I have defined it. To be willing to entertain different solutions and to be open to revision of views means that one must seriously consider secularist explanations. Such open consideration compromises *conviction* that should prevail, it is thought, around Mormon traditional or supernaturalist views. The critical approach may be also considered secularizing because of the pluralism in views that it allows. This is antithetical to the unity that is usually expected in religious tradition.

(3) In view of these difficulties, one with traditional convictions might not be willing to adopt criticism as I have defined it and argue instead (a) that criticism should not be defined so as to entail a willingness to change and revise views, (b) that criticism does not require a willingness to open up all views to revision, or (c) that criticism is not an approach and ideal to be sought after. Hamblin's response seems to accept the second option. He adopts criticism to an extent but, as his discussion appears to indicate, would leave certain issues outside of critical review. If I have judged his position correctly, then questions of consistency and secularization arise even for him. Take the Book of Mormon, for example. There is a range of views that recognize it as an inspired book but judge its translation differently. These include the views that (a) it is a literal translation, much like the King James version is a close translation of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek biblical texts; (b) it is a rather literal translation but that Joseph Smith has used some of his own idioms in expressing the ideas behind the text and that he has occasionally added glosses explaining unclear terms or ideas; (c) it has an ancient core but has been substantially added to by Joseph Smith (well articulated by Blake Ostler; see my note 57); (d) the book is scriptural but is wholly a composition of Joseph Smith. Hamblin does not tell us where he stands on this issue, but his stern rejection of my view (d), his citing of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (F.A.R.M.S.) as an example of the type of scriptural scholarship he idealizes, and his rejection of being identified as a "dogmatic supernaturalist" indicate that he may have a position somewhat like (b). This view of the Book of Mormon sees certain elements as anachronistic and therefore coming from Joseph Smith. It does not ascribe them to supernatural revelation to the ancient inhabitants of America. Thus it adopts aspects of secularist explanations. This may seem like quibbling—what is the effective difference between view (b) and (a) for the Church? I did, however, hear Professor Robert Millet of Brigham Young University in a Religious Education faculty seminar on 21 November 1986 say that "he finds saying that there is *slight* updating in the Book of Mormon more devious than saying it is all modern [i.e., a nineteenth century composition]."[2] His reason for saying this was that the latter view could be easily recognized as wrong, while the former could not and therefore might be attractive and be accepted. Thus, a view as seemingly innocuous as (b) is felt by some to be quite threatening to pure supernaturalist faith.

Another example of a tendency toward secularism is found in a work published by F.A.R.M.S., again, the organization whose research Hamblin prizes: John Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. Sorenson argues for a limited Central American geography for the Book of Mormon. This contradicts some of the statements of early members of the Church and even Joseph Smith about the geographical setting for the Book of Mormon stories. While Sorenson questions some of the evidence that makes it seem as if Joseph had a specific view about the book's geography, he is forced to say that "ideas he later expressed about the location of events reported in the book apparently reflected his own best thinking."[3] That is, Sorenson and his readers need not put much stock in Joseph's views about geography: a prophet's words that tradition values are set aside with relative ease.

These are just two examples of many that could be raised. They make it clear that even Hamblin's " 'critical' supernaturalist paradigm"—if I have approximated correctly any of the views he shares—already contains secularist tendencies. The questions to be asked here are: What are the secular limits of the " 'critical' supernaturalist paradigm"? How does one determine which supernatural beliefs are amendable and alterable and which are not? Who is to make up this list? What is the evidence that will clearly determine what is to be included among unrevisable beliefs?

(4) Hamblin portrays conclusions as being almost a mechanistic function of presuppositions. Yes, presuppositions have a lot to do with conclusions, but there is much more to the thinking and evaluation experience. If it were merely this then there would be no movement from one paradigm to another. It is better to think of thinking not as a linear movement from premises to conclusion but as a play between various possibilities with the thinker choosing in the end that which makes the best sense to her. In this entertainment of possibilities, various op-

tions may play on stage in one mind and compete with each other. To say that conclusions follow simply from presuppositions tends to distract attention from the historical evidence that must be considered.

(5) Observation (3), above, suggests that the supernaturalist-secularist dichotomy proposed by Hamblin may not be proper and true. Another consideration bears this out. His category of secularism is not as descriptive as it is polemical. In this category he effectively places those who maintain belief in the divine, though not in the specific or extensive supernaturalist manner that he argues is suitable, by his disparaging discussion of their misrepresented faith. In this he implicitly defines quality of religious belief being commensurate with the quantity of supernaturalism it fosters or allows. Religious belief that, for good reason, is cautious about accepting traditional or superficial claims about the acts of God is characterized as deficient, lacking, wanting. The fact of the matter is that while critical historical study can lead to reservations about the manifestation of the supernatural in various matters, the faith and hope of a historical critic grows and blossoms in other ways. New and, to him, invigorating understandings of the divine take root which are just as meaningful and motivating as traditional supernaturalist perceptions. The holy is real to him and his love for humanity and creation develops and bears fruit. I would be wary of approximating this secularism and judging it inferior to supernaturalism from a religiously experimental point of view.

(6) The unfortunate thing in regard to the foregoing is that in our religious community there is yet little tolerance for a historical critic's faith. Faith needs support, but there is really none of this officially for students who approach historical questions openly and yet seek to assert faith. Many who might have flourished in a more magnanimous and encouraging community have been pressed socially and emotionally to take the "final step" that Hamblin seems to recommend to me here. I am worried that alienating critical scholars who would constructively imagine new avenues of faith will leave the Church unprepared to deal effectively with critical conclusions like those described in my paper as they urge themselves more and more on the community.

NOTES

1. James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 30-31.

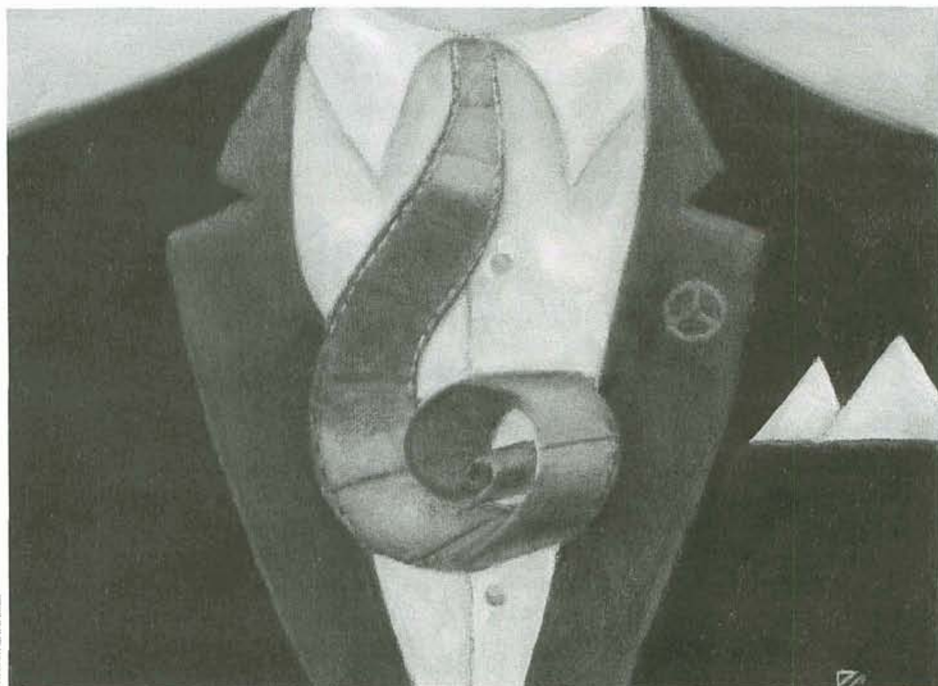
2. My summary of his statement recorded in my journal on that day.

3. John Sorenson. *An Ancient Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1985) 1.

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

Paul Nibley

HOW MORMONS SEE THEMSELVES IN FILM



PATRICK CAMPBELL

Where are our Woody Allens and our Mel Brookses? To see ourselves as a Brady Bunch family, where parents always know best and there are always happy endings, keeps us from examining the real conflicts in our lives and finding solutions for them.

IN 1968 I was dating a daughter of a stake president in the San Francisco Bay area. General authorities usually stayed in their home during stake conference visits, and I was always invited to dinner on Sunday afternoon between sessions. One conference visitor was Elder S. Dilworth Young, a fine Mormon poet and a man of great taste. During dinner he asked me what I was going to do with my life when I got out of the military. I said that I wanted to make movies. He asked me what kind of films I wanted to make. Like many young dreamers who want to make movies, I had not thought much about what I would put into them. I said, "I want to make films that will help the Church—like the one we saw last night about working in the Sunday School." Elder Young pointed his fork at me and said, "Don't you *ever* make a film like that." He told me that no matter how clean and wonderful it made us feel, the film was a disservice to the Church.

Elder Young felt that the Mormon community was a wonderful source of dramatic material because of those very conflicts that embarrass more defensive Mormons. He wanted to see movies about dramatic conflict and humor unique to Mormon culture—

PAUL NIBLEY is a film maker and summer workshop art dirctor for the Sundance Institute. This paper was presented at the 1991 Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City.

movies about Mormons that would succeed in Hollywood. He never got to see one; as far as I know, one has not been made. I have concluded that this is because Mormons are uncomfortable with the requirements of successful storytelling.

ONE of the least understood human experiences is dreaming. We all dream, but all we really know about dreaming is that it is an important biological or spiritual function of the brain. People deprived of dreaming go insane.

Storytelling augments our need to dream. When the listeners or readers become involved in the story, they exercise their emotions, just as they do when they dream. A good storyteller tries to make the experiences in the story as vivid and realistic as possible; thus the audience's involvement becomes more dreamlike. In a dream we experience a strange separation of self that does not happen in waking life. We are *in* the dream: talking, running, fighting, happy, sad, or confused; but at the same time we are *outside* the dream: witnessing it and seeing ourselves from all sides. In a well-crafted story a similar separation takes place—we identify with the protagonist and feel her emotions. At the same time we are outside watching, and we can see things she can't see and know things she can't know.

In a sophisticated form of storytelling—a play—characters act out the story in a controlled setting to intensify audience involvement. Anciently, temples were the finest storytelling facilities, and the modern theater descends from them. At present, film is our most sophisticated form of storytelling. In a dark theater people forget where they are and become totally involved in the story on the screen. They can move through space and time just like they do when they dream. I can't tell you what the rest of the audience was doing the first time I saw *Rocky* because I was too involved in the story myself. I went a second time to watch the audience instead of the film. During the fight scenes at the end, I saw people jerking and twitching like dreaming dogs as Rocky danced and punched. Not being a critic, I can't address the artistic value of *Rocky*; but as a filmmaker, I can say that it is storytelling at its best.

I've always wanted to be involved in the kind of storytelling that approaches the dream experience. I want to successfully tell stories about Mormons. I want to tell about the people I know and the relationships I have witnessed or experienced—exciting, passionate stories. However, based on my own and others' experiences, I think the Mormon community resists such storytelling because they feel the stories might damage the Church's image. "We don't want to air our dirty linen in public" is a common cliché they use.

By comparison, there are many movies about Jewish faith and culture, but that has not always been the case. When there were fewer Jews than Mormons in the United States, the studios that still dominate the motion picture industry today were built by a handful of Jewish immigrants from Germany and Eastern Europe. These men resisted making films about Jews in the same way that most Mormons resist making movies about Mormons. They tried to remain ethnically anonymous and produced movies about their ideas of a perfect Protestant American community. But some courageous Jewish directors insisted on making movies about the people they knew best. In 1929 the first movie with synchronized sound, *The Jazz Singer*, portrayed a Jewish cantor's son who breaks his father's heart by singing jazz instead of canting in the synagogue. It enjoyed huge success even though virtually no one in the audiences, outside of New York and Los Angeles, knew what a cantor was, or anything else about contemporary Jewish culture. In spite of *The Jazz Singer*'s success, Jewish writers and directors still met resistance from the Jewish studio heads when they tried to make movies about their own culture. But they persisted.

In the 1940s, when anti-semitism was growing in America as well as in the rest of the world, the Jewish film moguls got together and discussed the idea of fighting back with films that would show what was happening. Several projects were started, but most of them were eventually scrapped. One completed project, *Gentleman's Agreement*, starred Gregory Peck as a reporter who posed as a Jew to write about anti-semitism. *Gentleman's Agreement* broke through the Jewish community's wall of resistance about "airing dirty linen in public." After this film it became more acceptable for Jews to make movies about themselves. In the sixties a floodgate opened, and a lot of Jewish dirty linen was aired, along with some very bleached linen. Directors like Woody Allen and Sydney Lumet started opening up the Jewish community for the world to see.

I think Mormons can learn from Jewish filmmaking experiences, but there are obvious differences between the two groups. The Mormons are a proselyting people trying to share their message to the entire world; the Jews are a closed society, difficult to join even through marriage. Ironically, one would think that a closed society would remain secret, while a proselyting society would become well known; but that is not the case. Many non-Jews have some idea of what a bar mitzvah is and know that the bride and groom stomp on wine glasses and say *mazeltov* at the end of the wedding ceremony. But how many non-Mormons know what happens when a boy becomes a deacon, or understand the phrase "for time and all eternity"? Everyone knows about the Holocaust, but how many know that the governor of Missouri once ordered genocide against the Mormons? Elder S. Dilworth Young dreamed of people knowing about LDS culture the same way they know Jewish culture. He wanted Mormons to tell stories about Mormons to the world. It wasn't happening in the sixties; it's not happening in the nineties.

ABOUT twenty years after getting career advice from Elder Young, I was teaching screenwriting at BYU. One of my students wrote a charming story about a young Mormon couple: The husband works at the Mission Training Center, and his wife is expecting their first child. When the woman goes into labor early, the doctor prescribes an ounce of vodka every thirty minutes until the labor stops. The young man's challenge was to get vodka in Provo on Saturday evening and then to get his wife to drink it. It was folksy and Mormon and funny. I was very proud that it came out of one of my classes.

I related the screenplay to some high-powered filmmakers at the Sundance workshop for independent filmmakers the following summer. Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn loved the story, and Ring Lardner Jr., a Jewish screenwriter, thought it was delightful.

The next school year the student began production on the film. Unfortunately, he had talked to someone during the summer who had convinced him to eliminate all references to Mormons. The logic was that no one would understand words like *priesthood* and *home teacher* or conversations about missionaries. Because the characters were originally Mormons, and received most of their motivations from that fact, eliminating their Mormonness reduced them to one-dimensional characters. Not surprisingly, the story fell flat.

Regretfully, this was not an isolated incident. I had trouble getting *any* student to write about Mormons at all. Almost every student script was full of people who drank, smoked, had coffee for breakfast, worked as bartenders, slept around, or dealt with

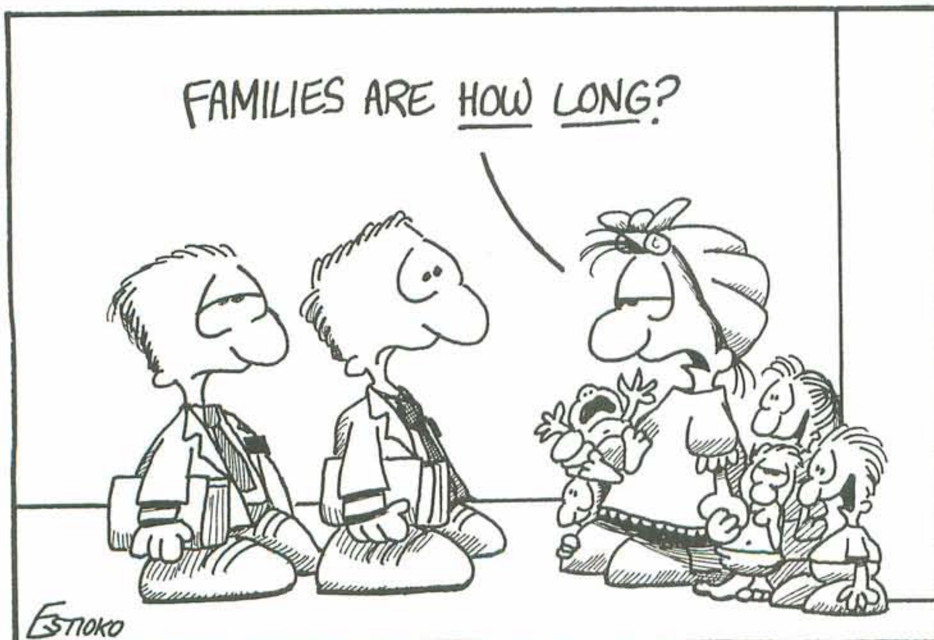
drugs. The characters were suspiciously flat and, when questioned, the students admitted their characters were inspired from movies or television shows. Ironically, they actually knew real people they could have used as models for these characters, but they refused to use them. I might ask, "Do you know anyone who actually sleeps around?" "Yes. A guy I went to high school with." I would ask for a description of the person, and then ask the class to respond. Invariably they would feel that the real character was much more interesting than the fictional one. "Why don't you use the real character in your story?" "I tried, but it just felt wrong."

WHY WE CAN'T MAKE FILMS ABOUT OURSELVES

WHY are LDS students unable to write screenplays about Mormons? We have all had the experience of seeing a photograph or videotape of ourselves that we felt did not represent us fairly. When we hear our own voices on a recording or see ourselves in photographs, we are surprised at what we hear or see; we experience an embarrassed, uncomfortable feeling. This is usually a personal experience, but in the case of ethnic or religious minorities, seeing a film about themselves can become a group experience. The documentary film *Sherman's March* provides some useful examples. The following descriptions will not have the power of viewing the film, but I hope they will adequately convey the scenes. To experience the scenes' impact to the fullest, of course, they should be seen in context during a screening of the entire film, which is now available on video. I recommend watching it with a group of people for reasons that will become clear.

Sherman's March was made by a filmmaker who received a grant to make a documentary on General William T. Sherman's march through the South during the Civil War. As filmmaker Ross McElwee started production, he kept digressing to film his own personal life. He is an admittedly neurotic man concerned about his relations with women and obsessed with the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. Though he occasionally shares something about Sherman, most of the film follows McElwee through one relationship after another and through his search for ways to survive a nuclear war.

The first example occurs in the first half of the film. In this sequence, Claudia, his fundamentalist Baptist girlfriend, takes McElwee to a secret survivalist hideout in the mountains. He is allowed to film the survivalists only after promising not to reveal their names or the location of their settlement. At the beginning of the sequence, the survivalists talk rationally about gathering doctors, dentists, and skilled workers together to have a balanced community in case of a nuclear holocaust; but as the sequence continues, they appear more and more paranoid. They wear guns and use sticks of dynamite for target practice. They speak of the government as their "mortal enemy" and ultimately appear so extreme that they elicit laughter from the audience.



What the audience sees is McElwee's *impression* of the people he visited. He talked to the people and filmed them, and then put together bits and pieces of the two days he spent with them. The audience doesn't experience the survivalists the same way he did because in the editing he eliminated a lot of boring conversation, bad camera work, etc. To make his points clear, when he edited the material, he exaggerated his feelings and made things seem more extreme than they were in the actual experience. For example, when Claudia shows him where the survivalists plan to build some tennis courts for the settlement, McElwee asks her if they are going to play tennis during a nuclear attack. Immediately after that question there is a cut in the film—an edit. Her answer is a quick, confident, yes. The audience laughs because it appears that she has entirely missed the irony of playing tennis while atomic bombs are falling. What appears to be her answer is actually an answer to a different question, which has been seamlessly cut out, along with her real response to the tennis question.

At first glance this kind of filmmaking seems unfair and dishonest. If the filmmaker is in the business of propaganda or news gathering, it *is* unfair and dishonest; but most filmmakers are not making propaganda films. McElwee is telling the story of his own personal fears and nightmares—to get us to feel what he felt. He tries to give us that dreamlike experience of participating and watching at the same time. He wants us to identify with the protagonist—himself—and experience his emotions. For most viewers that is exactly what happens, but a problem arises for those viewers who are closely aligned with the other characters in the film. Instead of identifying with the protagonist, they identify with the people he observes. The result is a confusing mixture of emotions. The fundamentalist Baptist isolationists in the audience will probably feel uncomfortable during the sequence on survivalists and experience defensiveness. On the one hand, the people in the film seem ridiculous and the rest of the audience laughs at them. But on the other hand, what the survivalists say is correct and makes perfect sense to a fundamentalist isolationist. Thus, isolationists will feel some discomfort and conflict.

I have observed that such defensive feelings are not only the fault of the film, but they result from the makeup of the audience as well. If, for example, the above sequence were screened at a meeting of the Aryan Nation or some other isolationist group, the reaction might be one of admiration for the

men in the film and extreme interest in the success of their settlement. It might be followed by a question-and-answer period where people would seriously consider following the example of the people in the film and plan their own community. Possibly, they would feel little if any defensiveness. If, on the other hand, the same individuals were mixed with a larger, politically liberal audience, and heard chuckles and laughter from people who did not share their beliefs, the Aryan Nation members might feel uncomfortable and offended.

The next sequence from the film takes place about a year later in McElwee's life. He has left Claudia and gone through two other women in his search for security and a relationship. An old friend comes to his rescue and helps him find a woman who will share his views on survival and make him happy. She introduces him to Dede, a beautiful woman who teaches at a girls' school. Being a good sport, McElwee goes out with Dede and discusses, as usual, his personal fears about a nuclear holocaust. She informs him that she and her family have foreseen such a disaster and have prepared for it. She shows him where she and her mother have stored food and water in their house, and tells him that they have more dehydrated food in a storage unit. Eventually it comes out that her preparedness is part of her religion—she is a Mormon.

The first time I saw this film it was with a non-Mormon audience in a theater, and my emotional reaction was very strong. I began to suspect that Dede was a Mormon when I saw the powdered milk in her house, but I dismissed it. When I found out that she didn't drink Coke, I was sure that she was a Mormon. When she actually said she was "a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—a Mormon," I was embarrassed, groaned out loud, and sank down into my seat. When she talked about Joseph Smith, I cringed at every cliché that I had used so often myself. I didn't understand my embarrassment, and I didn't consider for an instant that the rest of the audience didn't feel exactly like I did.

Since that first viewing, I have screened the film many times with friends and with classes at BYU. During those screenings I have monitored the reactions of first-time viewers. During this sequence, ethnic Mormons (as opposed to converts) usually experience uncomfortable emotions, as I did. Some cover their faces with their hands. Others scrunch down in their seats, and there is often a groan of embarrassment when Dede says that she is a Mormon. Non-Mormon audience members, however, show amusement, but no signs of discomfort. Recent converts, for whom the clichés have more meaning, often feel pride in Dede's courage, along with some delight that the joke is on McElwee and his matchmaking friend. The strong, negative feelings that Mormons experience when they see this scene come from the same confusion of identities that happens when we hear our voices on recordings or look at pictures on our driver's licenses, and say, "That's not me!"

Ross McElwee has given us the best version of his experience that he can put together from the material he has shot, and he structured the story to make the viewer identify with him. Even though in some shots the sound and picture are quite poor, he included them because they were essential in relating his experience. Most viewers do identify with McElwee and, like him, find what Dede says quite interesting. Mormon viewers, however, are too close to Dede and identify with her as well as with McElwee. The confusion of emotions from playing two parts at once produces a kind of stage fright in Mormons, and they fear that Dede is saying the wrong thing. They react to the situation as though they are in Dede's place undergoing an interrogation on some kind of member-missionary hot-seat. The fact that she is well prepared and handles the situation nicely is of little comfort.

In my experience, most Mormon viewers are so involved with Dede and their own confused emotions that they fail to understand how McElwee feels about Dede. In the subsequent scene he describes his feelings, but the confusion lingers long enough to make Mormons miss what he says. There is absolutely no reason for Mormons to feel embarrassed or defensive. McElwee describes Dede as an angel and a woman of "purity, strength, and conviction." He rejects the peace of mind that her religion gives her just as he rejects solutions to his problems every time they are offered to him throughout the film. This film is not about solutions; it is about neurotic self-absorption. Non-Mormon viewers quickly recognize that, of all the women that McElwee becomes involved with, Dede is the easiest for him to reject because she is the closest to what he claims to be seeking. If he were to continue his relationship with Dede, he would find actual solutions and no longer be able to wallow in the self pity that he seems to enjoy so much. When I poll audiences about McElwee's description of Dede, Mormons almost never remember it; non-Mormons almost always do.

THE kind of emotional roller coaster that happens when we Mormons see ourselves in films is not pleasant for most of us. Rather than personally experiencing that ride, we tend to trust our public image to advertising people who can make us feel comfortable. To be sure, the Church needs good publicity, and I have no quarrel with the official Church image. But where are our Woody Allens and our Mel Brookses? The official image of what we should be, and wish we were, is not what we are. To see ourselves as a Brady Bunch family, where parents always know best and there are always happy endings, keeps us from examining the real conflicts in our lives and finding solutions for them. And this practice presents a sterile, one-dimensional view of Mormons to the world, and to ourselves.

Storytelling and dreaming are closely connected. Perhaps storytelling is a kind of social dreaming. Individuals deprived of unrestricted dreaming don't function normally, and eventually go insane. What will become of a culture deprived of healthy storytelling? When the angel sounds his trumpet and reveals all "the secret acts of men, and the thoughts and intents of their hearts" (D&C 88:109), only those who have never shared their secrets will be truly embarrassed and ashamed. We have a chance to prepare for that angel by telling our stories before he comes. I hope the Mormon *Gentleman's Agreement* or *Fiddler on the Roof* will soon be made, and the world will have the privilege of knowing about our unique culture, and we will become a healthier, more functional culture at the same time.

ECLIPSE

If I break off the cusp
of this sharp night, it will be
smooth, holy, like a unicorn's
horn or a Chinese vase
of cloisonne. Something tries
to invade me and I just
swallow it up, bruised a bit but still
smiling. The shards of the window
open like petals in the middle
of the living room floor.

—HOLLY WELKER