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## READERS' FORUM

### BACKYARD CLEAN-UP

I, LIKE SO many in these challenging days, have spent more than my usual amount of time examining my "belief in the Church."

I believe that Mormonism can stand like a good house with open doors and invite examination. I believe that we can stand on the front porch and invite neighbors to walk through and look around to their hearts' content. Let the family stroll around as well.

And when they ask if they can poke around in the backyard, I think we can say, "Well, sure, if you want to. It's not perfect, but then whose backyard is? There are weeds in our ditchbanks. We've got some messes on the lawn: post- (and even pre-) Manifesto polygamy; a racist-tainted history; plenty of work on gender equality; Book of Abraham problems and other historical issues; abuses of authority. Lots of weeds.

"But poke around all you want. And when you're through, come to the front porch and sit down, and let's talk about some of the things that we're doing right now. Let us tell you how we try with all our hearts to bear one another's burdens, to truly be sisters and brothers, to take upon ourselves the name of Christ, imperfect though we are. Let us tell about the loving support we can offer from cradle to grave and beyond. Let us tell how we encourage high standards of behavior, of good health, of learning, of fidelity, of community service, and so much more."

I am puzzled that some of the Brethren appear to believe the Church is so fragile it cannot bear honest evaluation. "What?" they say. "What backyard? We don't have a backyard! And don't you dare go poking around back there anyway!"

There used to be a picket fence around the backyard. Now it's barbed-wire and even the family isn't allowed in. Most recently a deadly electric fence was added. I shake my head in amazement. All of us know the backyard is there and that it needs some good cleaning up and a bit of humor about the old unsightly tree stumps. But there's nothing we can do about them now except sit on them and tell their strange and funny stories.

I don't know why I believe in the Church more than some of the Brethren do. But I do. And I will poke around in the backyard insofar as I believe I can assist in the clean-up because this is my house, too. Still, I will spend most of my time out on the front porch visiting with family and neighbors because

it's really quite sunny out there and the conversation can be splendid.

CAROL LYNN PEARSON  
Walnut Creek, CA



"Do you need some help with your zipper?"

### AND HELEN SMILES ON

SOME COMPLAINED about the voluptuous cartoon (SUNSTONE, Feb. 1994), especially when it followed the enigmatic, Mona Lisa-like cover of Helen Candland Stark. But Church teachings themselves foster the dichotomy between the sensuous bride and the scripture-toting, hesitant bridegroom.

Mrs. Newlywed Mormon has been carefully acculturated to make her body desirable. For years she has received Young Womanhood awards and other recognition from bishops and stake presidents who introduce her by saying, "Isn't she lovely?"

In a talk reprinted in Relief Society lessons, President Gordon B. Hinckley counseled women with marital problems to "put a smile on your face and make yourselves attractive." A woman continues to be rated on appearance (so she has breast implants and tanning sessions) and childbearing ability. (Shame on Sarah, Rachel, and all their kind.)

In contrast, when he was off the Scout trail or basketball court, Mr. Newlywed Mormon was counseled in priesthood interviews to be the spiritual leader of the home, to have daily prayer and scripture study. And he's determined to start on that role his wedding night or die—before the next PPI.

Knowing the difficulty of reconciling the opposites, Helen Candland Stark smiles on.

ASHLEY AVIS  
West Valley City, UT

## SAVING SALVATION

I WAS HAPPY to read "The Joy of Unlimited Salvation" by Eugene England (SUNSTONE, Feb. 1994). I marvel at the unlimited grace and salvation of God's "plan of happiness" when almost no one else in the Church seems to, including general authorities. I applaud England for his broader view and willingness to share the real gospel, or good news, with us all. Most Mormons reject the idea as being too soft on sinners and in conflict with the orthodox teachings. When the word "gospel" is applied to the plan of salvation, it's not really that good of news—breaking up families for all eternity into three separate and inescapable planets or "kingdoms."

I venture just two corrections: (1) England's statement that he "knew a religion that affirms such a universalist God" seems to imply that the Church understands the concept of unlimited salvation, which it does not. (2) His statement that "Doctrine and Covenants 76 provides a snapshot of one certain time in the future" ignores some important clues given in the revelation. If section 76 is viewed with an emphasis on tense, it clearly shows that the vision was not of some future final state but what Joseph and

Sidney saw then and there. The three degrees of glory are not eternal lock-ups, but only states of being, with (as Brother England might say) unlimited salvation offered to all.

JOHN D. JONES  
Rigby, ID

### Eugene England Responds:

In response to John D. Jones:

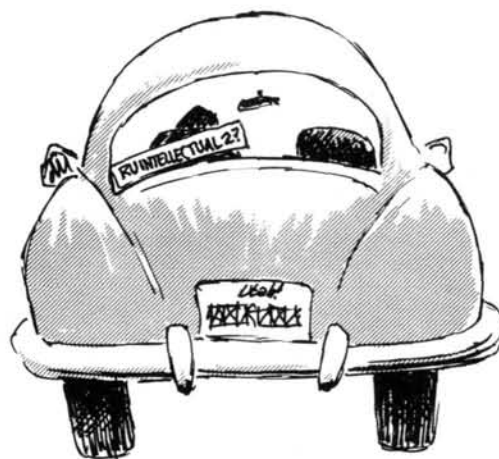
(1) "The Church" is all of us who call ourselves Latter-day Saints—neither a limited group of leaders and teachers (even at BYU) nor a majority of popular opinion. As long as some affirm the God of infinite love and unlimited salvation Joseph Smith and subsequent prophets have revealed and others are able to respond to that good news and be converted, then "the Church" does indeed understand that concept. (Besides, we should all be quite humble about what we claim to "understand" better than others; what matters is whether we treat each other and ourselves as infinitely precious and redeemable, not what our professed beliefs are.)

(2) Doctrine and Covenants 76 seems ambiguous about what "time" the vision it contains describes—whether the conditions in heaven in 1832 (whatever that means), the conditions at some future instant, or a kind

of abstract condition that always obtains. My main point was that it is not a statement that there is no future advancement between kingdoms, as it is usually interpreted. The Church's only official statement about the matter clearly states that the Church has no official position on such advancement. By using the image of a "snapshot," I meant to make clear that, as the section states, "they who are liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers, and whosoever loves and makes a lie" (v. 103), at the time when they are such sinners, cannot go "where God and Christ dwell," nor can they do so if they stay sinners, "worlds without end" (v. 111). That is, people *while in their sins*, of course, cannot advance between kingdoms. But the whole import of the gospel of Christ, including this section, is that *when* they change into something else, something they are always free and encouraged and helped by God to do, *if they will*, then they can advance and dwell with God and Christ.

## POKING POSTERiors

AFTER READING L. Jackson Newell's "Scapegoats and Scarecrows in Our Town: When the Interests of Church and Community Collide" (SUNSTONE, Dec. 1993), I be-



Mormon "closet people"

oklasa  
SECRETED FOR  
SUNSTONE

gan listing its hypocrisies.

Intellectuals are so busy trying to rectify Mormon doctrine with popular culture that they forget to question the validity of that culture. For example, one cannot value sexual differences and be blind to them at the same time. Intellectuals keep one foot on each side of the fence and wonder why they have a picket poking their posteriors.

Intellectuals love to talk about choice, but what they generally want is freedom to impose their choices on everyone else. Plenty of choices exist in the world, but if the LDS church endorsed all, it would be worthless as a religion and moral guide. This is not a call for blind obedience but for more honesty in making choices.

I realize most intellectuals think they are open-minded and tolerant, but my visceral experience of Mormon intellectuals is that

they are the epitome of hypocrisy with their aberrant political agendas. Most are oblivious to any negative fruition their actions perpetrate onto others, or worse, they don't care. Allegations of spiritual abuse from individuals who perpetrate abuse do not inspire confidence or breed respect.

Church leaders are often inept and uninformed, but they seldom base their concern for me upon devotions to their beliefs. In spite of the fact that they may have taken action and have a strong desire that I agree with them, they have not withdrawn love or concern for me as a person when I did not. My experience with intellectuals is that they view compassion as a noun, not a verb, and their commiseration is entirely predicated on my devotion to "the cause." Intellectuals accuse the Church of being controlling; obviously they never listen to their own rhetoric.

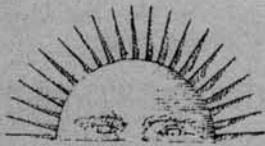
To the extent that "Mormon intellectuals" are a vehicle for popular intolerance, Elder Packer correctly uses "so-called." The more I listen to the "Mormon intellectual victim" melodrama, the less I find to hear.

DOUG DANSIE  
Layton, UT

## GOD'S UNIVERSITY

THE ISSUE BETWEEN Elder Boyd K. Packer's address and L. Jackson Newell's article boils down to, "What is the source of truth?" and "How is truth conveyed?"

Galileo said that "you cannot teach anyone anything. You can only cause them to discover it within themselves." This principle is confirmed by thousands of Mormon missionaries who know that they have no power to convert anyone but that conversion comes



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via the witness of the Holy Ghost.

Not all truth is of the same value. Newell, a professor of higher education at the University of Utah, elevates the value of mere temporal democratic ideals to eternal ideals. It is theocracy, not democracy, that should occupy the minds of Latter-day Saints.

The university is the worst place to seek answers to the three great questions of life. The greatest danger of a university education is the likelihood of considering it as the fountain of knowledge, as Newell suggests.

Moreover, to use Bertrand Russell, author of *Why I Am Not a Christian*, as an example of humility and one who has utilized the resources of the university to the best advantage stretches irony to its limit. How can someone be tapped in to the "fountain of truth" who rejects the "Light of the World"?

Truthfully, Professor Newell, do you really think the universities of men are superior to the university of God?

JOSEPH WYSON  
St. George, UT

*L. Jackson Newell responds:*

I am pleased to respond. Doug Dansie would benefit, I believe, from reading my article more carefully. I don't use terms such as "guilty," "victim," "hypocrisy," or "spiritual abuse," though they litter his sarcastic prose. Nor do I see how he can claim that I seek to "impose [my] choices on everyone else." I simply argue that each of us should strive to think and act in response to our conscience—as it is informed by moral principles and within the bounds of civil laws.

Joseph Wyson's argument springs from assumptions different from my own, but I admire the integrity with which he makes his case. Even so, in dismissing Bertrand Russell's idea of humility simply because he was not a believing Christian seems to contradict an essential, though dying, Mormon principle that we embrace truth wherever it may be found.

The vigorous give-and-take of inquiring minds in universities has a wonder all its own and great power to expand human understanding. Why else did the Saints have the audacity to found the University of Deseret (now the University of Utah) just three years after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley?

I welcome the clash of ideas wherever it happens—including the exchange of letters in this column.

It is silence, especially silence born of fear, that should concern us. The Church's theocracy can thrive only within a political democracy. When it stifles debate, it does so at its own peril.

## JUSTIFYING STATUS QUO

DAVID BOHN'S article articulated my concern that secular historians create their own "religious beliefs" about their work, plus attitudes of superiority, hidden agendas, an unwillingness to examine methods, and suppression of other views. (See "The Larger Issue," *SUNSTONE*, Feb. 1994.)

What bothered me about Bohn's approach was his seeming inability to apply the same criteria to "faithful" historians. I was amazed at statements such as: "criticism of revisionist history does not seek to question personal religious beliefs of historians or their right to compose histories in whatever way they please." Try telling that to the "September Six"!

Is Bohn oblivious to the very real "violence" done to those who seek understanding beyond the pabulum spoon-fed by the Church? Perhaps his discomfort with secular history, a discomfort shared by the Church, is only partly from "reframing" history; I suspect it is equally from the revelation of em-

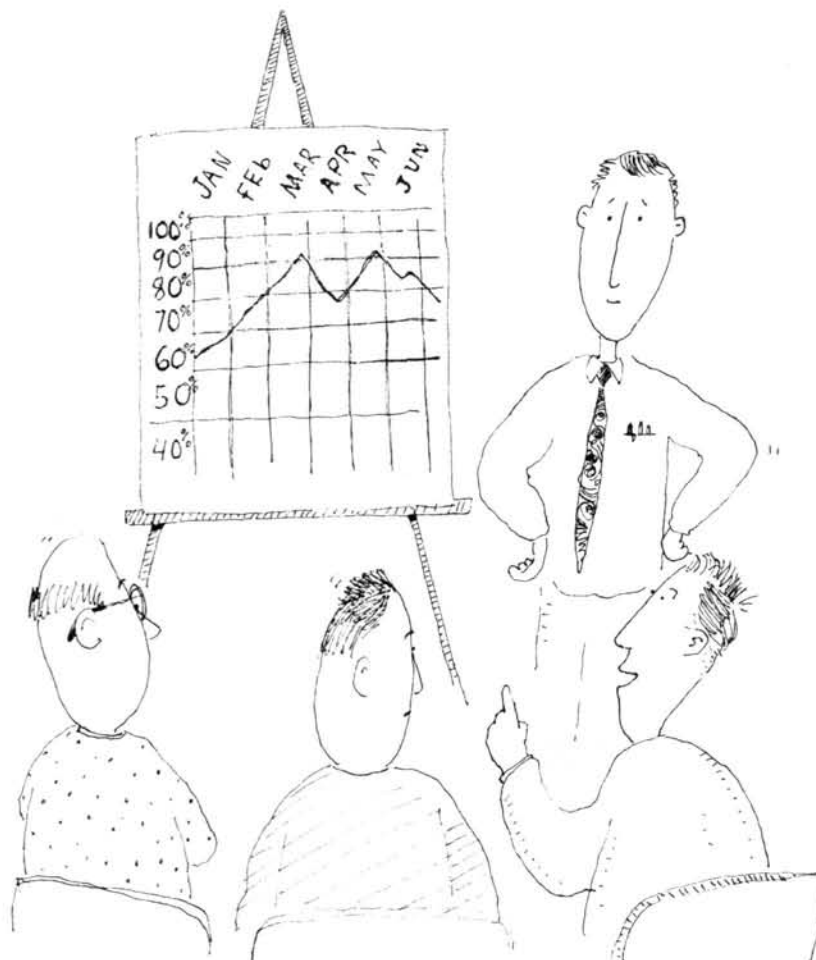
barrassing information that doesn't jibe with the established party line.

For example, I was taught by "sacred history" that President Wilford Woodruff's 1890 Manifesto was the direct result of revelation only, with no outside pressures involved, and that all sanctioned plural marriages ceased immediately. Is Bohn unable to realize that these kinds of deceptions, and there are many, stimulate secular research?

Church historians have had 160-years to produce a credible, faithful history. Their failure has produced a knowledge vacuum others have stepped forward to fill. Bohn's philosophical posturing appears as an attempt to justify the status quo of concealment and misrepresentation. Perhaps Bohn, and the Church, should have more faith that members can handle full disclosure.

I fully agree that "we need to move beyond political discourse toward a space of openness where questioning leads all to a richer understanding."

L. G. MORGAN  
Nampa, ID



"I may be an optimist, but I still think we can get 100 percent home teaching."

## ARE RUSH LIMBAUGH AND HOWARD STERN

the two latter-day witnesses in Revelations 11, who "tormented them on the earth" for 1,260 days, and will destroy their enemies like "fire proceedeth out of their mouth?" (*Time* magazine cover, 1 Nov. 1993).

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## BOHN SPEAKS FOR MANY

DAVID BOHN'S article levels the rhetorical playing field that has been so unfairly one-sided with regard to Mormon history. This thoughtful response to Malcom Thorp (*SUNSTONE*, Nov. 1991) shows just how terribly political "new" Mormon historicism is. The language of D. Michael Quinn and company leaves no room for dialogue because, as Bohn points out, it forces secular "frames" on sacred topics. Such revisionists do violence to the language of our community discourse and make only their understanding possible.

What strikes me as almost funny is that these same people call the Church's historians self-righteous, while they refuse to even consider our ways of understanding.

DAVE NORTON  
Orem, UT

## TOLERATING PAUL

I ENJOYED Elbert Eugene Peck's sermon on Romans 14 ("The Outer Limits," *SUNSTONE*, Feb. 1994). His exegesis got me reading the epistles, which I haven't done in years. I noted that Paul does not always demonstrate the tolerance toward Jews that Peck expounded. He may have tolerated the celebration of Jewish feast days, as he said in Romans, but Paul made no space for believers of circumcision. Consider this passage from Titus 1:9-14 (New Jerusalem Bible) that also has broader implications for intolerance in the Church for alternate voices:

[The presiding elder] must have a firm grasp of the unchanging message of the tradition, so that he can be both counted on for giving encouragement in sound doctrine and for refuting those who argue against it.

And in fact there are many people who are insubordinate, who talk nonsense and try to make others believe it, particularly among those of the circumcision. They must be silenced: people of this kind upset whole families, by teaching things they ought not to, and doing it for the sake of sordid gain. It was one of themselves, one of their own prophets, who said, "Cretans were never anything but liars, dangerous animals, all greed and laziness"; and that is a true statement. So be severe in correcting them, and make them sound in the faith so that they stop taking notice of Jewish myths and the orders of people who turn away from the truth.

It is hard to know how to take Paul. One could see the above passage, with the Cretan slander and perhaps the reference to circumcision edited out, quoted by today's general authorities as justification for silencing the September Six. But it is statements just like the slam on the Cretans (which sounds like it's a quote taken out of context and used for a message never intended by its Cretan poet



"Elder, would it be a serious strain on our companionship if I asked you not to keep your tanning bronzer beside my toothpaste anymore?"

author) that *require* the reader to have a tolerance for Paul that Paul lacks for others. For if we want to take Paul seriously, we must not only address the writings that seem to be true, but we must painfully dismiss the ones that seem to be mere opinion or culturally bound, such as when he preaches that women should submit to their husbands. Even Paul's order to silence preachers of circumcision must be bracketed because undoubtedly the Christians in Jerusalem headed by Peter and James allowed Saints to continue the practice, even if they did not require it of adult male gentile converts.

So as a modern reader, after dismissing Paul's mere opinion and cultural idiosyncrasy, I am left with his general statements about the need for the presiding elders to keep the Church doctrinally pure; but I reject the very substance that Paul said must be kept pure. What kind of help is that from the scriptures? Does it mean that we must allow today's leaders to enforce today's cultural blindspots that some future generation will see as not only silly but morally repugnant? To some degree, I guess that's unavoidable since there is "no exit" from our times. But while we indulge our leaders in silly things, I suspect reform comes partially from Saints saying, "Hell, no!" to slavery and women's subordination—opposing stands Paul probably would label as "foolish speculations . . . quibbles and disputes" and about which he counseled leaders that "if anyone disputes what you teach, then after a first and second warning have no more to do with him" because he is "warped and self-condemned as a sinner." (Titus 3:9–11.) What kind of tolerance is that? Peck may want to expand the boundaries of tolerance, but Paul really could not tolerate much tolerance, although his maddening epistles necessitate it.

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## WHICH SIDE, HAMBLIN?

WILLIAM HAMBLIN ("The Final Step," *SUNSTONE*, July 1993) in responding to David Wright ("Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth," *SUNSTONE*, Sept. 1992) made one of the best cases for the secularist argument I've read.

I only disagree when he states 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." He further implies that one must be able to read Hebrew to obtain first-hand knowledge of

texts (presumably the Bible) written in that language. Then he likens *SUNSTONE*-reading secularists who cannot read Hebrew but accept the opinions of those who can to Mormons who "accept the authenticity of the Book of Mormon on the authority of prophets or Latter-day Saint scholars." Every adult Mormon I know who accepts the Book of Mormon's supernatural claims does so based on first-hand, personal experience with the book; the authority of prophets and especially that of LDS scholars seems to matter very little. Otherwise Hamblin's general conclusion seems to be quite correct: It is impossible to put forth a "secularized Mormon" argument explaining Joseph Smith's supernatural experiences that is both "cogent and rational." Only the pure secularist position, which Hamblin's article convincingly supports, can do so.

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## GOSPEL AS COMMODITY

AS WITH D. Michael Quinn ("I-Thou vs. I-It Conversions: The Mormon Baseball Baptism Era," *SUNSTONE*, Dec. 1993), my mission seriously challenged my testimony. As a teenage convert, I idolized my missionaries and wanted to be just like them. I was ecstatic to receive my own call to serve in southern California from 1966 to 1968.

I soon discovered, however, that I had romanticized missionary life. We went through a sales-training course given by a

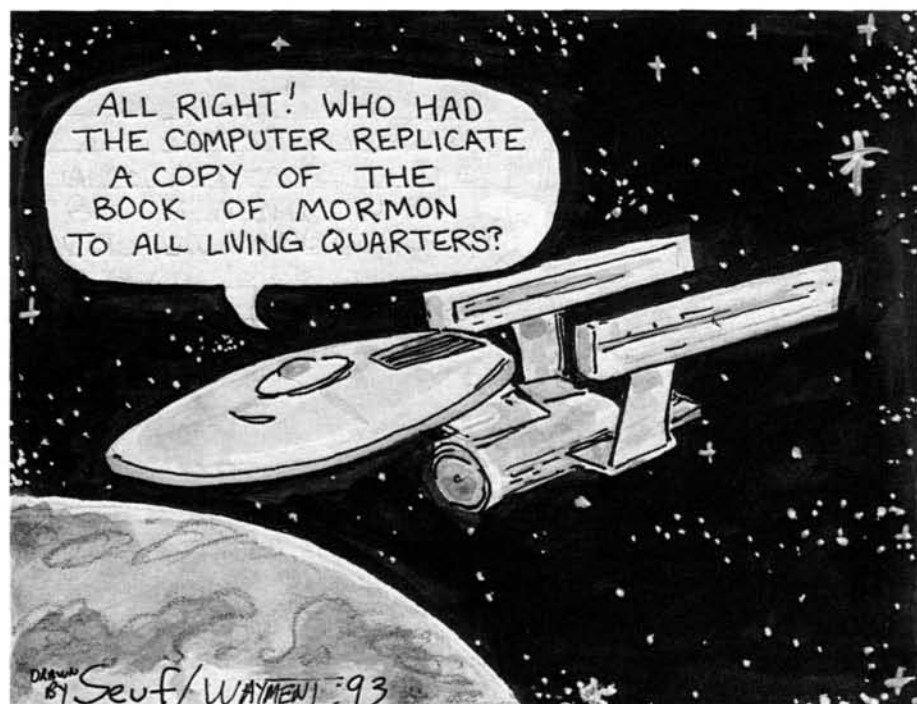
man who made his fortune selling vacuums door-to-door. No effort was made to adapt the material to a spiritual context; the assumption was that, with the right skills, we could sell vacuum cleaners or the gospel.

Missionaries who met baptismal goals were rewarded with trips to major league ball games, recognition in the mission newsletter, and leadership positions. An elder who went home without achieving leadership was considered a failure. I witnessed the kind of statistical manipulation Quinn documents as baptismal certificates were submitted in a later month or swapped to make sure each district team met the quotas.

The missionary discussions were far from discussions. They were a catechism of six lessons in which the investigator was boxed into giving canned answers. An investigator who couldn't walk lock-step through the memorized material probably wasn't a true prospect anyway.

I suffered great personal turmoil over this. Was the gospel the spiritual transformation I had experienced during my conversion, or a commodity sold door-to-door with memorized script? I never bought into the gospel-as-commodity philosophy and was black-listed by the leadership, even though my statistics were good. In our final interview, my president told me that he considered my mission a failure and he worried about my future faithfulness. This was a heavy burden for a young man to carry home.

After several years I resolved these issues and am better for it. If I had to do it over, I





would go on a mission again. Like all experiences, my mission had bad and good. I have left the bad behind, remembering primarily the good. The system isn't perfect, and the people in it aren't perfect. To survive in the Lord's true church, one needs a thick skin, a good sense of humor, and a healthy skepticism. Despite an emphasis on numbers in my mission, I witnessed none of the trick baptisms Quinn encountered. I sincerely believe all of the people I taught and baptized were truly converted and had testimonies.

In contrast to then, my oldest son recently

completed a mission in France. He was given no baptismal quotas; the emphasis was on spirituality and genuine conversion. The current missionary lessons are true discussions in which the investigator is encouraged to express opinions and ask questions. My son spent much time reactivating less active members. He was involved in the community and did volunteer work. His mission was a wonderful experience in every way.

As with all human endeavors, mistakes are made in the Church—sometimes big ones. It is still the Lord's work, and we all do

the best we can. Do we learn from our mistakes? We have, and we are all better for it.

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## OF GOOD REPORT

### RELIGION AND MORAL DEBATE

*Religious argument has historically played an important role in secular social change. Unless contemporary religions refuse to accommodate secular society's demands for humanist orthodoxy, religion will become the exclusive realm of the political right, and liberalism will fail in its pluralistic goals.*

WHAT IS NEEDED is not a requirement that the religiously devout choose a form of dialogue that liberalism accepts, but that liberalism develop a politics that accepts whatever form of dialogue a member of the public offers. Epistemic diversity, like diversity of other kinds, should be cherished, not ignored, and certainly not abolished. What is needed, then, is a willingness to listen, not because the speaker has *the right voice* but because the speaker has *the right to speak*. Moreover, the willingness to listen must hold out the possibility that the speaker is saying something worth listening to; to do less is to trivialize the forces that shape the moral convictions of tens of millions of Americans.

There is an economy about religious belief—an economy and a tendency toward evolution. Over the centuries, the religious traditions, like traditions of other kinds, tend to abandon what is useless and preserve what is useful. The religions may not measure utility in the same terms that secular society does; but, as many sociologists have suggested, religious traditions that lack any relevance to the human experience are very likely, over time, to wither. This evolution matters because it suggests that a religion that has survived must include some kernel of moral truth that resonates with broader human understanding, whether or not most people share epistemic premises of the religion itself.

Sometimes these resonances may seem trivial or circular—for instance, most established religious traditions in America preach against extramarital sex, and Americans overwhelmingly agree that extramarital sex is wrong—and sometimes, as the sociologist Peter Berger has argued, it may be that churches select their moral teachings *because* they resonate with what parishioners already believe. Often, however, the religious traditions connect more deeply with aspects of the human experience. For example, in the case of abortion, which many different religious traditions teach to be wrong, a majority of Americans, while favoring many restrictions on abortion, reject the idea that the government should control it. (So do I.) At the same time, most Americans endorse a key point in the antiabortion argument of religions—that the fetus is a human being.

Thus we see an important role of religious argument in public debate: even when most members of the public reject the religious tradition itself, many and sometimes most will be moved by the moral claims that religious conviction causes members of a faith to make—even when the religious and the nonreligious disagree on the basis of the moral claims. Indeed, in many cases—and the humanity of the fetus is surely one—the basis of the oral (or one might say factual) claim is probably one that most Americans would debate only uneasily, and then with difficulty. Often the moral claim seems almost instinctual, not argued for, and yet it nevertheless becomes the subject of further inquiry—and the foundation for political action.

Because of this ability of the religions to fire the human imagination, and often the conscience, even of nonbelievers—as, for instance, the civil rights movement did—the religions should not be forced to disguise or remake themselves before they can legitimately be involved in secular political argument. As one who believes deeply in the importance of both religious tradition and liberal dialogue, I consider it vital that this accommodation be made. If it is not, secular political disaster may ensue as more and more religiously devout Americans turn their backs on the intellectual traditions that have built and preserved our free institutions. For unless liberal theory and liberal law develop ways to welcome the religiously devout into public moral debate without demanding that they first deny their religious selves, the caricature of liberalism offered by the radical right will more and more become the truth, for liberalism will continue its slide from a pluralistic theory of politics to a narrow, elitist theory of right results. ☐

STEPHEN L. CARTER  
in *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics  
Trivialize Religious Devotion*  
BasicBooks, 1993, 230–32

Sunstone welcomes submissions of interesting quotations.