

## INTERVIEW

MCMURRIN'S HERESIES,  
HISTORY, AND HUMOR*A Conversation with Sterling McMurrin*

L. JACKSON NEWELL AND STERLING M. MCMURRIN

*People ask me, "Why don't you quit the Church?" I don't see much point in quitting. I don't know of any better church. I know of churches where there is more freedom of thought, but one of the really good things about Mormonism is that it brings happiness to people. I think that's the best thing about Mormonism.*

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of Utah Press.

This interview was conducted by L. Jackson Newell, professor of higher education at the University of Utah, at the 1993 Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City. Newell is compiling material for the book, *Conversations with Sterling McMurrin on Religion, Philosophy, and Education*.

A cassette recording of this entire interview is available from the Sunstone Foundation for eight dollars (tape #SL93-363). A second interview, conducted by Laurie DiPadova at the 1994 Sunstone Symposium, is also available (tape #SL94-375).

**How did your Mormon upbringing, especially your two prominent grandfathers, influence your perspective on life?**

I think both my grandfathers had considerable influence on me—especially my mother's father, William Moss, who was the chief founder of the Deseret Livestock Co. I was with him a great deal on cattle and sheep ranches right up until his death, when I was a college student. He was a man of great stature in my opinion. And my paternal grandfather, Joseph W. McMurrin, a member of the First Council of the Seventy, was a powerful figure back in the old days, when the tabernacle used to ring with great oratory. Most people today have no idea what happened in the tabernacle in those days.

I remember a biographer of Brigham Young, for instance, M. W. Werner, who said in the introduction to his book that Brigham would get up in the tabernacle and "God bless" the people for some things and "God damn" them for others. Those were the good old days when going to conference meant something!

**How did you end up becoming a professor of philosophy?**

You mean how come I failed so miserably? I had a teacher, who was a great figure in the philosophy of religion, say to me, "I had a brother who always had the nerve to do the things that I wanted to do, but was always afraid to do. He ended up as a successful man in the world of business affairs and I became a professor of Christian theology and Christian ethics." So, if you can't succeed in something more important, go in for teaching philosophy.

**When and what did you teach in the Church's seminary and institute system?**

I became a seminary teacher in 1937, and I taught classes mainly in the Bible. I like the Old Testament better than the New Testament. To me it is far more interesting. I think they chose not to let me teach the classes in Church history and doctrine that they had in those days. Later on, when I was director of the institute at the University of Arizona, I taught courses in Mormon theology, philosophy of religion, history of religion, and comparative religion.

**Did you feel comfortable teaching Church doctrine and history then?**

Oh, sure. I feel comfortable now in teaching Church doctrine; it's just that they



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don't want me to teach it. Mormon doctrine is a fascinating subject. I have no objection to teaching it at all. Now, there is much in it that I don't believe. There is also a good deal in Platonism and Aristotelianism that I don't believe, but I've made a living teaching that stuff.

**You've said that Mormon theology has greater strengths than most Church leaders are even aware of.**

I think that's true. In order to appreciate the real strengths in Mormon theology, as well as its weaknesses, a person has to have some comprehension of the history of religion and theology and know a good deal about what has been going on in the world in those areas. To appreciate Mormon thought it should be studied comparatively. My book, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, was originally lectures given at the University of Utah that were published by the University Press. One of my colleagues, Sydney Angleman, a highly cultivated non-Mormon Mormon-watcher and very critical of Mormonism in a sophisticated way, said to me when he read the book, "You made Mormonism look a lot better than it actually is." I replied, "That's exactly what I intended to do. I wanted to make Mormonism look better than it is because all of the other writers make it look worse than it is." I mean that quite seriously. Mormon theology has strengths that virtually all—not all—but virtually all the writers within the Church seem to be unaware of. Although, of course, at the present, there's more attention given to the strengths than there was thirty years ago when I wrote those essays.

The chief strength of Mormon theology is its opposition to absolutism in theology; that is, Mormonism believes in a limited God. There aren't many accepted Mormon writers involved in traditional absolutist theology. Still, of those who are, most don't seem to realize that Joseph Smith made a break with all of that. Some of the officials of the Church who turn out books—I wonder where some

of them ever find time to do anything else, they turn out so many—write books steeped with the absolutism that Mormonism was a break from. That's the strength of Joseph Smith as a religious leader. He had a few ideas of his own and some of them were very good. Not all of them, but some of them. Some of them were nonsense.

**Are there other strengths in Mormon theology?**

Many of the other strengths are related to the idea that God is a being who is involved in the world process rather than being some kind of static entity; that God is a temporal being. It's the temporal, material facet of the nature of God that distinguishes Mormonism. I mean materialism with respect to metaphysics, not ethics. Materialism was a perfectly good word that's now ruined by people who use the word if you like good automobiles or something like that.

When I was doing work at Princeton University in 1953, I called on W. T. Stace, a British philosopher at Princeton, a man of stature in the field of philosophy. He had taught at Stanford in Obert Tanner's early years, and they became good friends. In the course of our conversation, Stace said to me, "You know it seems to me that Obert Tanner said that the Mormons believe that God had a body like a human being's. That can't be true, surely?" I replied, "Yes, that's what Tanner told you and that's what the Mormons believe." He slapped his hand down on the table and said, "Goddamn! It's nice to find a religion that makes some sense." Now, he didn't say that he thought it was true, just that it made some sense.

I think it does make sense. I don't think it's true. I'm sure Stace didn't think it was true. But it's a strength of Mormonism to bring God down out of the clouds and try, in some way or another, to make God a living being. This is the great thing in the Bible, you know, that distinguished the biblical God from the typical deities of the ancient world—that God is a living God. The

problem is that, in their efforts to do this, too many Mormon writers get involved in a lot of ludicrous stuff so that they humanize God as if he's just somebody down the road who's been here longer than we have and knows a lot more than we know, but after all he's one of us. Well, that's a form of blasphemy. And that's what you get in a lot of Mormon writings.

**What about free will?**

The Mormon emphasis on the freedom of the will, or what Mormons call—using an old fashioned term—free agency. This is a very great strength in Mormonism. Take the three most important Christian theologians: St. Augustine, the greatest of the theologians, denied freedom of the will in some of his writings, although in other writings he defended it. Martin Luther, in his controversies with Erasmus, the Catholic humanist, argued against freedom of the will. There are many arguments against freedom of the will in John Calvin. This is a great strength in Mormonism—the emphasis on freedom of the will.

The problem is that Mormon writers have never contributed anything whatsoever to solving the problems associated with the belief in freedom of will, while at the same time holding to the principle of universal causation—events that occur are caused to occur. For example, take a person like B. H. Roberts, who laid great stress on freedom of the will (and it's a good thing he did), but who made no contributions whatsoever that I know of to the problem of freedom of the will. He just believed in it. It's not a simple problem; it's difficult to make a case for free will.

**And original sin?**

Yes. Another great strength of Mormonism is its abandonment of the idea of original sin. That is the worst idea, in fact, that ever infected the human mind—and it is a view that is basic in virtually all the great Christian religions. It's not found in any

other religion, but it has been basic in Christianity. In original sin, we sin because we are sinners. In Mormonism, we're sinful because we sin; we don't sin because we're sinful.

### **What is the essence of philosophy?**

Well, theology is what is done to try to make sense out of what the people believe. I mean that quite seriously. For example, the early Christians believed that Christ was divine, so theologians had to make some kind of sense out of that. What they did in the fourth century was come up with the Nicene Creed, which employed Aristotelian metaphysics to make the case that Christ is divine, as the Father is divine. Henry Nelson Weiman was an American philosopher of religion at the divinity school of the University of Chicago (I don't think he's any too good, and I kind of told him that once and he didn't much like it), who wrote a book entitled—it's a wonderful title—*The Wrestle of Religion with Truth*. This wrestle has been going on for some time. On the first page he said, "The theologian is like a cook. He takes all the ingredients and puts them together in a theological formula in such a way that the people like it." Then he says, "Now the philosopher of religion is like a dietitian. He sniffs around to see what the theologian has put in the stew, whether the people like it or not." Now that's rather crude, and I've made it even cruder than he did, but I think it's a very good idea. Of course, the term theology is a derivative of two Greek words, "theo" and "logos," which simply means "the word about God" or "the study of God," as it is sometimes put. Immanuel Kant said that the subject matter of metaphysics is God, freedom, and immortality. That's usually what we think of in connection with theology.

But philosophy is a different matter from theology. Philosophy is an analytical pursuit to try to find out the meanings of things. The term "philosophy" in Greek means the "love of wisdom," as you well know.

### **If theology is the task of trying to make sense of what people believe about religion, does Mormon theology go back to what Joseph taught?**

I think that Mormonism makes a great mistake when it departs too far from the attitude of Joseph Smith. I say that because I think Joseph Smith was a genuine revolutionary in religion. He didn't accept the established religion. Now, Thomas Alexander, a brilliant historian at BYU, has done some ex-

cellent things on the early development of Mormon theology. He has shown, and I think he's quite right, that in the beginning it was not radically different—I mean, if you go back into the Kirtland era—it was not radically different from much of Christian theology. Sidney Rigdon had a lot to do with it then. He was an accomplished Campbellite minister, and he read a lot of Baptist theology into Mormonism (the Campbellites were an offshoot of the Baptists)—faith, repentance, and baptism comes, I think, out of the Baptist church, largely through Rigdon. But as time went on, down to the time of Joseph Smith's death, there was a development of a more radical theology.

For instance, the King Follet sermon, which is a gross statement of ideas that can be worked at in a somewhat more refined way. Just a few months before he died, Joseph Smith said in the King Follet address that we are co-equal with God. Well, the Church rather wisely toned that down. It now reads "co-eternal"; that is, the human ego, which is uncreated, is co-eternal rather than co-equal. That's probably what Joseph Smith had in mind.

### **You have a good deal of respect for Joseph Smith?**

Yes, but some of his ideas were extreme. He had, I think, rather extreme ideas on marriage, for instance, polygamy. It didn't do Mormonism much good, or, to be frank with you, I'm not sure it didn't. If it hadn't been

for polygamy, I, for one, wouldn't be here. Yes, I would! I'm three-fourths polygamist, but always by the first wife! But, there are a lot of you in this audience who wouldn't be here because you weren't first-wifers. It's impossible for historians to determine what causes what, but the whole polygamous hassle helped make Mormonism what it is. We can thank the Lord that for the most part it's gone, although it will never completely disappear. There are plenty of people who, I am sure, are looking forward to polygamy in the hereafter. It's hard to tell just what the Church teaches on that, but the Church never would have been what it is today if it hadn't been for polygamy. We wouldn't have had our great martyrs and our romantic tradition.

Polygamy probably led to Joseph Smith's assassination. If I may hazard a historical observation—and I wouldn't want to be completely misunderstood on this—I think it was a fortunate thing for the Church historically that Joseph Smith died when he did, because the Church was beginning to fall apart. It seems like it was beginning to go to pieces. Something needed to be done to pull things together. Brigham Young pulled it together. I think Brigham was a great man. I don't agree with a lot of his stuff, but he was a man of great stature. I don't think Joseph was a man of great stature. He was a charismatic, prophetic type, but I wouldn't put him in Brigham Young's class as a leader.

Joseph Smith was a bad judge of people;



*"And the calling of Bishop goes to . . ."*



*President Joseph Fielding Smith said to me, "In this church a man is free to believe whatever he wants to believe, just so he accepts certain fundamentals." I thought that was a good statement. "Well," I said, "now, President, the problem is those fundamentals. I simply don't believe them."*

Brigham Young was a good judge of people. He knew when to have them around him and when to get rid of them, in more ways than one. But with Joseph Smith, consider John C. Bennett, the famous apostate who caused him a lot of trouble, a charlatan of the worst order and an adventurer. If I'm not mistaken about this, he wrote to Joseph Smith and said he'd like to join him. He said, "I'll be your right-hand man." And Joseph Smith wrote back, said he didn't want him, and said, "God is my right-hand man." Now that's really a piece of presumption. But later on Joseph did business with John C. Bennett, and it resulted in all kinds of trouble.

**If you were writing *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* today instead of in 1955, would you be able to say those same things, or has our theology evolved?**

I wouldn't change what I put in those essays. As a matter of fact, I'm doing some new essays on the philosophy of Mormonism. In the preface I have made the point that today it is difficult to determine what the official doctrine of the LDS church is. Back when I was a college student and learning things about Mormonism, James E. Talmage, B. H. Roberts, and John H. Widtsoe were living—people of intellectual strength. Talmage and Roberts died in 1933. In those days you could tell what the Church believed and what it didn't. But then every Tom, Dick, and Harry of the general authorities wasn't turning out books all the time. Nowadays everyone turns out these books. Of course, people think they know what they are talking about. And so you have a hard time. I mean you have a hard time comparing some of Neal Maxwell's writings, for instance, with B. H. Roberts's writings.

A few years ago, meeting with a small group of young Mormon men, I talked about some of these things—a limited God and free will—and Daniel Rector said, "You know, you are a Talmage-Roberts-Widtsoe Mormon." He said, "The Church doesn't be-

lieve that sort of thing anymore. They don't go in for that kind of theology anymore." And I thought, "Now what in hell is this kid trying to tell me?" He essentially said, You've lost touch with reality. So, I got around and got in touch with reality and discovered he was absolutely right! Those men have been forgotten. I haven't read many of these things lately, you understand, so I could be corrected, but my impression is it would be very difficult to take the things published now and determine just what the beliefs of the LDS church are.

**Why has that change in Mormon theology occurred?**

I don't know why it's occurred. I'm inclined to say it's occurred partly because the general authorities now are not drawn so much from people like, say, Roberts and Talmage and Widtsoe and Joseph F. Merrill and Orson F. Whitney. I don't mean that they don't draw from people of real stature. I have high regard for most—not all—of the general authorities. They are people of real stature and integrity, but those whom we looked to a few years ago as leaders of the intellectual life of the Church have betrayed us. The leadership of the Church just seems to have lost touch with reality.

You take this situation with academic freedom and faculty firings down at the BYU; it's a deplorable situation. Now, I have plenty of sympathy for the Church on things like that; the general authorities are there to preserve the faith, at least that's what they consider themselves to be there for. It's difficult at this time to determine just what faith they're preserving, but that's their function. Some of these BYU teachers, unfortunately, have minds of their own. And the Church just doesn't know what to do with them. I think it's a serious question whether the Church should have a university. A church that is committed to any extent to thought-control shouldn't have a university. This contention has gone on for a long time; I don't quite know what they can do.

Now, when I say it shouldn't have a university, I don't mean it wouldn't be wise for the Church to support people in education. When I worked for the Church, Franklin L. West, the commissioner of education, was a physicist and dean of the faculty at the college in Logan. He became commissioner back in the thirties and was there when Ernest L. Wilkinson came on the BYU scene. West used to advise the parents to have their young people go to the universities of their choice and especially in their own states. When I was in college that was the official policy of the Church. They weren't of the opinion that the young adults had to go to BYU. The Church, you see, has been able to effectively support an interest in religion through its institutes, and still have students get an education in institutions where there is genuine freedom. In the intellectual sense, the University of Utah, in my opinion, is as free an institution as there is in the world.

**A student at the BYU should have the same opportunities.**

Now the BYU officials—and Wilkinson used to make a good deal of this—would say BYU is a freer institution than the University of Utah. It is freer because they can take courses in Mormonism. At the University of Utah we don't have real academic freedom because we don't give courses in Mormonism. There are different ways of arguing all of this, but it is a travesty that an institution that teaches the glory of God is intelligence and that a person is saved no faster than she or he gains knowledge, that makes free agency and free will a foundation of the faith, should behave as it sometimes does.

I taught at the BYU during the summer of 1947, and it was as pleasant an experience of teaching as I ever had in my life. It was a delightful experience. Now there were two spies assigned to both my classes, but I knew that. If you know there are spies, it adds to the fun. They were very bright. I gave them both As. And they were good spies. They fi-

nally confessed toward the end of the session. They weren't spies for the administration, I hasten to say; they were spies for Sidney B. Sperry, who was a leading man there in religion. He wasn't the head of the religion department or whatever it was called, but he was a major figure.

The head of religion was fired while I was there. I was told it was mainly because of his having me there. But this was fortunate for him because he went out and made a lot of money.

**In the mid-1950s local authorities began proceedings to excommunicate you. What were they angry about?**

I'm not sure what they were angry about. They were just mad. Very often I hear that I'm excommunicated. It's nothing new to be excommunicated these days, but it was fairly new back then, in 1954. Rumors began back in my ward that I had been excommunicated, then that I was being excommunicated, and so on. So I called on the bishop, who was a rather high-level civil servant in the Church. He was one real bigot.

Anyway, I called on him and asked him what was going on. He said to me, and these are his exact words, "Sterling, it is my ecclesiastical duty to investigate you to determine whether you should be brought to trial for excommunication." Well, they were investigating. I had two sessions with him—but before the first session broke up he asked me if I would furnish him the names of people whom they could use as witnesses against me. I didn't think that's the way you were supposed to go about it, and I said, "Look, you're supposed to get your own witnesses." He said, "We haven't been able to find anybody." This is a true story! And I said, "Now look, I have taught Sunday School classes and this, that, and the other. I teach the philosophy of religions at the university. Surely, you can find somebody." And he said, "No, we haven't been able to find anybody."

I had had two long sessions in 1952 dealing with my heresies with Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee, together. Joseph Fielding was president of the Quorum of the Twelve and Harold B. Lee was next in line, and, as you know, they both became presidents of the Church. But this was when David O. McKay was president.

President Smith had said to me, "Now, Brother McMurrin, we want you to know" (and he was very nice, they were both very nice) "that in this church a man is free to believe whatever he wants to believe, just so he accepts certain fundamentals." I thought that was a good statement. "Well," I said, "now,

President Smith, the problem is those fundamentals. I simply don't believe them."

**So, you took it from there?**

So I said to the bishop, "I can give you the names of two people who would make excellent witnesses because they are fully conversant with all of my heresies—all of them." (Well, maybe not all of them, but all of the basic ones.) "President Joseph Fielding Smith and Apostle Harold B. Lee."

He said, "You know we can't use them."

"Well," I said, "why can't you use them?"

I discovered later on why they couldn't use them—Joseph Fielding had instigated the thing in the first place. I liked him very much. The thing I liked about Joseph Fielding Smith was that he was honest and courageous. He said what he thought and he didn't care whether anybody liked it or not. I admired that in him.

Dr. West, the commissioner of education, once told me that as the executive officer of the Church Board of Education, Joseph Fielding Smith, more than any other person he dealt with, was ready to put money into education. This man believed Mormonism. He really believed it. Now some of them don't believe it, you see. But he really believed it, and he was convinced that it will come out on top regardless of what goes on

in the institution—that Mormonism will win. I admired him greatly.

Just before this happened Joseph Fielding Smith was the visiting authority at our stake conference. He was very dramatic. Forceful. And he said, "There are wolves among us. Wolves among us, I tell you. Wolves among us." Later I learned that a couple of men in my high priests quorum happened to go up and talk to him afterwards and inadvertently mentioned my name. And he said, "That's Sterling McMurrin you're talking about?"

And they said, "Yes."

Now he said, "He's the chief wolf I've been telling you about!" Then he said, "He's not to be permitted to come to your priesthood meetings, and if he does come, he's not to be permitted to say anything. He is going to be excommunicated."

**That's the way this got out in your ward!**

Yes, but as I said, I liked Joseph Fielding Smith very much. After he became president of the Church, we had some pleasant communications. For instance, the day after he became president of the Church, Sister Jessie Evans Smith, who as most of you may remember had a distinctive voice, called me on the telephone. My wife Natalie answered. It was about ten o'clock at night. She recog-

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nized her voice and handed me the phone and said, "It's Jessie Evans Smith."

So I talked to her and she said, "Sterling."

"Oh," I said, "Sister Smith, how is President Smith?"

"Oh, he's wonderful. Wonderful. Now that's what I'm calling about. Joseph told me to call you and tell you that he doesn't want you and Natalie to take us off your list."

Now, I'd never heard that expression before, but I kind of got the point of it, and I said, "Well, now, Sister Smith, you tell President Smith that I'll make a deal with him. As long as he keeps me on his list, I'll keep him on my list." She laughed.

**Anyway, a couple of days later—maybe three or four—President McKay called you up at the university?**

I was home for lunch. William Kent, one of my colleagues who was not a Mormon, called me and said, "Somebody's been calling you and says he's David O. McKay. I guess it's just a joke."

I thought, "Well, it may not be such a joke."

He said, "I gave him your home phone number."

I had no sooner hung up the phone than President McKay called and said, "I want to come and see you."

And I said, "President McKay, you can't come and see me. I'll come and see you."

"No, sir, I'm coming to see you."

"Well," I said, "I live way out here in the sticks." I lived way out south of Parley's Canyon—that was before the freeways. I said, "You can't come to see me."

He said, "I am coming to see you."

He lived on South Temple. These were the days when the old Union Building was still the Union Building. I said (I probably shouldn't have used this language), "Well, now, President McKay, what do you say we meet on neutral ground? You're not far from the Union Building. I'll meet you at the Union Building. Give me a little time to get ahead of you." I got a key to the Auerbach

Room—a beautiful room that they used to lock. We had a long talk. President McKay started by saying, "What is it that a man is not"—these are his exact words—"what is it that a man is not allowed to believe or be asked out of this church? Is it evolution?" Nothing in my case was said about evolution. But he brought it up. He said, "Is it evolution? I hope not, because I believe in evolution." Then he went to two or three other things. Each time saying, "I hope not because I believe in that."

**Then you raised the priesthood issue?**

"Well," I said, "I tell you, President McKay." (He was making me look so good that I was feeling guilty as the devil, you know. I still have guilt feelings about this.) I said, "Now, President McKay, I think I caused some trouble in my ward. A teacher was saying that we believe that the Negroes are cursed because of the curse of Cain so they can't hold the priesthood." (This was before the 1978 revelation, of course.) "I told him I didn't want to argue the case, but I wanted him to know that I didn't believe that." President McKay said, "I'm glad you said that because I don't believe it either." And he said, "That was never a doctrine of this church. It's not a doctrine of this church, and it never will be a doctrine of this church that the Negroes are under a divine curse." He said "We believe that there is scriptural precedent—these are his exact words—"scriptural precedent." I knew he was referring to the Pearl of Great Price passage that the Negroes should not now be given the priesthood. "Now," he said, "this is a practice and it is a practice that is going to be changed." Now this was back in 1954. He said, "It's a practice that is going to be changed, and it is not a doctrine of the Church."

**This was still a quarter-century before the matter was to be resolved!**

And I said, "Well, now, President McKay, couldn't you make that statement that you

just made to me in conference or put it on the front page of the *Deseret News* with a box around it?" You know, like they used to do sometimes—statements from the First Presidency. I said, "There are thousands of people in the Church who believe that it is a doctrine of the Church that the Negroes are cursed."

He sat there with a kind of a benign smile, and I thought maybe there was such a thing as pushing the prophet a little too far, so I didn't say anymore. He was very thoughtful. And he said, "Well, all I can do is say that that is not a doctrine of the Church. Denying the priesthood is only a practice, and it is going to be changed."

We were sitting close. He reached over and grabbed me by the knee, and he had a very strong hand. He didn't mention the trial, but he said, "They can't do this to you. They cannot do this to you."

And I said, "Well, President McKay, you know more than I know about what they can do. But," I said, "it looks like that's what they're going to do."

Then he said, "If they bring you to trial for excommunication from the Church, I'll be there as the first witness on your behalf."

"You know, I couldn't ask for a better witness," I said.

I don't know what happened, but I never heard anymore about the trial. I would like to add, while we're talking about the occasion with President McKay—he was most gracious and marvelous—that toward the end of our long conversation he said, "There's just one piece of advice I would like to give you. Just one piece of advice." It's the advice that his uncle somebody or other gave [him] (and he let me know this uncle was kind of the black sheep of the McKay crowd). "He came down to the Union Pacific station to see me off on my mission and when he shook hands with me, he said, 'David, I just have one piece of advice for you. You just think and believe as you please.'" President McKay said, "That's my advice to you. You think and believe as you please."

I said, "President McKay, that's wonderful advice. Couldn't you give that advice in conference?"

**You've known many of the Church's presidents in your lifetime, and many apostles, and I know there are two or three you hold in high esteem.**

That's quite true. President Spencer Kimball, for example, was a marvelous human being. I had strong feelings also for President Lee. To be frank with you, President Lee was disappointed in me. But he was gracious in every way right up until his death. After the third session I had with Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee, they were both very gracious. Some people might suppose that they were a little on the mean side. I didn't get called in; they just asked me if I would come in. Now that's different from being called in, I think. At the first session they wanted me to talk to them about the problems of what Harold B. Lee called the "intellectuals" of the Church, and Joseph Fielding Smith called the "educated men" of the Church.

Anyway, the second session concentrated on my views, and I completely revealed from start to finish my heresies, which are as bad as anybody could have. When Joseph Fielding Smith got up and we shook hands, I was quite moved by what I felt was his generosity. First he said, "My door is open to you every hour of the day, every day of the week, every week of the year, if you will come in and talk to me about the problems of the educated people of the Church." That was his attitude. And he said, "You know things about that that we don't know, and we need to know." I greatly admired him for this. And when we shook hands, he said, "In spite of all of the heresies that you have revealed to us, your disbeliefs, I want you to know that you have the Holy Ghost." I thought that was very generous—as a matter of fact, far too generous.

Harold B. Lee walked out with me and said (you'll excuse me for telling you this, but this is what he said), "Sterling, you could do great things for this church, and you can become a very dangerous man for this church." I said, "Well, I don't want to be dangerous to the Church." And so we shook hands and that was that.

Years later a friend of mine, George Boyd, who had been an institute director, sent me a copy of correspondence that every institute in the Church had copies of. It was correspondence between President Smith and a man in Salt Lake named Fred Morrison. He

had written to President Smith and said that he had been a student of mine, and so on and so on. He didn't understand why I hadn't been excommunicated from the Church. President Smith—you know apparently either this guy or somebody in President Smith's office, there's always somebody who will leak this stuff—got a copy of this letter on official apostolic stationery. President Smith wrote: "I am aware of the fact that Sterling M. McMurrin is a betrayer of the church and its teachings . . . But there is nothing I can do about it. . . . I wish you would take up this matter with those higher in the authority than am I. . . . Why not present your case to the First Presidency?" [letter dated 29 August 1960.] I thought that was great. I just loved him for that. I liked his frankness.

**How do you feel about excommunication now, Sterling?**

Any day now the Church might decide to dispense with me, and honestly, I don't see any reason why they shouldn't. I really don't. I'm not a good believer. It's just that simple. Sometimes people ask, "What would you do if you were called in to be excommunicated?" Well, I wouldn't miss the trial like some of my friends have. I wouldn't miss it on a bet. I would want a witness there, but not a witness in my behalf. I wouldn't want that. If President McKay had shown up, I wouldn't have objected to anything he said. But I wouldn't want a witness there in my behalf. I'd want an objective witness who could tell what happened there. I wouldn't try to defend myself at all in an excommunication trial. I don't have any defense. I would have to say, "Now look, you're the people that are sort of on trial. You've got to decide whether or not you want guys like me in the Church." There are good reasons for not having people like me in the Church, and there may be, for all I know, good reasons for having people like me in the Church.

When I was a young man and started teaching seminary, there were liberal-minded seminary teachers, and we thought we could make a contribution to the Church. We really did. Well, I don't think that any longer. The Church belongs to the true believers who are 100 percent tithing payers, and to the general authorities. I used to think the Church belonged to all of us. That was back in my youthful, idealistic days, you see. I seriously don't believe that any longer. If they decide to get rid of people like me, which I'm well aware would include a lot of other people like some of you in this audience, I think they'd be perfectly within their rights. I

would make no defense at all.

**Do you regard the universe as a friendly place for human beings?**

No, I don't. I'm somewhat pessimistic. I don't think the universe is on our side. Now I've had teachers whom I greatly respect who can give you marvelous arguments to show that humanity is at home in the universe. After all, the universe has thrown us up and will destroy us. So we're perfectly at home. We're just aren't going to be at home forever. I regard the world as an unfriendly place. I don't see how anyone can take into consideration the enormous amount of suffering the human race endures and think in any other terms than that the world doesn't give a damn for the human race.

**On the whole, would you say the world's great religions have been an aid in ameliorating suffering?**

I think that is what religion for the most part is about—an attempt to convince us, or to convince ourselves, that the suffering and evil of the world can be sublimated and that ultimately God is in his heaven and all is well. William James said, "In times like this, God has no business hanging around heaven." That's the way I feel about it. William James is my saint among philosophers and the one whose views are closest to Mormonism. He said, "God is down in all of the muck and dirt"—and these are his exact words—"He's not in heaven. He's down in all of the muck and dirt of the universe trying to clean it up." I have essentially a pessimistic view of the human condition.

**How did that idealistic young Sterling you describe begin to evolve?**

I'm not sure, but I can think of a few things. During the second year I was teaching for the Church, the commissioner of education wrote to me and asked if I would write a paper on the philosophy of religion—he didn't say Mormonism—that would be acceptable in a graduate philosophy seminar. So, I wrote such a paper, an argument for the Mormon concept of God in connection with moral philosophy—a nonabsolutistic God, you see. The commissioner liked it, and the people he worked with liked it, and they published it in a magazine called *Weekday Religious Education* that the Church published and sent out to all its teachers of religion at Brigham Young University and seminaries and institutes and so on. It was a very nice thing—had a lot of good things in it.

One of the apostles took my article to President Heber J. Grant. Now, I have this

from Dr. West, the commissioner himself. President Grant called him in and put my article in front of him and said, "I have given this article to seven lawyers. Everyone of them agrees with me that this is nothing but a lot of damn tommyrot." That was his language. "It's nothing but a lot of damn tommyrot. Now this man's to be fired and we do away with this magazine." Well, they did away with the magazine. I have a fine record on doing away with magazines.

### And this happened way back in early 1940!

Well, they didn't want to fire me. They were nice. My bosses—Lynn Bennion was my immediate boss—didn't really want to fire me. So they sent me down to Arizona. I had college institute work at Tempe and the seminary at Mesa. I'd been there about six weeks and some kid with a stern look on his face came in and said, "President Grant is out in his car, and he wants to speak with you."

I thought, "My Lord, the president of the Church has taken the time out to track me clear down to Arizona." So, I went out, and he was in the car. He apologized for not getting out. He was having some trouble with his legs. He wondered if I'd get in the car and we'd talk. We just had a wonderful time. I'm pretty sure he had forgotten I was the guy he had wanted fired. But when he died I was in Tucson, and I gave the eulogy at the big stake affair they had in his memory. I liked President Grant very much. I didn't blame him for telling them to fire me. I think I'd have done the same thing; it wasn't the best article in the world.

Anyway I love the Church, you know, and they leave me alone. I get along famously with the Church. There are several of the general authorities whom I run into at some concert or something, and they speak to me. I hold that any general authority who will speak to me in public is a generous person. I like them. I'm sure there are some who won't speak to me in public.

### What would you say are the chief threats to the welfare of the Latter-day Saint church in the future?

First, I think Elder Packer's a total disaster for the Church. He and others like him are the chief threats to the Church. A major threat, and I mean this very seriously—to what you might call its intellectual and moral integrity and so on—is the fact that this sort of thing, the Sunstone symposium, goes on and they don't like it. If the Church were open and honest, Sunstone symposiums would not be necessary. I once asked Daniel

Rector, "Do the general authorities come to any of these Sunstone meetings?" His father was one of the general authorities, and I think he came once. They ought to be here and see what the people are thinking instead of sitting up there condemning the people who come here and telling BYU professors to stay away and so on. He said, "No, they don't come, but they have their spies here." I suppose they do. I don't object to their having their spies here. I think it is a good thing if general authorities have people coming to every one of these sessions if they'll report back honestly about the attitudes and thoughts of the people—because they are out of touch, they are just out of touch with the people. They go to the stakes and the wards and people fawn over them and want to touch the hem of their clothes. They're objects of adulation.

Some of them know better than to do some of the things they do in condemning the people, like Dallin Oaks functioned with respect to Linda King Newell and her colleague Val Tippetts Avery on their book on Emma Smith. They know better than that; some of them came out of universities. What is it that causes people who have good ideas and right thoughts to get taken over by their ecclesiastical positions and get swallowed up in that authoritarian and dogmatic stance that so many of them assume? That's a great threat to the Church. The very fact that Sunstone exists, and I think it's a wonderful thing, shows a weakness in the Church, that people can't go to church and say what they think. They have to get out somewhere else to say what they think. For a long time there were these so-called Church history groups. I guess there still are some. They were all over the Church because people wanted to go somewhere where they could say what they thought and communicate with each other honestly.

**You are skeptical about religion and yet, frankly, I don't know anyone who has a more fundamentally respectful attitude toward other people, who seems to enjoy life more in all the highest senses, is more spiritual at the core. On what do you anchor this verve for life, this respect for others?**

That's very gracious thing for you to say, and it's a gross overstatement, of course. There are all kinds of people who know how bad I am. But the main cause for what I am is that I'm a Mormon. I mean that quite seriously. You see, one of the really good things about Mormonism is that it brings happiness to people; I think that's the best thing about Mormonism. It brings a sense of well-being

and happiness and the desire to do things and so on. I think it has had that kind of effect on me and certainly on millions of others. I realize that one might find the same thing in some other religions.

People ask me from time to time, "Why don't you quit the Church?" I just don't see much point in quitting the Church. I don't know of any better church. I know of churches where there is more freedom of thought, as in the case of the Unitarians. I like the Unitarians, and I have some association with Unitarianism. But I don't know of any better church than Mormonism. Though I am critical of it, I have no inclination to turn my back on the Church. ☐



## AUTUMN

Ballerina dandelions  
pirouette through the sky,  
lose their essence  
to greedy wind.

Grizabella leaves  
crinkle a farewell song,  
embrace death  
in a red-gold aria.

Wall Street squirrels  
argue bull and bear,  
embezzle nuts  
from unwary trees.

Sultan squash  
grow fat on the vine,  
wait indulgently  
for Thanksgiving.

Elephant clouds  
lumber across the horizon,  
boldly trumpet  
the coming rain.

Pekinese wind  
nips at fingers and toes,  
yaps incessantly  
that winter is near.

—CHARLENE C. HARMON