

PBS Broadcast "The Mormons"

INTRODUCTION

On a whole, I enjoyed the much anticipated May 2007 PBS Broadcast, "The Mormons"; but many Latter-day Saints did not. Indeed, the storm of criticism (and praise) that followed could be read on LDS.org, PBS.org, and on Internet blogs everywhere! It was a fascinating thing to observe (especially as Mitt Romney's presidential campaign waged in the background)! The Thomas Sherry letter to PBS seemed to intellectualize criticism of the broadcast propelling it to email addresses everywhere. I received two copies myself—one from my father-in-law and another from a good friend, Son Le. I found many of Dr. Sherry's criticisms to be unfair. And so I soon found myself doing what I am wont to do; I responded.

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PBS Broadcast "THE MORMONS"

THE THOMAS SHERRY LETTER

To: PBS – Frontline & American Experience
Re: "The Mormons"
Fr: Thomas E. Sherry, Ed.D

Dear PBS,

I was disturbed and disappointed in the imbalanced portrayal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which you aired on April 30 and May 1, 2007. I wish to state some of my disgust with your method and message. My comments, of course, represent my own views and I am not speaking in any way as an official representative of the LDS Church. Nevertheless, I do have some qualifications: I am an adult convert to the LDS Church; my masters and doctoral degrees included a minor in religious studies; I have been an LDS Religious Educator for 34 years, the last 28 of those at Eastern Washington University, Pennsylvania State University, Brigham Young University, and Oregon State University. I teach World Religions, Bible and Christian History, LDS History and Doctrine. I serve as adjunct faculty of the OSU History Department, and on the Boards of the Holocaust Memorial Committee and Religious Advisors Association at OSU (the latter is a coordinating body of the 28 religious groups which function on the campus of Oregon State University). My experience and education have contributed to the sense that producers had just accomplished one of the most seriously skewed programs I've ever seen. When I view "anti-mormon" films and literature, at least they are overt in their mission and purpose; yours, however, was a program from which viewers expect fairness and balance but which delivered just the opposite – a sort of "wolf in sheep's clothing" experience. You described a church that I do not recognize, which did not portray my beliefs, and almost wholly missed the mark for accurate journalism.

My family has been staunch and consistent supporters of PBS both in time, devotion, and money – this program causes me to re-evaluate the respect we have held for you and our future financial support. If on a subject of which I know much, you present such an imbalanced representation, what does that mean for so many other programs for which I know little? That is a disturbing thought.

Before going further, I wish to recognize the admirable portrayal of certain topics: The international welfare and humanitarian aid efforts of the Church; the conversion story of the former drug addict; and, your sensitive treatment of the challenges of homosexual lifestyle and Church doctrine & practice regarding such. Thank you for those elements.

PBS Purpose and Vision

For days after the program I sincerely wondered just how the mission and purpose of your presentation had developed. Had it begun ostensibly with the intent to broadly "explore" Mormonism or was it driven by a darker mission? Regardless of the original intent, the show felt like the producers at some point progressively digressed from a balanced exploration to an intent to "expose the under-belly of Mormonism." In an interesting comment from one of my university students, he said that he (a new convert) had invited his non-LDS roommates to watch the show with him. During the show he felt terrible and wondered what "damage" he'd done by so inviting them. But afterward, they turned to him and said; "I thought we were going to learn something about your Church in this program but this was just a rehash of all the crap we hear

constantly – we didn't learn anything new." By the way, the most uniform observation I heard from students was that from the first minutes of the program, they knew this would be a bad experience – it felt dark, ugly, and ominous.

Did the producers and interviewers just become enamored with all the controversy and forget their journalistic responsibility? It's a baffle to me. But the program evidenced a production that seemed intent on: 1) "Knocking Mormonism down a notch or two;" 2) Tipping the "great American religion" off its pedestal" (if it ever were on one); and, 3) portraying Mormon history and doctrine as cultic, deceitful and secretive, absurd, and outlandishly weird. What follows is some comment on areas in which I feel you did a disservice and left viewers with skewed and erroneous impressions:

Imbalance

Krister Stendall, former Dean of Religion at Harvard University and Episcopal bishop of Stockholm, Sweden, has stated 3 rules which guide his participation on interfaith discussion and exploration of other religions. The first two are: 1) "If you're going to ask the question as to what others believe, ask them – not their critics, not their enemies because what one tradition says of another is usually a breach of the 9th commandment – "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour." It is important that we do not picture the other person's faith in a manner they do not recognize as true; 2) "If you're going to compare, don't compare your bests with their worsts. Most think of their own tradition as it is at its best and they use caricatures of the others." In the case of your program, it was not so much one religious view opposing another, it was the slick and sophisticated portrayal of the "intellectual and dissident" view verses the "unintellectual

and blindly obedient" Mormon mainstream and leadership – an unfortunate and mistaken dichotomy.

Regarding Stendall's rules, PBS somehow decided to give a time ratio of approximately 10-1 to non-LDS commentators and those who are bitter former members with an axe to grind (several of whom I know personally). Do those persons have a legitimate story to tell and a right to tell it – of course. But those persons were given the overwhelming amount of time and when time was given to the few LDS commentators – particularly in part 1 -- it was in short and awkward clips with little context and sometimes so weird and irrelevant that you wondered why PBS even included the clip.

For example, with an almost dismissive manner you trivialized the Book of Mormon by numerous references to a strange and magical translation story, DNA accusations of unreliability, and Antebellum American context for book which you portrayed as very human and very flawed. No matter that the book is among the most widely sold books in the world, that millions of converts trace their conversions to the text, and that intelligent people actually believe it. No, the best you could come up with on a positive note was a non-LDS "poet" commenting on how he really enjoyed the Book of Mormon as a quaint self expose of Joseph Smith and hot button issues in his culture. Additionally, Terryl Givens (a respected author) was given the bulk of his time on the first night to an exploration of Mormon "dance" as theology – what's up with that? Weird, yes; representative, no. So was that the modus operandi of PBS – to emphasize "weird?" Did Givens misrepresent us? No, but the relevance of that portion to LDS history and theology was so insignificant and strained, and the presentation so mystical that it effectively conveyed strangeness – a seemingly central intent of the producers. And that relatively irrelevant portion was given more time than any other issue from LDS commentators in program 1 – a shameful misappropriation of time.

Mystical strangeness was the hallmark of nearly every piece of art, shadowy background,

and eerie music selections which dominated the show and exercised such an oppressive feeling. Did you want to portray Joseph Smith and LDS belief as demented and strange—perhaps even evil? Even the voice intonation and script of the main commentator added to the "secret, strange, and oppressive" aura of the show which focused on the sensational and eschewed the compelling and easy to understand story of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its international growth.

As such, the expose was masterfully crafted if what PBS wanted to emphasize was "strange, secret, and oppressive." Watching the show was akin to reading one of the tabloids on the news stand – titillating but unreliable and misrepresentative. Is that what the producers sought to accomplish? If not, one would ask where the art loved by Latter-day Saints was; where was the light, cheery and faith filled art, music, and landscape which so represents us and is produced 100-1 over that which was chosen by the producers? Where were the pictures of Joseph Smith that looked normal? And where were the devoted, faith filled "normal" every-day Latter-day Saints in the show – particularly in Part 1? By the millions, they are the real story of the Latter-day Saints. Where were the intellectuals, scientists, and eminent public servants who believe? Apparently including such would have worked against the purposes of PBS. Doesn't it seem rather contrary to logic to assume that anyone who believes in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its doctrine is ignorant, oppressed, or mentally incapable to discern "the real story" astutely "uncovered" by PBS? That's the message your program conveyed. Yes, you did give attention to Mitt Romney and Harry Reid, but the context made no effort to cast them as reasonably intelligent disciples – rather, it was to explore whether a Mormon could be elected to any significant office given the strangeness of this religion.

Balance in the Issues

In Part 1 (Monday evening), you took roughly the first 100 years of LDS Church history. HALF of that program was reduced to 2 events – plural marriage and the Mountain Meadows massacre. The rest was devoted largely to your view of how strange, mysterious, and weird Joseph Smith apparently was. Was that the best you could do for 100 years of history, accomplishment, and contribution?

1) Mountain Meadows – no question about it, this is the darkest piece of LDS history with despicable acts by members and local leaders – thank you for including Elder Dallin H. Oaks comment on it. Among historians in and out of the LDS Church, there is significant challenge and varied interpretation in print on this subject and you covered NONE of the debate except a brief statement by one LDS historian who said he was satisfied that blame did not lay in the office of Brigham Young. But he had maybe 3 seconds, compared to 20 minutes by critic historians. The truth is, the most debatable aspect of this story is the knowledge and responsibility of Brigham Young. You gave that debate almost no time, not even mentioning it as a legitimate point of disagreement among qualified historians.

After allowing critics to lambaste Church responsibility for the event you feature a preposterous summary statement as proof that the murderous edict came from Brigham Young – "Young was governor of the territory and nothing happened without his knowledge." What a silly statement. The Utah territory was a big chunk of land (encompassing current Nevada, Utah, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado), and pre-dated telegraph services at the time (Mountain Meadows was a 3-day hard ride from SLC). Just how did Brigham Young magically control and know "everything" going on in the territory? And how about the indisputable historical record that a rider was sent to Young to get advice on the pending crisis but could not have arrived, conferred, and returned before the massacre had occurred?

On a related matter, consider the restrained position of Brigham Young regarding not harming any individual from the invading forces of the United States Army who were heading into the valley? He did direct harassment and the capture of supply wagons; he did prepare members to once again leave their homes in the valley and to burn them if necessary to give the army no benefit from arriving in SLC. But it is well known that with all the skirmishes and threat, no direction was ever given to contest by firearms the invasion. Doesn't that seem a little contrary to Brigham Young then turning around and ordering the deaths of men, women, and children in an immigrating pioneer train? So where was the balance in the PBS report on this issue? You strongly accused Young and others of "running out of town" federal officials sent to govern Utah. But where was the coverage of those same officials acting illegally and mistreating the saints? Again, that was a balance you seemed uninterested in covering.

2) Plural Marriage – here again, where were the first-hand journal records of this policy and practice being a blessing to people, a trial of faith that in the end strengthened their testimony of Joseph Smith's inspiration in the matter and of the Lord's hand in this? No where to be found. But by far the greatest disservice done in the PBS report and other writings on this subject was to cast it as a sex-crazed policy of a lunatic gone mad with power – as though this practice was invented by Joseph Smith. Did you check into this interpretation – or was it just the sensational and pejorative that you were interested in?

Point One: Plural marriage was a common Bible practice. COMMON – not exceptional and weird to Bible peoples. All Bible believers, both Jewish and Christian must wrestle with that. And Jesus himself held up as the quintessential prophets and people of faith those who practiced plural marriage (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, etc.). The Savior even went so far as to liken himself to the great Moses and heaven to Abrahams' bosom. Sounds like Jesus didn't have a problem with the practice. But did you mention that? Of course not – it didn't seem to fit in your production purposes. After all, that would make plural marriage in modern times a restoration of lauded biblical precedent instead of a weird invention of Joseph Smith – not a message you apparently wanted to risk conveying. Latter-day Saints do not apologize for following the Lord's direction on this matter. We have nothing to hide. I may personally never wish to participate in the practice but it is not a source of embarrassment.

Point Two: Did you look into the history of this with Joseph Smith? Do you know that while studying the Bible he came across the plural marriages of these early venerated prophets and was in such shock that he went to the Lord in prayer to ask how in the world such a practice could be acceptable? And to his dismay and disgust, he was answered by the Lord – but not with an answer he could have ever imagined. In our publicly accessible scriptures (Doctrine and Covenants 132) the Lord answers by saying that He would tell Joseph Smith the answer, but once He did, Joseph would be asked to live the same law. This is among the best known and accessible of historical records on the subject but was never mentioned by you. And what a surprise – none of the critics mentioned it either!

Point Three: You erroneously portrayed plural marriage as an LDS requirement to enter heaven. That is how many fundamentalist polygamists think (you gave a lot of coverage to them!). But that has never been the doctrine of the LDS Church. Celestial marriage is a practice whereby two worthy individuals enter a marriage covenant and have it sealed by one having priesthood authority – period. That policy includes monogamous and plural marriages but the latter does not overshadow the former. You altogether failed to make this distinction in your show even though you devoted 40 minutes to the subject. And where were the respected LDS voices on the beauty of this belief? No where to be found in your skewed representation.

3) Missionary Service – In night two, you devoted a fair amount of time to a subject which deserves it – the amazing missionary program of the Church. But what was the dominant message you conveyed? It was that LDS missionaries are mindless automatons doing what they cannot choose not to do – no choice, no choice, no choice – "you go, you go, you just go," was the repeated message. And then to make things worse, 3 of the 4 voices you gave time to were missionaries who apparently went under real or imagined duress and subsequently abandoned the LDS Church. What a disservice – skewed and bigoted, flawed and incomplete. You portrayed such service, the LDS culture which encourages it, and the Church program which sponsors it as oppressive, mechanical, and regimented to the point of intellectual and emotional pain. It was Jesus that "commanded" (yes, commanded – not lightly "suggested") that disciples go into all the world and preach repentance, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, baptism, and enduring in obedience to the gospel – "Mormons" didn't make that up.

Over the years, I have worked with hundreds of young men and women and older couples who were preparing and did serve missions. In my experience less than 1% have any such feelings which you portrayed as "normal." They deeply desired to serve, they saved and sacrificed to serve, and they count the time as the best years of their lives. Where was that message in your presentation? You did give the positive some time but there again, it was minor compared to the negative interpretation. I can again, only surmise that the overwhelmingly positive experience of hundreds of thousands of individuals was of little interest to you – you had a purpose and that overwhelming set of evidence did not fit within your purposes so you largely left it out.

To your credit however, you did give liberal time to the story of one woman convert and how the gospel had blessed her. Also, you allowed Marlin K. Jensen to tell his mission experience. Thank you for doing that.

4) The LDS Church is secretly rich and power hungry – I think you would have done well to return to the public record on this and how President Gordon B. Hinckley has repeatedly summarized in public interviews the wealth of the Church. Most of that wealth is in income consuming, not income producing ventures – the bulk of which are chapels and other worship and welfare structures and land.

To the amazing credit and faithfulness of members, many do fully observe the Law of Tithing and pay 10% of their income to the Church – we don't look at that as a suppressive burden. But again, that's a biblical precedence of which we again follow in our day whereas you portrayed it as a mysterious coupe accomplished by secretive power hungry church leaders. "They have devious plans and bilk their members so they can exercise power over them to get personal gain and insure that no one questions their practices" – was the ridiculous mystique purveyed by critics. It's just plain wrong on its face, wrong in fact, and wrong in interpretation but none of that deterred the producers.

For many years I have been part of and witness to the extraordinary auditing practices of the Church to insure that all sacred funds are handled legally and appropriately – I can assure you that it is done in minute detail. In addition, the Church hires non-LDS auditing services to assess its handling of these funds and to make an annual public statement. While the individual expenditures are not public record, those expenditures are publicly audited (a requirement by the Federal government for "non-profit" organizations).

I am grateful for the law of tithing, that as members we can share the blessings granted us and elevate our brothers and sisters around the world both in and out of LDS membership. Tithing monies allows the work to go forward throughout the world and those few leaders (very few by comparison), who do receive a living stipend receive very little. They are poorer than if

they held normal jobs in the world and anyone who portrays the leaders as accessing income from tithing funds to live luxuriously is mistaken. Those who publicly portray this message are ill-informed or downright dishonest.

You did equally poorly on the portrayal of temples and their purposes, on Church disciplinary councils, and governance. I am very familiar with these issues and you did not portray an honest and balanced perspective. Again and again your cast and backdrops were intended to convey strangeness, weirdness, thoughtless obedience, and extreme authoritarianism on the part of LDS leaders and the membership. You portrayed little respect, a great deal of antagonism, and a general avoidance of the grandness of the Church and its doctrines. One wonders just how the LDS Church could be growing at all given your abysmal assessment. Was that irony lost on you? Or do you simply explain it by adjudging LDS members and converts to be from the poor and downtrodden, the uneducated and desperate and hence largely unknowledgeable and indiscriminate?

I could go on with other subjects but I hope I have adequately made the point. I'm sorry that you chose to do the show you did. I think you have done a serious disservice to the viewing public and to the reputation of PBS. I believe that viewers were left with erroneous ideas and impressions and the responsibility for that lies directly on your shoulders.

Thomas E. Sherry,
May 8, 2007

PBS Broadcast "THE MORMONS"

MY RESPONSE TO THE THOMAS SHERRY LETTER

From: Victor Poulsen
To: Son Le
Sent: June 5, 2007
Subject: The Thomas Sherry Letter to PBS

Son,

I'm afraid my MSEE can't compete with Thomas E. Sherry's impressive resume laden with church scholarship, but as a ruminative aerospace engineer who has spent most of the last twenty years in church government (including several great years as your counselor), perhaps I can provide meaningful commentary on his May 8 letter to PBS and its subject film. My initial impression: Dr. Sherry's letter was hastily written in anger and I disagree that the broadcast was as bad as he suggests. That I received word of it from you (in Orem), my father-in-law (in St. George), and my Bishop (here in Fort Worth) indicates the letter enjoys a wide and likely growing circulation. And most, like you, seem to applaud Dr. Sherry's combative defense of Latter-day Saint interests. I was less inclined to do so. I was momentarily tempted to dismiss it, but as you know (and as my website suggests), writing about such things is a bit of an illness to me. And so, since you first brought it to my attention, you get to be the unfortunate recipient of my response.

I still have my copy of a 1986 letter (on church letterhead) addressed to "General Authorities..., and Stake Presidents in English Speaking Countries" from the managing director of the LDS Public Communications Dept. My Stake President presented it, along with an accompanying book--"The Truth About 'The God Makers'" (by Dr. Gilbert Scharffs of the University of Utah LDS Institute)--to members of the Fort Worth Stake High Council to be used as a resource to counter its subject anti-Mormon book and movie by the same name. (A web-based version of the book can be seen at http://www.fairlds.org/The_God_Makers/.) Having discussed "The God Makers" movie with some of my fellow engineers, I was the first to borrow Dr. Scharffs' book, which I read completely. There is no doubt that my own efforts to answer questions raised by Mormon detractors are influenced by this book. There are many things to admire about the way Dr. Scharffs wrote it, including:

1. His scholarly, contemplative, and complete answers.
2. His stoic, professional, and restrained tone.
3. His intellectual honesty in acknowledging valid criticism.

Included in the latter was a lament that the Savior and the grace of his atonement were too often lacking in our local sermons and testimonies. I agreed (and still do) and have always kept that in mind while selecting Sacrament Meeting topics as a Bishopric member. Nevertheless, it was not the criticism itself but rather the **ADMISSION** of its validity that left a powerful impression on me; such, it seemed to me, was just not done in the church. Yet Dr. Scharffs' willingness do so demonstrated objectivity and added **ENORMOUS** credibility to his book! I believe my willingness to do the same has been perceived by my fellow engineers in a very positive way

enabling many frank and honest discussions of religion over the years. In short, they're not afraid of offending me. Angry letters such as Dr. Sherry's, I'm afraid, may leave respectable media--which has only now begun taking an interest in Mormonism while dealing with a climate of post-Imus political correctness--afraid of offending us.

While the scholarship of Dr. Sherry's comments is evident, the latter two of Dr. Scharffs' credibility-building characteristics are missing from his letter. I was especially troubled by its caustic tone. Email has been at once a blessing and curse in our society AND in our church. The occasional acrid email I've seen exchanged between local church leaders during my years in church government have left me troubled at times. I have preached, begged, and pleaded with members NEVER to hit that "send" button while angry! The tone of a letter, it seems to me, ALWAYS overshadows its content. Such is the case here. PBS would likely be more receptive to a more restrained tone. I once wrote a similar angry letter to some engineers who were bombarding me with anti-Mormon literature. Unfortunately, it brought our otherwise interesting discussions to a screeching halt! (They became afraid of offending me.) Nearly twenty years later, I still can't read the letter as it recalls my embarrassment at having written it.

Nor do I think that Dr. Sherry's case was helped by his use of hyperbole. He complained, for instance, that "The Mormons" broadcast described a church he did "not recognize." He included in quotes a vicious rhetorical accusation relating to tithing and power that was neither spoken nor (in my opinion) suggested in the film. On the contrary, commentator Richard Ostling admitted that he was unaware of any financial scandal in the church. Furthermore, as I watched the broadcast, I was impressed by what I saw as a fairly balanced presentation. ("Balanced," of course, means that there WILL be contrary views expressed.) "How then," I asked myself, "could Dr. Sherry see a 10-1 imbalance favoring negative comments from individuals 'with an axe to grind'?" And with a drawer full of marked up anti-Mormon literature, how did I not see this as the "most seriously skewed program" and "wolf in sheep's clothing" that Dr. Sherry saw?

I'm sure part of the answer lies in our disparate expectations. After dealing with years of venal anti-Mormon media, I was looking forward to an honest (if not completely flattering) presentation. This expectation was seeded by a Jan. 14 Deseret News article mailed to my Bishop (who delivered it to me--his counselor at the time) from Church Headquarters in which filmmaker Helen Whitney discusses her upcoming film. "The Mormons," she observed, "will no doubt displease anyone who doesn't want to hear a negative word about the LDS Church. At the same time, it's going to anger those who don't want to hear anything good about it." Based on the contents and tone of his letter, I expect Dr. Sherry joins many Latter-day Saints in being well described by the former. As a pragmatist, however, my expectations were markedly different and largely met by the film.

Dr. Sherry also employed some flawed arguments. Just as the large number (hundreds of millions) and intelligence of Muslim and Hindu believers does not mitigate the error of their respective scripture, a few million Mormons do not make The Book of Mormon true. Similarly, the rapid growth of Islam is neither evidence of its truthfulness nor even of its lack of (perceived) oddness. Additionally, I'm confident that virtually any church would experience significantly increased growth if it had access to a missionary force such as ours. (That they couldn't possibly put one together is an important but separate question.) There is also inconsistency in his complaints about reasons given in the film as to why our young men serve missions. I didn't find anything inaccurate or offensive, for instance, in Bryan Horn's comment, "You go. You go. You

go..." In fact, I'm at loss to understand how anyone, who knows the dynamics of human societies in general and of Mormon society in particular, could deny that young Mormon males do not respond to pressures they surely feel to serve a mission. (I'm sure anyone who has served as a missionary, as a parent of a missionary, and in a Bishopric--as we have--will agree that there is some degree of truth here.) Is it not better to argue the MERITS of social pressures to do the RIGHT thing? Isn't this one reason we are so proud of BYU--because of the positive peer pressure among its student body to obey others of God's commandments including morality and sobriety? If a burning testimony was the ONLY motivating force for missionary service, I'm confident that a similar percentage of our young WOMEN would serve missions as well. But, as Dr. Sherry points out, our young men are responding to an ageless commandment from God (AND subsequently from the community in which they live). And commandments, by definition, pressure us socially--and that's OK.

There were significant problems with the PBS broadcast to be sure. Even as I try to be understanding of some of the flaws in her film, I can't defend Helen Whitney's decision to waste an entire hour discussing the admittedly important subjects of the Mountain Meadows massacre and of polygamy. As I said in a previous letter, I think she could have presented the same information in less than half the time allowing for other needed discussions that were overlooked. Such an extensive treatise of polygamy, furthermore, reinforced rather than mitigated Mormon stereotypes that Helen Whitney told the Deseret News she was attempting to "blow away." Nevertheless, I tried not to let the excesses of that one hour define the other three. I was also a little annoyed when no context was given to Elder Dallin Oaks' sensational comment, "It's wrong to criticize leaders of the church, even if the criticism is true," used as a teaser following Part 1 of the broadcast. And I agree with Dr. Sherry that the whole dance thing was a bit contrived. Additionally, I found the detail about a Branch President posting a note on a missionary's door with news of his mother's death to be a gratuitous addition to James Dalrymple's tragic story. In another context, such a detail NEEDS to be told; but in the context of this film, it falsely suggested to outsiders that such gross insensitivity is normal rather than exceptional in the church. Nevertheless, these criticisms represent errors in film editing judgment by Helen Whitney rather than factual errors.

Despite its problems, there was much to like about the PBS broadcast. (Brother Sherry mentioned some of these.) Unlike the anti-Mormon media we know so well, I was unable, for instance, to find any falsification in the film. Opinions from commentators were presented as such (including Will Bagley's inane comment, "Nothing happened in Utah Territory that Brigham Young didn't know about") and tended to be balanced by a contrary view. And who could forget Betty Stevenson's touching conversion story which included her hilarious comment, "And they told me the most preposterous story about this white boy, a dead angel and some gold plates"? Neither could Latter-day Saints miss the SIGNIFICANT church involvement in the film! Indeed, Helen Whitney commented in the aforementioned Deseret News article that the LDS Church was "absolutely cooperative" in the making of the film. In fact, I was mildly astonished at video clips from church meetings, from inside an MTC classroom, and even from inside a TEMPLE! There were interviews with members of the Quorum of the Twelve and of the Seventy. The latter included extensive, articulate and inspiring comments from Elder Marlin K. Jensen on a wide variety of topics. (His comments alone made the film worthwhile to me.) In my experience, such cooperation is UNPRESIDENTED in the church and reflective of a new openness in the realities of an Internet age; and I am EXCITED by it! I believe that by thanking

PBS for the many positive elements of their flawed program, future cooperation will yield even better results. Doing little more than lambasting them, on the other hand, is probably not helpful.

I have seen (and recorded) "The Mormons" broadcast and read its transcript. I've also read, with a great deal of interest, the commentary of Internet blogs in the film's wake. As expected, comments range from scathing to glowing. Unfortunately, without knowing who is a practicing Mormon, a non-practicing Mormon, an ex-Mormon, or a non-Mormon, it is impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions from them. It's probably safe to say, however, that most of the complaints come from active church members such as Dr. Sherry. I'm convinced that a clue as to why Mormons are so uncomfortable with any church criticism is found in Kathleen Flake's striking comment (in Part 1 of the film), "Revelation is everything to this church. It is revelation or nothing for these people." I'm guessing she doesn't realize how right she is.

Despite the oft quoted teaching of D&C 58:26, there is an element in our culture which partially embraces the false notion that God is micromanaging the church (and our personal lives) at every level. Decisions or comments, then, made by any church leader (local or general) are viewed as God's OWN mind and will which can never be erred! This subculture notwithstanding, it has been my experience that most church members (including leaders) understand that God wants us to make our own decisions even regarding many church matters; this perspective allows a more pragmatic (and less testimony threatening) view of the imperfections in this society that is our church. (I've decided that many of us just want to hang on to the certitudes and routines of the Mosaic Law.) I still have my 1981 BYU "Update" article that documents Elder Bruce R. McConkie's WONDERFUL "Balancing the Saints" address to local priesthood leaders. Therein he chastens well-intentioned "extremists" who preach (among other things) that it is never OK to turn down a church calling or to do homework on Sunday. He further suggested that students should choose their marriage partners on the basis of PERSONAL JUDGMENT rather than requiring a heavenly revelation in the matter! (Can there be any doubt that many in the church would be ASTONISHED at such teaching!) In our 2003 Stake Conference, Elder Gerald N. Lund similarly complained of those who inappropriately seek God's will in even mundane matters. Unfortunately, such confusion between human and divine will has the effect of trivializing the true revelation upon which our church is built. I think the truth of Kathleen Flake's comment suggests that we are overdue for another chastening in this matter. Perhaps then, we will feel less threatened by even occasionally valid criticism.

In summary, I've always preached (and this is the engineer in me) that we can NEVER be afraid to ask questions. How can we? I don't want to fear this kind of (increasing) public scrutiny. On the contrary, I think it has already lead to positive change in the church. (I'm assuming you agree that ANY change brought by the First Presidency is positive.) High profile examples are Official Declarations 1 & 2 of the Doctrine and Covenants ending plural marriage and extending the priesthood to all worthy males respectively. Acknowledging this does not remove God from these actions, as I'm confident that both Presidents Wilford Woodruff and Spencer W. Kimball would agree that outside pressures influenced his decision to take the question to the Lord in the first place. (Outside pressures, after all, lead to the GREATEST change of all when young Joseph Smith sought God's will concerning which church he should join.) But there have been many other positive (if less consequential) changes influenced by the realities of modern society. The "Church Court" system, for example, (described in Part 2 of the broadcast) has been softened to the more clement and private "Church Disciplinary Council" of today. (During my years in the Bishopric and on the High Council, I've experienced both.) There have been

changes in the temple endowment (also referred to in Part 2 of the broadcast) and in the temple recommend interview. Even efforts to address the challenges of modern working women, single persons, unwed parents, and newlywed students have emerged in recent years. These kinds of positive changes keep the church vibrant and modern and prepared to meet the challenges of a contemporary Internet world. Nor will I question the wisdom of the church in making itself a variable in the complex equation of modern Mormon perception. Indeed, based on our leaders' support of this production, I don't think we should be reticent to express nor embarrassed to speak of change in the church. Perhaps the film's final cut wasn't exactly what the church wanted, but in the end it really wasn't that bad. And I, for one, am **EXCITED** by the unusual openness the church displayed in helping tell their story in it. I believe it portends of **GREAT** things to come!

Victor

PBS Broadcast "THE MORMONS"

PBS RESPONSE TO CRITICS

<http://www.pbs.org/mormons/talk/>

Our editors respond:

This discussion area has received to date more than 3,100 letters and while we are unable to respond to all the many points raised in them, we would like to call attention to three concerns about the film that were cited by many viewers.

Many viewers complained that the program did not have many Mormon scholars and church members and leaders in it, and they also were disappointed that we didn't identify who was or wasn't a LDS member. There were several church leaders in the film, as well as many Mormon scholars and writers. We refer you to the "Interviews" section of this Web site where you can read the extended interviews of some of them.

We decided not to label a person's religious affiliation, just as we didn't label who was or wasn't a Catholic in filmmaker Helen Whitney's previous program on Pope John Paul II. There was a concern that people would automatically make judgments, without listening carefully and respectfully, had we labeled whether they were or were not members of the LDS church. We want to point out, however, that the religious affiliation of most of them generally surfaces early in their comments in the program, and certainly it is clear in the extended interviews published on the Web site.

Many viewers faulted the program for spending so much time on polygamy and on the Mountain Meadows massacre. Here is filmmaker Helen Whitney's response, taken from her live chat on Washingtonpost.com the day after the series concluded:

"I spent considerable time on these two areas because they are important in Mormon history and theology. Most people know very little about polygamy. They assume it was not social practice, but are unaware that it was a spiritual principle of utmost importance to Mormons. It was essential to salvation, and as Mormon scholar Kathleen Flake points out, polygamy was as important to the Mormons as baptism was/is to Christians. The Mountain Meadows massacre is a dark chapter in Mormon history. It has been generally treated in a sensational manner. We tried to provide the historical context -- the years of persecution preceding the massacre, the Utah war, the fact that President Buchanan had sent an army to Utah to remove Brigham Young as governor. All these events created an inflamed atmosphere and paranoia that is essential to understanding, though of course not excusing, this terrible event."

Finally, there were hundreds of viewers who complained that we left out some essential topics in the history, culture and theology of the LDS church or didn't go deeper into those topics we did cover. Unfortunately, four hours was not enough to fully explore this rich and complex story, but we believe that what was presented did offer a thoughtful and valuable perspective on the Mormons' story and we invite you to read the LDS church's statement about the film that was published on lds.org the day after broadcast.

PBS Broadcast "THE MORMONS"

LDS CHURCH RESPONSE

<http://www.lds.org/ldsnewsroom>

SALT LAKE CITY

2 May 2007

PBS has produced two thought-provoking programs about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Aspects of the faith covered in the programs were broad and diverse, and the broadcasts are resulting in an equally diverse range of opinions and responses from viewers.

As she has done in similar documentaries, producer Helen Whitney probes at both the center and the edges of Church history, belief, and personal experience. Members, former members, scholars and Church leaders all presented their perspectives. Those interviewed in the program — even though they hold different points of view — were articulate and measured in their comments, giving serious thought and consideration to the topic.

But even four hours and numerous interviews can't cover everything. No doubt, some Church members will feel essentials were left out (the restoration of priesthood authority and a fuller description of women's experience in the faith) and non-essentials left in (polygamist Warren Jeffs, for example). In a similar way, the historic practice of plural marriage and the tragedy of Mountain Meadows are far from the whole story of Church history or the experience and faith of members today. (The entire interviews of Church leaders are available on the PBS website at [http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/.](http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/))

But addressing these and other topics in a forthright way seems to have allowed viewers less familiar with the Church to see a new and broader dimension of the Church, shorn, perhaps, of one-sided stereotypes and caricatures.

At a time when significant media and public attention is being turned to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and when news media is so often accused of superficiality in its coverage of religion, this serious treatment of a serious subject is a welcome change.