

Matricidal Patriarchy: Some Thoughts toward Understanding the Devaluation of Women in the Church

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THE VIOLENT HISTORY OF PATRIARCHY reveals a system that is more than male dominance and the subordination of women. It is a system of power, dominion, and control that subordinates entire peoples, cultures, and natural resources. In her book, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner traces the history of patriarchy as a creation of both men and women. "The system of patriarchy is a historical construct; it has a beginning; it will have an end. Its time seems to have nearly run its course—it no longer serves the needs of men or women and in its inextricable linkage to militarism, hierarchy, and racism it threatens the very existence of life on earth."¹

Jungian scholar and analyst Marion Woodman suggests that patriarchy originated in the myth of the hero's journey. As a descendant of the sun god, the hero ventures into the world to conquer the forces of darkness that challenge the reign of his father's absolute authority. The moon, with its feminine cycles, rules the night as a symbol of darkness by reflecting the sun's light rather than radiating any light of its own. Woodman points out that this "relationship of sun and moon thus comes to symbolize the relationship between the sexes themselves. The feminine, standing for the forces of darkness and chaos, is brought within the orbit of a masculine light-bringing creation as a reflection of its power."²

1. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 228-29.

2. Marion Woodman, *The Ravaged Bridegroom—Masculinity in Women* (Toronto, Can.: Inner City Books, 1990), 19.

Woodman further points out that the dragon or serpent has been traditionally related to the feminine lunar cycle and subsequently must be brought under "the dominion of masculine power" through the hero's act of dragon slaying. This occurs because men typically do not understand dragon slaying as the "symbolic process of transformation" but believe it to be part of rescuing the feminine (the maiden) from its own darkness (the dragon). "The solar hero, who stands for spirit and light, the penetrating power of rational insight, cannot comprehend this darkness, which comes down to us as the feminine mysteries."³

Woodman suggests that "a transformation in the male fear of the feminine process" is crucial to achieving equality between men and women.

The mutation in consciousness which is here suggested would reconstruct the foundations upon which the male ego has for centuries rested. Still it is clear in our evolving consciousness that slaying is at best an arrested act of transformation. The characteristic male response to the rejection of the dragon-slaying myth in favor of transformation is the ancient fear that the forces of darkness may then overtake the forces of light, leaving the man in the (Freudian) condition of the woman, denied his phallic power. Here we come face to face with what is involved in a man's response to his own inner feminine as anything other than a threat to his hard-won masculinity. Almost nothing in his social experience prepares him to view it in any other way.⁴

This fear of the feminine, coupled with the male's physical domination of his environment, has resulted in centuries of matricidal behavior by men in the sexual, social, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse of not just women, but anything associated with the feminine.

Matthew Fox begins his book, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, by describing a dream in which he witnessed our planet's devastation, "because we lack a living cosmology. I call this devastation matricide or the killing of the mother, for this is how the dream spoke to me." Fox speaks of the death of Mother Earth through neglect and exploitation, and points out, "If this continues, eventually we and our children will pay the price. If we persist in poisoning the 'mother of all,' then we will ultimately poison ourselves."⁵ Fox laments the dying of wisdom, of native peoples and their mystical cultures, of human imagination and creativity, and of mystical awareness. In all this he believes we are losing the spiritual interconnect-

3. *Ibid.*, 20.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1988); see Part 1.

edness of all things that binds us to God and to each other. He believes we are engaged in killing mother love and compassion, so necessary to the human soul, the source and fountainhead of our very being. We are also witnessing the death of mother church which he believes

is deeply entangled in the lethal embraces of matricidal patriarchy. Fundamentalism is a planetary phenomenon in religions today; Islam, Judaism, and Protestant biblical literalists all have their kind; Roman Catholics whose hearts and souls wait for papal order demonstrate their kind. This fundamentalism is the result of a deep-seated fear triggered by the breakup of cultural patterns. Religious fundamentalism exemplifies identification with the oppressor—the very hatred of mother that caused it is embraced and intensified by fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is patriarchy gone berserk. It is banishment of the mother in us all and in our traditions. It results from mysticism repressed and denied, and it always leads to scapegoating—the projected hatred of others. It occurs when the mother principle is rendered a shadow, that is, a repressed part of the personal or collective psyche.⁶

In what I believe to be the most disturbing part of his book, Fox writes of mother church succumbing to pressures of patriarchy and becoming an exclusively “father church.”

Any organization that is run exclusively by fathers, from the father’s point of view and for the father’s benefit will succumb to competition and jealousy and will remain out of touch with the deeper pain of our times—that of Mother Earth, mother wisdom, and mother peoples. . . . An almost fashionable fascism arises wherever religion or society repress the mother principle in the name of patriarchy. Power struggles, not mutual love, support, and solidarity, characterize such systems. This same kind of competition can be observed in fundamentalist church structures. The authoritarian character who thrives in such a system “is essentially sado-masochistic” according to psychiatrist Anthony Stevens, and is compelled to categorize others as either strong or weak. He worships the former and has contempt for the latter.⁷

Fox observes the merging of a mother-hating psychology and a mother-hating world view into what he describes as a collective fascism based in authoritarian character, “where the social and political (and ecclesiastical) structure is dominated by an order imposed by a single masculine authority.” Fascism is but one of many patriarchal

6. *Ibid.*, 27.

7. *Ibid.*, 28.

systems and is, he reminds us, "the ultimate expression of father-dominance . . ."8

In such a society, "persons are not educated to be true selves but to wear false persons modeled" on the demands of oppressors.⁹ Psychologists Alice Miller and John Bradshaw have observed and described abuse resulting in the death of an individual's soul who must now wear the mask of a false self to survive in life.¹⁰ Fox suggests that children in such oppressive patriarchal societies are forced to channel sexual and aggressive powers into "self-loathing and self contempt." He believes this original sin mentality—the notion that I came into the world despised, unwanted, ugly, and powerless—is displaced onto scapegoats such as racial minorities, homosexuals, and women. "It can also be transformed into worship of the oppressor who is always right (and ultimately) perverse energies are unleashed. Sadomasochism substitutes for morality; control for prayer; moralizing and condemnation for play and celebration; and a self-centeredness and preoccupation with human-made games and rules substitute for cosmic adventure, interest, wonder and living ritual."¹¹

Centuries of misogyny based on dragon-slaying mythology have resulted in a patriarchal imperative that defined, devalued, suppressed, subjugated, silenced, and killed women. Misogyny has been justified and codified into Old Testament scripture and law by powerful but fearful dragon-slaying men. From the beginning of recorded biblical history, holy scripture tells how Adam was God's first creation. After Eve was created from Adam's body, she was named and her role defined by Adam as his helper so he, as patriarch of all living things, could exercise his role as head of this earthly family. His role as head was to rule and have dominion over all things on the earth, *including women*.

With the Adam and Eve story, patriarchy began the divinely justified rule of the father and dominion over women. We have inherited a system that is, as Heidi Hartman writes, "a set of social relations between men which . . . establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men

8. *Ibid.*, 28.

9. *Ibid.*, 29.

10. See Alice Miller, *Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*, originally published as *Prisoners of Childhood*, trans. Ruth Ward (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984). See also *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, trans. Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984); *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child*, trans. Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984); and John Bradshaw, *Bradshaw On: The Family: A Revolutionary Way of Self-Discovery* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc, 1988).

11. Fox, 29.

that enable them to dominate women."¹² The Adam and Eve story was the recorded beginning of a history that justified the devaluation of women transforming them into objects for man's use.

Genesis 19 underlines patriarchal theory and sets a standard of male hegemony which, among other things, protected men at the expense of women. Rather than give up his male guests to a mob of inhospitable Sodomites, Lot was willing to throw his daughters to the crowd. "I beg you my brothers," he pleaded with the mob, "not to do this wicked thing [demean and rape Lot's guests]. I have two daughters who have never had intercourse with men. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please. But don't do anything to these men, for you know they have come under the shelter of my roof." Fortunately the angel guests interceded protecting themselves and intervening for Lot's daughters.

In Judges 19:22-23, however, the same kind of story has a tragically different ending. A male owner of a home housing guests—as in Lot's case—was also confronted by inhospitable men of the city who demanded he surrender his house guest that they might do him harm. "The owner of the house went out to them and said, 'No, my brothers; do not be so wicked. Since this man is my guest, do not commit this crime. Rather let me bring out my maiden daughter or his concubine. Ravish them, or do whatever you want with them; but against the man you must not commit this wanton crime.'" At this the male guest seized his concubine and threw her outside to the mob. The scriptures tell us she was raped all night until dawn (while her master slept) and left to die on the innkeeper's doorstep.

Deuteronomy outlines one of many Old Testament laws that disadvantaged women in their marriage relationship with men. If the man, after marrying and having relations with his bride, discovered her to be undesirable, he was able to bring charges claiming she was not a virgin. The burden of proof was then on the wife's parents to produce evidence of her virginity (the blood-stained sheet). If they succeeded in establishing her virginity before the marriage, the husband was fined and the money given to the bride's father. The man was then, with no involvement from the bride, forbidden to ever divorce her (What about *her* feelings after all this?). But if the parents were not successful in proving her prior virtue, their daughter the bride was to be stoned to death and the husband freed to find another woman more worthy. "Thus," the law reads, "shall you purge the evil from your midst" (Deut. 22:13-22).

This is but one of many Old Testament laws justifying the harsh

12. Heidi Hartman, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 14.

treatment and devaluation of women for the next 4,000 years.¹³ And because these laws were scriptural, men, especially those in ecclesiastical positions of power and authority, justified themselves in subjugating, violating, and dominating women. One of the most horrible examples of ecclesiastical patriarchal abuse occurred during the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. During this time the mother church linked witchcraft and women to heresy. Once witchcraft was ecclesiastically defined, it could be denounced as a Satanic religion.

This demonization of witchcraft was formalized in 1484 by Pope Innocent VII when he gave church power and authority to the Inquisition in hunting and prosecuting witches. Some time thereafter, two Dominican inquisitors, Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer wrote a manual for witch-hunting called *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of the Witches*. That single document exposed deep-seated male fear and superstition about women as it outlined justification and ecclesiastical authorization for the brutal torture and murder of an estimated 7-9 million women. "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil," they wrote. Witches were connected to the feminine because women were "more impressionable than men and more ready to receive the influence of the disembodied spirit." The priests further wrote that because women were weak they found "an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves in witchcraft." Woman "is a liar by nature," they warned, "a wheedling and secret enemy."¹⁴

During this horrific feminine holocaust, with the blessing and encouragement of the church, inquisitions began persecutions and executions of women that continued until they reached their climax of brutality and murder during the seventeenth century. David Noble describes the magnitude of murder during that lamentable period in the history of patriarchy estimating the total number of witch-hunt victims to be in the millions. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Germany and Italy women were executed by the thousands. "In some German cities, executions averaged two a day; nine hundred women were killed in a single year in Würzburg, and over a thousand around Como. In the late sixteenth century, this wave of gender-bound genocide swept through France. In Trier, two villages were left with only one woman each; in Toulouse . . . four hundred women were murdered in one day."¹⁵

We want to believe that witch-hunting and the Inquisition are relics of a past we would prefer to ignore or forget. But they are not. Misogyny

13. For further discussion of women and Old Testament law, see Lerner, as well as James R. Baker, *Women's Rights in Old Testament Times* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

14. David F. Noble, *A World Without Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 207.

15. *Ibid.*, 209.

thrives in our own time with as much violence and cruelty. Crimes against women in our own cities have become a regular part of the evening news. Expanded versions of these stories are regularly carried on network news programs. Because these stories are so sensational and sordid they become an unending source of material for so-called infotainment television "news" programs.

During the past two years eastern Europe has become a backdrop for the latest atrocities committed against women. In the former Yugoslavia, Bosnian women have been systematically raped and murdered by Serbian troops as part of the latter's "ethnic cleansing." Following their capture, Serbian soldiers have confessed they were following orders from commanders to capture and rape women in occupied towns as part of a systematic process of dominating and eliminating an entire culture.

We continue to see television stories about events in India involving brides who do not live up to the financial, matrimonial, or sexual expectations of the groom. With the complicity of women in the groom's family, these young brides are shamed, returned to their families in disgrace, or, in the worst scenarios, are burned alive in a horrifying demonstration of women's devaluation and dehumanization. In Africa, young girls by the millions have been systematically brutalized with clitorrectomy in an effort to control and limit their sexual activity to that of bearing children.

We in the United States seem willing to accept and even dismiss the abuse of women in other parts of the world as cultural customs in backward-thinking third-world countries. Because we live in one of the most culturally advanced and politically powerful countries in the world, we are tempted to believe our women are safe from such things. We want to believe in the progression, goodness, and ultimate perfectibility of our system of government and society. Latter-day Saints, through scripture, proclaim the divinity of our Constitution—that it was inspired by God and implemented by spiritually-inspired men to provide sufficient legislation to protect all people's rights, including women's. When LDS leaders, feeling no need to specifically protect the interests of women through constitutional amendment, labeled the battle against the Equal Rights Amendment a moral issue, they persuaded women in the church to enlist the help of other women in defeating the ERA.

As a nation men are slowly coming to an awareness and understanding of the sexual harassment of women. The Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings brought this issue into focus as the entire nation, through television, witnessed how a woman's testimony about sexual abuse could so easily be dismissed. Members of the senate committee questioning Clarence Thomas reinforced the widely-held notion that "boys will be boys," and that what Thomas did was perhaps a regrettable but not

punishable offense. Thomas was eventually confirmed by a committee of his peers and seated on the United States Supreme Court.

Many women and men were outraged by Thomas's confirmation. But it was an inevitable result from an all-male Senate committee who in their own public and private lives had everything to lose by allowing themselves to believe Hill's testimony. The chilling reality for women in the United States is that these men, who supposedly serve the public good, are at the center of a government system that has been defined, designed, forged, and sustained by patriarchy. A system that teaches women to understand and live their male-defined roles as less powerful than and subservient to men. A system that defines them as prey to male strength and aggression—objects for male pleasure and oppression. A system that creates such a dangerous environment that women need to be afraid to walk into a parking lot alone at night.

Many believe that sexual harassment and the violent abuse of women in our own country is not as bad as it might seem. Victims' voices are minimized as the machinations of an hysterical fringe of discontented women—"feminazis," a vocal representative of the radical right calls them on the radio. They are simply the "hyperventilating" of the "church's detractors," one general authority recently stated in LDS general conference.¹⁶ And while we as a church, society, and nation bury our heads in the sands of denial, women, including thousands of LDS women, continue to be emotionally, physically, politically, and spiritually abused. They are marginalized and devalued by their own church, objectified, abused, and molested in their own homes, sexually harassed at church as well as in the work place, stalked by former husbands, boyfriends, or just strangers, and raped in shopping center parking lots, on college campuses (including Brigham Young University), and even in their own bedrooms. In order to silence their victims and protect themselves, male perpetrators now frequently kill the victims of their violent sexual crimes. Week after week women are brutally beaten, raped, and murdered with their half-clothed bodies thrown into dumpsters like so much garbage. And as reports of sexual harassment and rape pour into police stations, and as shelters for battered women fill to overflowing, many still insist that things are not as bad as they appear. The truth of the matter, because of fear, intimidation, and an inadequate system for reporting crimes of abuse, is that things are worse than they appear and there is little promise for resolution in sight.

Catharine McKinnon helps us understand how extensive the abuse really is:

16. Neal A. Maxwell, "Behold the Enemy is Combined," *Ensign* 23 (May 1993): 76.

For those of you who think this is a lot of rhetoric, I want to specify the fact . . . When I speak of male dominance, I mean as its content facts from this culture. The facts have to do with the rate of rape and attempted rape of American women, which is 44 percent. If you ask a random group of women, "Have you ever been raped or been the victim of an attempted rape?" and do not exclude marital rape, that is the figure. Some 4.5 percent of all women are victims of incest by their fathers, an additional 12 percent by other male family members, rising to a total of 43 percent of all girls before they reach the age of eighteen, if sexual abuse within and outside the family is included. If you ask women whether they've been sexually harassed in the last two years, about 15 percent report very serious or physical assaults; about 85 percent of all working women report sexual harassment at some time in their working lives. Between a quarter and a third of all women are battered by men in the family. If you look at homicide data, between 60 percent and 70 percent of murdered women have been killed by a husband, lover, or ex-lover.¹⁷

Evidence of misogyny reveals itself in places we, as Latter-day Saints, least expect to find it—in our own history, in writings we consider scripture, and even in the attitudes of current general authorities. In the late 1970s women were likened by a member of the Quorum of the Seventy to black widow spiders who devour their mates.¹⁸ Many Mormons were astonished when young women in the church were counseled by a member of the twelve apostles that Mormon husbands *need to feel dominant*, and were the young sisters to take that role away from them, they would reduce their husband's manhood.¹⁹

The question we must ask ourselves in story after story, paper after paper, book after book, is *why*? Why are men doing these things to women? The answers we find are as varied as the theories behind them. They range from the psychoanalytic to the political, from the anthropological to the philosophical. But the only common thread I have found is that *men do what they do to women because they can and because they justify their actions in the name of the law and in the name of God*. They rape women because they are bigger and stronger. Does this make every man a rapist or an abuser? Of course not. But an exception does not invalidate the truth of history. Men's brute strength and aggressive nature has helped them take control of

17. Catharine A. McKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified, Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 51-52.

18. See D. Michael Quinn, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843," in Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 382.

19. Boyd K. Packer, "Come all Ye Sons of God," *Ensign* 13 (Aug. 1983): 68; Packer, "Eternal Marriage," *Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham University Press, 1970), 5; Quinn, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood," 382.

business, industry, government, religion, and the family. Men justify this dominion because they believe it is their right as men, creators of a phallogocentric world, to rule and govern and control. Because God, in their minds, is male, men have created male ecclesiastical authority and have excluded women in church priesthood activities and decision-making processes.

Until recently, men for the most part have written the history, created the arts, speculated the philosophical, analyzed the psychological, and contemplated and revealed the spiritual. They have created and maintained governments, kingdoms, religions and their ecclesiastical structures, created the militaries, fought the wars, and enjoyed the spoils. Through male discourse men have defined women as less than, not equal to, themselves. They have male-written law and scripture to justify their dominion and they have male-defined priesthood/ecclesiastical structure to vindicate themselves in the eyes of God.

We want to believe that we as members of the restored church and kingdom of Christ on earth are safe from 4,000 years of patriarchal devaluation and abuse of women. But we are not. And how could we think we could be safe from the evils of patriarchy knowing that the ecclesiastical structure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is at its base a patriarchal system whose imperative is male-hierarchical hegemony? It is an organization based on the rule of selected men through principles of power and authority claimed from God.

In spite of Joseph Smith's good intentions in restoring the gospel, in spite of the revelations and teachings of Jesus Christ, and in spite of the dedication of millions to participate, to preach and teach and give their lives to help build that kingdom, I believe that as a church we have not yet rid ourselves of misogyny. For much of our history we have not even recognized it. That misogyny now voices itself in a 1950s corporate-patriarchal hierarchy that we embrace as the church's ecclesiastical structure today—a system that marginalizes its women as well as its disenfranchised men and subjects them to the control and dominion of male authority.

Perhaps Joseph died too soon. Perhaps, as I believe, he did as much as could be expected, given the task of building a church structure that would be congruent with the grace-full teachings of the gospel of Jesus. He left us schematic plans for a structure we could build that would be safe for all of God's children; a place where they could grow spiritually in the fresh air of moral agency and reciprocal esteem, where none would ever be more important than another, and where women and men could live their lives as equal partners in the spiritual enterprise we call life.²⁰

20. See Quinn, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood." Quinn's argument for women having had the priesthood since the time of Joseph Smith is convincing but not

But following Joseph's death, those plans were forgotten, lost, hidden, or destroyed. I believe the ecclesiastical structure we know as the LDS church today has been built and renovated over the past decades to conform with deeper cultural blueprints of patriarchy. I don't—can't—believe this is what Joseph Smith, as I struggle to understand his intentions on behalf of women, intended. The foundation for this building we call Mormonism today has been reinforced with male superiority, the columns and walls thickened and strengthened with male hegemony, covered with a roof structure of male control and dominion. Women and disenfranchised men of the church are locked inside by the power of denial and obedience to authority rather than entreated to stay through the power and grace of Christ's love. The blueprints of patriarchy call for windows to be sealed up through which the light of Christ might otherwise shine. In their place hang paintings of men in positions of leadership. Through the electrical outlets now runs male chain-of-command-authority rather than the power of the Holy Spirit. In the library, books of Christ's grace are being replaced with books by modern Pharisees—legalistic books full of rules and laws written by and for the benefit of men. And through water pipes runs the pedagogy of unrighteous dominion rather than the living water of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Door knobs designed to fit the male hand open doors that swing on hinges of obedience to patriarchal and hierarchical imperative, and open onto stairs that lead to upper rooms in the building reserved for men only. Inside everyone is persuaded and even coerced to think the same, talk the same, pray the same, and dress the same; and it is all dictated by male corporate imperative. There are many doors of seductive promise leading into this building. The modern-day church is not without its marketing skill and proficiency. But those who will not succumb to that corporate male dominion, to cult-like obsession with obedience to authority, and not subject themselves to ecclesiastical imperative, are shown to the doors leading to the building's outside. These are the doors of oppression, of silencing, of punishment, retribution, recrimination and reproof; doors of spiritual bankruptcy, loss of faith, and of excommunication.

Inside this patriarchal building women are taught that they must not want what men have in running the affairs of the church. They are taught they must worship and pray only to God the Father. It is under the threat of apostasy and resulting disfellowshipment or excommunication that they dare talk about or teach the concept of our Mother in Heaven.

What are women to make of a religion whose theology holds out the

comforting in light of what is happening to women in today's church. Soon after publication of *Women and Authority*, LDS authorities denounced Quinn's findings at the May 1993 general conference. The book as well as Quinn's essay is a rich resource for Mormon feminist bibliography and footnotes.

possibility of godhood and yet counsels that we must never teach or even talk about or pray to our Mother in Heaven? In Doctrine and Covenants 132 we read that men and women alike will pass by the gods on their way to exaltation and continuation of the seeds forever. It says that women and men both will be gods. But from teachings we hear over the pulpit in our own time we infer that even though a woman may attain godhood in worlds to come, she must forever remain unknown and unheard in an undefined cosmic subordination to male gods—voiceless, faceless, having no contact with her spirit children. Meanwhile we are taught her husband-god moves through his universe controlling, creating, and organizing galaxies while she stays home giving birth to millions of spirit babies.

I am confused by such teachings that devalue women when the concept of a heavenly mother is so empowering and liberating. Current church policies are, I believe, the consequences of men yielding to their darkest fears of women, of a patriarchy intent on keeping women and disenfranchised men subservient so that men in positions of power, as Doctrine and Covenants 121 warns us, can “cover their sins or gratify their pride and vain ambition.” This speaks to me of confusion, of fear, of arrogance and pride, and of spiritual schizophrenia designed to cast women in a devalued and subservient role in order to sustain male hegemony in LDS culture.

Church leadership masks the truth of gender bias by claiming that all are benefitted by patriarchy. In his keynote address “Women, Feminism and the Blessings of the Priesthood” at the 1985 BYU women’s conference, the school’s academic provost Bruce Hafen tried to make women feel better about their roles in the church. Remarkably, he told them they are equal to men in all things and have all the blessings of the priesthood available to them. However, he stated, “The one category of blessings in which the role of women is not the same as that of men holding priesthood, *is that of administering the gospel and governing all things.*”²¹

And what are we to make of this statement in the 1979-80 Relief Society manual: “Where the father is present, he should function as the head of the home, with the counsel and support of his wife. This pattern should be followed *whether or not the husband is a member of the church and holds the priesthood.* It is the revealed role pattern for all married couples.”²²

The power, authority, control, and preeminence of patriarchy is male defined and male served. Woman is defined by patriarchy as object to the male subject. She is defined in sexual terms by male imperative in her role as “female” church member who must cooperate and sustain her own

21. Bruce Hafen, “Women, Feminism and the Blessings of the Priesthood,” 18, given at Brigham Young University Women’s Conference, 1985, italics mine.

22. *Relief Society Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 131, italics mine.

domination and devaluation by the masculine ecclesiastical structure. Of course this makes sense to men in the church. What better way to justify the system than to demonstrate the support of women who sustain what is clearly not in their best interests. This is exactly what is happening in the LDS church. Women are enabling this system so that it will not only continue but thrive. As Gerda Lerner points out:

This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining "respectability" and "deviance" according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women.²³

Women have cooperated in building this gendered structure that devalues and silences their voices, ideas, analysis, and interpretations of how their spiritual lives should be lived. Many women actually seem to enjoy their subservient role. Others, by means of their capitulation, are rewarded with position and privilege. I remember watching the "Larry King Live Show" one evening as a church spokeswoman debated with Deborah Laake about her book *Secret Ceremonies*. When confronted with questions about church women in the male-dominated LDS church not being involved in the decision-making process for the whole church, she simply responded, "Well, it works for me." Of course it works for her. She does what is necessary to ascend to a certain amount of power and privilege by representing the male reality as beneficial to all women in the church.

It is no secret that men hold the greatest power and authority in the ecclesiastical structure of the LDS church—it is they who dictate practice, policy, theology, and proscribe spiritual experience. Access to power is for those who are male and is denied to those who are not. Church members are taught that the power and authority of God is a matter of sex and that there are consequential implications in the relationship between priesthood leaders and women. The door is open for men in the church to define women as objects for their own use and pleasure. When that happens, a man can transfer his quest for pleasure from the sexual sphere to the ecclesiastical. And if sex for men is power, the way is opened up for a man to misuse his ecclesiastical authority and work out sexual fantasies of desire, conquest, domination, and performance with his church authority.²⁴

23. Lerner, 217.

24. See McKinnon's discussion of power and sexual objectification under male supremacy in her chapter "Desire and Power" where she suggests, "The feminist theory

Too often women are required to submit to their male authority's probing intimate questions during private interviews, where girls and women are urged to reveal their innermost feelings about everything in their lives, especially sex. This sets the stage for spiritual and sometimes literal rape. Whether the bishop's behavior remains above reproach, sexual power and control have been transferred from the physical to the spiritual. We talk of these things as though they are only possibilities. But they are not. The stories of this kind of abuse are more numerous than we want to believe.²⁵

I believe it would be possible to minimize this misuse of authority if priesthood were not a matter of sex and women were able to interview women as men interview men.²⁶ But of course that erases grounds for men only to hold priesthood. When we (both men and women) as a church are willing to study the issue in our own minds and make it a holy quest of the spirit, I believe the soil will be prepared for a priesthood grounded in the equality of men and women working as partners in governing the affairs of the kingdom together for the mutual blessing of all.

Do we dare contemplate such sweeping changes in the relationship of men and women in the church? And how will they ever be possible? I believe they are possible because the cornerstone of the church is Jesus Christ, the bedrock is revelation, with a foundation of apostles and prophets. In an October 1992 general conference address Elder Dallin H. Oaks gave a talk outlining precisely why, from church history and current scripture, he believes women do not have the priesthood and do not fully participate in church decision making at the highest levels. The implication I inferred from his talk was that women do not hold the priesthood or participate at the highest levels of church government and decision making because that was the way God wanted it and that was the way he revealed it to Joseph Smith.²⁷ In his April 1993 general

of power is that sexuality is gendered as gender is sexualized. In other words, feminism is a theory of how the erotization of dominance and submission creates gender, creates woman and man in the social form in which we know them. Thus the sex difference and the dominance-submission dynamic define each other. The erotic is what defines sex as an inequality, hence meaningful difference . . . The act of control . . . is itself eroticized under male supremacy. To say women are sex objects is in this way redundant. Sexualized objectification is what defines women as sexual and as women under male supremacy." See also her discussion of rape and violence in her chapter "Sex and Violence: A Perspective."

25. See discussions on women and priesthood interviews in *Exponent II* 17 (1993), 2, esp. Scott Fisher, "By Virtue of Authority: A Bishop's Perspective," and Ellen Toronto, "Unequal Power and the Sexual Domination of Women."

26. *Ibid.*

27. Dallin Oaks, "The Relief Society and the Church," *Ensign* 22 (May 1992): 34-36.

conference talk Elder Boyd K. Packer, in spite of evidence from church history, did much the same thing as he denounced the idea that priesthood is in any way conferred through the temple endowment.²⁸ This is what they believe and teach and establish as doctrine in the church today. They are apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ called to set us straight in these matters. And as long as we sustain them in their offices, we have little choice but to believe them in faith. But we sustain them as prophets, seers, and revelators, and as a church, "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God" (A of F 9). Over the past two decades we have been witnesses to many of those important revelations. Who will ever forget that June day in 1978 when it was announced that *all* worthy male members would enjoy confirmation into the priesthood of God?

I believe a new day is at hand for women in the church. Those we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators have the power to exercise their prophetic gifts of priesthood in behalf of women to finally erase gender discrimination in the church. I am convinced there is much yet to be revealed regarding the role of women in the church and that God is simply waiting for us to ask—waiting for us to repent, to "study it" in our own minds, and make it sufficiently important to formulate specific changes necessary to include women's views, opinions, and voices in the highest councils of the church.

Where does such an enterprise begin as far as we members of the church are concerned? Gloria Cronin, a professor of English at Brigham Young University, has eloquently written, "I think it is a process that begins in a holy kind of trembling in the presence of God—a trembling that first acknowledges our sin, and which then acknowledges multiplicity and 'Otherness' as the essence of Deity. It proceeds from there to acceptance of personal responsibility, hope for sanctified relation, and faith in a millennial future."²⁹

Where does repentance begin? With both men and women opening their eyes and hearts to the terrible history of women's abuse—a history so horrible that, as Andrea Dworkin has written, it "should leave the heart seared, the mind in anguish, the conscience in upheaval."³⁰ Perhaps repentance begins when we confess that our own ignorance, denial, pride, and arrogance have blocked the way to understanding—and we recognize our

28. Boyd K. Packer, "The Temple, The Priesthood," *Ensign* 23 (May 1993): 18.

29. Gloria Cronin, "Gender, Power, and the Sexual Politics of Salvation," delivered at the 1993 Sunstone West Symposium, San Francisco, California.

30. Andrea Dworkin, *Right Wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females* (London: The Women's Press, 1981).

own complicity. With that recognition comes the ability to hear the uncountable individual screams and be willing to count the infinite tears. Our repentance must include sufficient patience and love to understand and feel the collective anger of women and let it pierce our souls and break our hearts. Then in the depth of our remorse we can begin to exercise compassion and ask forgiveness. Only then will true love be possible through the sanctifying of the spirit and the healing blood of Jesus Christ who calls us to come and lay this terrible and heavy burden at his feet. The price of reconciliation has already been paid by suffering that caused him, "even God, to tremble because of the pain and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit" (D&C 19:18-20). He stands at the door and knocks for us to open it.

The ecclesiastical structure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a patriarchal system whose imperative is male hierarchical hegemony. It is a church based on the rule of selected men through principles of power and authority claimed from God. I believe that as long as the male church leadership regards the subordination of women as god-given, the church will stand as a stumbling block to the spiritual growth of its members. Only when it becomes clear to church members that patriarchal hierarchy as the basis of the LDS ecclesiastical structure no longer serves the deepest spiritual needs of women and men will a new horizontal system of equality based on the grace and love of Jesus Christ emerge—a system, as described by Chieko N. Okazaki, counselor in the general Relief Society presidency of the LDS church, that is less like a ladder and more like the child's string construction called a "cat's cradle."³¹

I want to close with a dream, a quote, and a prayer. My dream occurred a few weeks after I received some unexpected money and decided to go shopping at a feminist bookstore. I have entitled my dream "My Sister, My Friend," and it came during the first few weeks of reading while I was trying to get a fix on various feminist theories and arguments that have developed in the past two decades. In the dream I found myself in a building, a large and dangerous building, that I and my wife knew we must escape. While in the dream I knew she was my wife, I also knew that she was many women, multi-faced, perhaps all women.

We entered what I discovered to be the last room before exiting a door to the outside. As we began to make our way across the room, a large man came through the door with an automatic pistol in his hand. He took one look at me and fired three shots into my arm and shoulder. I went down and he quickly stood above me. As he held the gun to my head I knew he

31. Chieko N. Okazaki, *Cat's Cradle* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993).

wanted to kill me. On my knees I begged for my life. I was in agony for my wounds, but they were nothing compared to my feelings of utter helplessness and terror.

As I begged for my life, I found myself crying and shaking with fright. He looked down at me, gave me a sarcastic smile, and with a look of satisfaction and complete conquest swaggered away. I woke up. A friend later visited our home and helped me analyze the dream. The importance of the dream to me was realizing that I had never really known that kind of fear before. As a young man I was either too stupid or too drunk to have been afraid. I cannot know what it is like to be a woman—that goes without saying. But I do know that my dream was so powerful and spoke to me with such strong, clear, personal insight that I believe it gave my life a final course correction. Never again will I be able to hear a story of powerlessness, unrighteous dominion, abuse, or rape without reliving that dream.

The quote is from Gloria Cronin's insightful paper, "Gender, Power, and the Sexual Politics of Salvation," in which she writes:

We already know through sacred text and testimony that we contain within us multiplicity and femininity, an excess of meanings which are prior to any phallogocentric order. Even now, as we see each other face to face we are much more already than the sum and contents of those gender types and relations masculinism or phallogocentrism describes. By seeing that multiplicity, recognizing our prior divine identity, acknowledging an ethical responsibility which is grounded in the pre-existence, we have a place to begin the task.³²

My prayer is simple: Heavenly Father and Mother, please help us to be equal to that task.

32. Cronin.