

Sterling Moss McMurrin: A Philosopher in Action

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STERLING M. McMURRIN, A MAN OF LETTERS, has spent most of his life in the world of affairs. A distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of Utah for four decades, he held key academic leadership positions at this university both before and after his service as United States Commissioner of Education under President John F. Kennedy. My task here is to explore the origin and nature of McMurrin's beliefs about religion, education, and government, and describe his perspective on the institutions that serve them.

McMurrin's paternal grandfather, Joseph W. McMurrin, was a noted Mormon orator and one of the presidents of the First Council of Seventy. He was at the height of his powers in the late 1920s when Sterling was growing up. It was something of a shock to Sterling as a child, then, when his father told him of his grandfather's 1885 gun battle with a federal marshal in Salt Lake City.

Polygamy was still officially sanctioned and practiced by the Mormons at that time, and federal officers were pursuing the church's leaders. McMurrin's grandfather was then a bodyguard for Mormon church president John Taylor, who was in hiding. President Taylor was meeting secretly with his top assistants in Salt Lake City's Social Hall when Marshal Clarence Collin appeared outside, prepared to make the arrest of his career. He encountered Joseph McMurrin, not for the first time, and their tempers flared. The two reached for their sidearms. McMurrin took three slugs and nearly died. Collin escaped unscathed, but, fearing mob retaliation, he took refuge at the Fort Douglas army post on the east side of Salt Lake City. This incident, which reverberated in Utah's consciousness for decades, became a matter of national concern. Fearing a Mormon uprising, the federal government strengthened its garrison at Fort Douglas.

Sterling McMurrin reflected recently on the impact this family revela-

tion had on him as a small child: "From a boy's perspective, it's a story about a federal marshal trying to kill your grandfather because of his religion." He continued with a chuckle, "This tends to give you certain impressions about both the government and your religion."¹ He encountered newspaper accounts of this story while researching a term paper as a college student and saw it then "as a more complicated affair, the way reality really is."

This story provides a key to understanding McMurrin's eventful career: he served institutions—religious, governmental, and educational—in many ways, but especially by keeping his eyes on, and giving voice to, their essential values. He has always placed his hope in liberal education and his trust in individual freedom.

Now eighty-one years of age, Utah's E. E. Ericksen Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and History, Emeritus, has retired from the university but not from his habits of thinking and writing . . . nor from practical effort.

ORIGINS AND IDEAS

The third of four sons, Sterling Moss McMurrin was born in Woods Cross, Utah, just north of Salt Lake City, in 1914. His McMurrin grandfather was in these years a man of great stature in the church hierarchy, a defender of the faith. The McMurrin clan was very much a part of Utah's cultural and religious elite. Sterling's father, Joseph Jr., was a school teacher and probation officer, but Sterling characterized him as "a misplaced university professor."² He loved good books, entertained diverse ideas, and had his son reading Plato, Darwin, and Dante as a youth. He, himself, pursued a lifelong passion to reconcile the claims of reason and religion.

McMurrin described his mother, Gertrude Moss, as "completely open-minded and approachable, a person whose company I always delighted in."³ She hailed from ranch country, though hardly from humble circumstances. Her father, William Moss, was co-founder and general manager of the Deseret Live Stock Company, one of the largest and most successful ranching operations in the Great Basin.⁴ The Mosses were educated, practical people seasoned in the rough-and-tumble of frontier agriculture and business. A cattle baron who was also

1. Transcript of conversation with McMurrin, #1, 2 May 1984, 16, in my possession.

2. *Ibid.*, 25.

3. *Ibid.*, 22.

4. To provide some sense of the scale of this ranch, a portion of it—221,000 acres—was recently reported in a story about the real estate holdings of the Mormon church. *Arizona Republic*, Chart, 30 Jan. 1991, 5.

president of a bank in northeastern Utah, "Bill Moss was in charge wherever he went," his grandson recalls, "people stood back as he walked along the street."⁵

McMurrin describes himself as growing up "half ranch kid, half city kid."⁶ At age nine he began wrangling horses for his Grandfather Moss, and two summers later he was pulling his own weight among the ranch hands of the far-flung cattle and sheep operation. He returned home each autumn—not when school started but after the cattle and sheep were brought down from their summer ranges in the high country.

From his early teens, McMurrin was completely at home with ranch hands, physical labor, and practical challenges, just as he was with books, ideas, and Utah's privileged class. His boyhood experience was both physically and intellectually robust. "I think it is true," he reflects, "that I grew up with an essentially critical, but not cynical, approach to the world."⁷

Although McMurrin continued to work for the Deseret Live Stock Company each summer, his family moved to Los Angeles when he was fourteen and he attended and graduated from Manual Arts High School.⁸ Asthma attacks threatened his health during his first year at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). He moved therefore to the drier climate of his native state where he enrolled at the University of Utah in the autumn of 1933. George Thomas, the veteran university president, befriended him and appointed him to work in the archives on the university's history.⁹ Enlivened by Professor E. E. Ericksen, among others, McMurrin took his bachelor's degree in history in 1936 and his master's in philosophy in 1937.

Sterling met Natalie Cotterel in the University of Utah library when they were both undergraduates. He was immediately taken with her, and they courted one another for several years. She converted to Mormonism, and they were married by Apostle David O. McKay in the Salt Lake temple on 8 June 1938. They have five children. An independent thinker, Natalie has been central to Sterling's life and work for over half a century.

During the seven years following receipt of his master's degree, McMurrin taught in the Mormon church's seminary and institute system which provides religious education for high school and college students as an adjunct to their secular studies. Students flocked to him, astonished

5. Conversation # 1, 30.

6. Notes from Sterling M. McMurrin-L. Jackson Newell Conversation, 12 May 1985, in my possession.

7. Conversation #1, 27.

8. Conversation #2 transcript, 19 Dec. 1984, 117.

9. *Ibid.*, 117.

by his theological knowledge and intellectual daring. His former seminary supervisor, Lynn Bennion, remembers McMurrin's classroom atmosphere: "No theological claim was too sacred to be challenged, and no idea was too wild to merit consideration. At the same time, Sterling knew more about Mormon theology, and the whole history of Christianity, than anyone in our system, before or since."¹⁰

McMurrin's experience as a teacher in the Utah, Idaho, and Arizona seminaries led to his appointment as director of the LDS Institute of Religion across the street from the University of Arizona. But his intellectual courage brought him increasingly into conflict with his ecclesiastical superiors. Meanwhile, he began investing his summers in further graduate study in philosophy and religion at the University of Southern California. His escape from the tightening institutional church environment was in the making.

Approaching thirty, McMurrin resigned his educational position with the LDS church and devoted himself to full-time doctoral study at USC. He completed his Ph.D. in May 1946. The preface to his dissertation—which explored the relationship between positivism and normative value judgments—revealed more than such documents ordinarily do about a scholar's philosophy. He began:

The moral crisis that characterizes our time is . . . the wide disparity . . . between man's technical attainment in the control of his environment and the effectiveness of his moral and spiritual idealism. It is increasingly imperative that the conduct of men and nations be brought under the dominion of a moral ideal. As a practical issue, this is . . . a responsibility of religion, education, and politics. But the integration of fact and value, necessary to both personal and social character, demands a theoretical foundation which will give meaning and direction to practical effort.¹¹

In over 250 articles, books, and essays on philosophy, education, and religion, McMurrin has continued to explore the themes found in this early study: Human institutions must advance human dignity and respect individuality. Ethics must keep pace with technology.

These ideas emerged and were nurtured by the circumstances of McMurrin's family, youth, and early career experiences, but the larger historical backdrop of his formative years should not be overlooked. During McMurrin's college and graduate school years he witnessed the global depression, Nazi holocaust, fascist and communist totalitarianism,

10. Conversation with Lynn Bennion, 22 Oct. 1987. J. Boyer Jarvis, a student of McMurrin at the University of Arizona, has remarked to the same effect.

11. Sterling M. McMurrin, "Positivism and the Logical Meaning of Normative Value Judgments," Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, May 1946.

World War II, and the birth of the atomic age.

While eschewing affiliation with any particular school of philosophy, McMurrin is an existentialist without the angst. He has a tragic sense of history, fears for the human prospect, and writes and speaks doggedly in pursuit of his ideal of social justice. He values individuality and treasures liberal education as the best hope for liberating humans from ignorance, bigotry, and violence. While he harbors no illusions about the future, McMurrin personally finds comedy in almost every situation—a gentle, ironic humor.

ACADEMIC CAREER

Even before receiving his doctorate, McMurrin was appointed to the philosophy faculty of the University of Southern California. After three years, however, his health again began to suffer from the California climate. The University of Utah beckoned once again, and he joined its faculty as Professor of Philosophy in the fall of 1948. There he taught, except for occasional short-term assignments, until 1988.

As a young philosophy professor at Utah, McMurrin enjoyed the same success—and controversy—that he had as a seminary teacher a decade earlier. He was an intellectual lightning rod from the start. Frequently invited to give public addresses and scholarly lectures, McMurrin addressed himself to a variety of social and philosophical issues. Always concerned with human dignity and freedom, he became a spirited defender of academic freedom on campus and an early activist in the field of civil rights in the community. He spent the 1952-53 academic year on the east coast as a Ford Foundation Faculty Fellow, lecturing and pursuing his scholarship at Columbia University, the Union Theological Seminary, and Princeton University.

In 1954 McMurrin co-edited a book of readings, *Contemporary Philosophy*, and the following year he and B. A. G. Fuller published *A History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* and *A History of Modern Philosophy*.¹² The latter two works appeared subsequently in Polish translation. By now McMurrin was “deaning” and his energies were already being diverted from his scholarship. His internal struggle between ideas and action had been joined.

During the academic year 1957-58, however, another old theme resurfaced. McMurrin was invited to give a lecture on “The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology” at Ohio State University. The paper attracted much attention, and McMurrin put on something of a road

12. B. A. G. Fuller and Sterling M. McMurrin, *A History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, 3d ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1955). *Contemporary Philosophy*, a book of readings, was published by Henry Holt and Company in 1954.

show when the University of Utah, Brigham Young University, and Utah State University asked for repeat performances. Published by the University of Utah Press in 1959, and still in print, this treatise remains the most penetrating explanation of Mormon philosophy available.¹³ McMurrin extended this theme with a lecture series a half-dozen years later that resulted in the publication of a larger volume entitled *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*.¹⁴

Understanding and explaining Mormon theology was by no means the same thing as accepting that theology or supporting the policies of the Mormon church. For his persistent criticism of specific church practices, especially for its denial of priesthood ordination to males of African descent, McMurrin was regarded by many leaders and members as a dangerous heretic.

In 1954 a Mormon church leader initiated excommunication proceedings against McMurrin.¹⁵ When David O. McKay, then president of the Mormon church, heard the news he called McMurrin on the phone and arranged to meet him that same afternoon at the University of Utah Student Union. When the two men sat down, McKay exclaimed: "They can't do this to you. They can't *do* this to you! If they put you on trial, I will be there as the first witness in your behalf."¹⁶ After a long and cordial discussion, McKay ended the conversation with heartfelt advice: "Sterling, you just think and believe as you please."¹⁷ He did. And through five successive presidents, the Mormon church has continued to endure McMurrin's criticism—and benefit from his loyalty. He remains a fierce defender of the LDS church, its leaders and members, except on matters of doctrine and practice where he differs in principle.

I think I have told enough of Sterling McMurrin's story to provide a sense of his character and style. He has a remarkable capacity to disagree without being disagreeable, to form authentic friendships and comfortable relationships with people of vastly differing perspectives, and he has never eschewed controversy. These qualities continued to characterize him as he moved toward the center of American intellectual and political life. The crucible of his own culture and the American west had prepared him to move easily and effectively in wider and wider circles.

13. *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959).

14. *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965); also still in print.

15. See Blake Ostler, "An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Spring 1984): 18-43.

16. Conversation #5 transcript, 7 Nov. 1986, 47; confirmed in personal conversation, 21 Feb. 1994.

17. *Ibid.*

THE PATH TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

Sterling McMurrin's success as a teacher, author, and social critic led inevitably to responsibilities in academic administration—as well as to teaching at higher and higher levels. The two sides of the man—the thinker and the actor—continued to vie with one another, and it was the combination of the two that propelled him to Washington, D.C.

Just six years after joining the University of Utah faculty, he was appointed Dean of the College of Letters and Science, a position that he held until 1960 when he became Vice President for Academic Affairs. In these administrative posts McMurrin delegated generously and reserved his own energies for setting directions and recruiting internationally respected scholars to the faculty. He created a university environment rich in academic freedom and intellectual opportunity.

Walter Paepcke, a wealthy Chicago business executive, established the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies in that Colorado ski resort at about the same time that McMurrin was assuming his deanship at the University of Utah. Looking for a scholar-teacher who could help lead his executive seminar program for high public officials and prominent citizens, Paepcke had been advised by mutual friend Meredith Wilson that McMurrin was an ideal person. Wilson, then secretary of the Ford Foundation, had recruited McMurrin to the University of Utah faculty when he was dean there. Paepcke simply called McMurrin on the phone (interrupting a luncheon meeting), offered him the opportunity, and secured his agreement to affiliate with the Aspen Institute.¹⁸

From 1954 to 1962 Sterling, Natalie, and their children spent part of every summer at Aspen where he led one group of distinguished leaders after another in reading classic texts and considering the saliency of ideas contained in them to contemporary national and world affairs. Just as he had entranced undergraduates, he now stimulated and prodded Walter Paepcke's invited guests: Supreme Court justices, Cabinet officers, foundation presidents, foreign ambassadors, U.S. diplomats, labor leaders, and heads of international corporations. McMurrin made them think, and he made friends. Among many others, he formed lasting bonds with Walter Reuther, William Brennan, Byron White, Eric Severeid, Thurgood Marshall, and Russian physicist George Garnow. Attorney General Robert Kennedy proved a source of some irritation. His bare feet at a seminar session, McMurrin thought, took "Aspen's generally informal environment a step too far."¹⁹

More completely at ease with ideas and with people of stature than ever, but largely unconscious of his notoriety, McMurrin was now acting

18. Conversation #7 transcript, 14-15 May 1988, 2-21.

19. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

on a national stage. In 1958 the Department of State invited him to go as a special envoy to Iran where he spent five months as an advisor to the chancellor of the University of Tehran. His responsibilities were to work on stemming the tide of communism among students by improving relations between them and the faculty and administration.²⁰ Both before and after that sojourn, Columbia University had tried to lure him to New York with an endowed chair in philosophy in their Graduate School of Business.²¹ McMurrin was now widely sought for advice in national policy circles concerning public education, higher education, and national human resource needs.

On the Wednesday night before John F. Kennedy's inauguration in January 1961, McMurrin received a telephone call from Alvin Eurich, Vice President for Educational Programs at the Ford Foundation. Eurich explained that he and several colleagues had been asked by the new administration to propose someone to be United States Commissioner of Education. "I want to put you forth for that position and would like to know, first, whether you will accept it?"²² McMurrin had never been active in politics, nor had he ever publicly supported the election of any local or national candidate. Nonetheless, he told Eurich that if asked to serve he would do so. Because of his asthma condition he had not served in the military during World War II and, he explained later, felt this would help to dispatch an obligation he owed his country.

The day of Kennedy's inauguration McMurrin received a telephone call from the new Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Abraham Ribicoff. He told McMurrin of his wish to have the president appoint him Commissioner of Education and asked how soon he could come to Washington to talk it over. "A day or two," was the reply.

Once in Washington, Ribicoff and McMurrin met briefly and quickly established a rapport. Before they finished their initial meeting, Ribicoff sent a message to Ralph A. Dungan, Kennedy's special assistant for administrative appointments, who shortly arrived from the White House. He joined the interview with McMurrin, then asked him to step outside the room while he called President Kennedy.

Moments later Dungan and Ribicoff congratulated McMurrin and said the president would announce his appointment as United States Commissioner of Education that evening.²³ McMurrin was not asked if he would accept, nor was he told what his salary would be. But Ribicoff

20. Conversation #4 transcript, 14 Jan. 1985, 17.

21. *Ibid.*, 21.

22. Conversation #8 transcript, 4 Oct. 1988, 1. John W. Gardner, then president of the Carnegie Corporation and the Carnegie Foundation, also nominated McMurrin.

23. *Ibid.*, 2-6. This story was also the subject of a personal conversation between McMurrin and me on 1 October 1992, notes in my possession.

made it clear from the outset that HEW was a huge department and that he would run the health and welfare ends of it if McMurrin would take care of education. Said the former governor and future U.S. senator from Connecticut: "Sterling, let's give them hell: and if it doesn't work out you can go back to teaching philosophy and I'll go back to selling neckties."²⁴ The commissioner-elect went to work immediately—commuting weekly to and from Salt Lake City. It was all informal at first, of course, until after Senate confirmation—which did not occur until April due to the flood of nominations from the new administration.

When the confirmation hearing finally commenced, Senator Joseph S. Clark of Pennsylvania asked McMurrin if, as a Mormon, he could support school desegregation. He responded: "I'd like the committee to know that I do not agree with the policies of the Mormon church with respect to Negroes, and I have made my position very clear to the leadership of the Mormon church. I'm 100 percent in favor of desegregated schools."²⁵ Clark and others were highly supportive of McMurrin, and his appointment won swift approval from the Senate. And, indeed, desegregation of education, the equalization of educational opportunity, and federal aid to public schools were priorities McMurrin pursued vigorously as commissioner.

The National Education Association was at odds with the new commissioner from the start but did not oppose his appointment. The conflicts were predictable, especially because of McMurrin's advocacy of merit pay for teachers. Further, he had come out of higher education, he had no previous relationship or membership in the National Education Association, and he did not intend to continue the cozy relationship that had long existed between the NEA and the U.S. commissioner's office. McMurrin did not know until later that one of Kennedy's criteria for selecting a new commissioner was that he or she *not* come from NEA's membership.

Setting the sights for New Frontier and Great Society education policy, and illustrative of McMurrin's relationship with the NEA, was an early incident involving Admiral Hyman G. Rickover. In the wake of the Soviet Union's launching of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, the father of America's nuclear navy had become concerned about the state of U.S. education and took a series of trips abroad to compare our system with those of other nations. He wrote extensively about what he regarded as the evils of progressive education and attracted much attention with *Education and Freedom* (1959), *Swiss Schools and Ours: Why Theirs Are Better* (1962), and *American Education: A National Failure* (1963).

24. Conversation #8, 21.

25. *Ibid.*, 23.

In the midst of all this, Congressman John E. Fogarty, who chaired the House Appropriations Subcommittee, invited Rickover to state his views for the benefit of Congress. The admiral did not think American education was competing with Soviet education, and he launched a volley of criticisms at our system. Later, Congressman Fogarty asked Commissioner McMurrin for his views on the condition of American education, pointing out that Congress already had such a statement from Admiral Rickover as well as McMurrin's predecessor, Lawrence Derthick.

Pleased to respond, McMurrin had begun preparing his thoughts for the assignment when his deputy commissioner approached him and said that the NEA and the Office of Education, as with past assignments of this type, would work together through a joint committee to compose the requested document. Shocked, McMurrin replied, "If it is my views Congressman Fogarty wants, then it will be my views, and no one else's, that he gets."²⁶ Reminding the commissioner that the deadline for submission was short, his aide pushed a bit further, suggesting that McMurrin could probably use some help. "I'll have it on time," McMurrin declared, and he did.

McMurrin wrote the essay longhand in one evening, had it typed by his secretary, and then spent a few days tinkering with it as his schedule permitted. He delivered the statement to the House Appropriations Committee, and Congressman Fogarty ordered the U.S. Government Printing Office to put out 100,000 copies of it. An abbreviated version appeared almost immediately in the *Saturday Review*.²⁷

"A Crisis of Conscience" was pure McMurrin, and it set the tone and framed the agenda for federal education policy during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. "In education we are facing a crisis of conscience and collectively we are experiencing a sense of national guilt," he charged:

We cannot deny that today we would command far more knowledge and have far more creativity, civic character, and national strength if our schools had been more rigorous in their intellectual discipline and . . . more adequately structured to the needs of our society. We have with lavish prodigality wasted the talent and energy of countless persons.²⁸

He said that the aims of education cannot be defined in narrow or nationalistic terms, nor does education serve national security primarily

26. *Ibid.*, 82-83.

27. Sterling M. McMurrin, "A Crisis of Conscience: A Report on the State of American Education," *Saturday Review*, 16 Sept. 1961, 58-78.

28. *Ibid.*, 58.

through technological and scientific training. Without a “world-minded” citizenry, McMurrin wrote, “We cannot hope to satisfy the obligation of world leadership that history has conferred upon us.” He called for better education across the board, urging that we

guard against the tendency to suppose that our national well-being is served primarily by advances in technology, however important and timely these may be . . . The study of politics, history, and philosophy is fundamental to our cultural life, and no nation can achieve a lasting strength unless its character is expressed in great literature, art, and music.²⁹

McMurrin called on the federal government to provide sound leadership for American education “as well as material support,” while not interfering with the tradition of local and state control over curricula and teaching. He proposed a new policy of *general* federal financial support for education, but one that avoided national control of schooling or educational and economic planning—which might infringe upon individual choice of educational pursuits.

Specifically, McMurrin offered this agenda for improving American educational practice:

—Raise expectations for student performance, with more emphasis on solid material, less on “trivial studies and activities.”

—Set new standards of teacher preparation, including a bachelor’s degree in liberal education prior to specializing in teacher education.

—Select teachers according to higher intellectual standards, including stronger preparation in the subjects to be taught.

—Bring teacher education into the mainstream of university intellectual life, rather than keeping it apart.

—Base teacher education on a wide range of academic disciplines, and rely less heavily on psychology as the knowledge base for the profession.

Finally, he admonished the nation to “turn a deaf ear to those reactionaries among us who are forever insisting that we abandon our democratic ideal and model our education on the aristocratic patterns of some European nations.”³⁰

29. *Ibid.*, 59.

30. *Ibid.*, 78.

This essay was the expression of one mind; it was anything but the product of a committee. The commissioner sought consciously to put the education of teachers and educational standards in the forefront and talked chiefly about ends. He left economic issues like teacher salaries to follow as means. It was not a statement the NEA would have made. It appears that the content of the essay, more than the rebuff of their offer to help write it, put McMurrin in increasing conflict with this union.

"A Crisis of Conscience," republished in several places, won laurels from policy makers across the country and inspired much debate and a fair amount of federal legislation. Like the president he served, McMurrin's ideas were bold and clear, his language graceful and compelling.

Telling the story of McMurrin's *actions* as U.S. Commissioner of Education, and assessing his influence on educational policy, will be my task in another publication. Here I am concerned chiefly with his *ideas*, where they came from, and how the philosopher and the actor in McMurrin competed for his energies. Suffice it to say, he did work diligently for higher standards in education and teacher preparation, general federal aid to education, desegregation of schools and colleges, and the simplification of the federal education establishment. The NEA objected to much of what he tried to do, with comparatively little effect.

RETURN TO UNIVERSITY LIFE

After less than two years as U.S. Commissioner, McMurrin submitted his resignation. Several factors seemed to have played into this decision. Still in his forties, McMurrin had children in school, and he and Natalie did not enjoy having their lives scattered across the country from the Potomac to the Great Salt Lake. He also missed teaching and writing, having been in one administrative post or another since assuming the deanship at the University of Utah in 1954. To go home to Salt Lake City would be to go home to his scholarship for the first time in many years.

The catalyst for McMurrin's decision was HEW secretary Ribicoff's announcement that he planned to resign as Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to run for the United States senate in Connecticut. McMurrin and Ribicoff had worked well together, and that relationship would clearly be missed. In late summer 1962 McMurrin announced that he would be leaving the administration. Secretary Ribicoff objected seriously to his decision.

Abraham Ribicoff had advocated splitting HEW apart and creating a new cabinet-level Department of Education. He intended to propose legislation to achieve this change and told McMurrin that he expected the president to appoint him United States Secretary of Education if the cabinet-level department was established. McMurrin strongly favored cabi-

net-level status for education, but he had no interest in moving to such a post himself.

Before leaving office, McMurrin was approached by Ralph Dungan, still President Kennedy's appointments chief. Dungan said the president wanted McMurrin to suggest the names of a few people who might be qualified to succeed him. The retiring commissioner gave Dungan three names in rank order: Francis Keppel, professor of art and dean of faculty of education at Harvard; James E. Allen, New York Commissioner of Education; and Harold Howe III, superintendent of a New York school district.

The degree to which McMurrin's judgment continued to affect federal education policy throughout the 1960s is illustrated by subsequent events. The three distinguished educators he nominated turned out to be his three successors as United States Commissioner of Education. President Kennedy appointed Frank Keppel (1962-65), President Johnson appointed Harold Howe (1965-69), and President Nixon appointed James Allen (1969-70).

Sterling and Natalie McMurrin left Washington, D.C., in September 1962, resuming their lives in Salt Lake City and his professorship at the University of Utah. It was not, however, to be a quiet period for them. He turned down a number of college and university presidencies, endowed professorships, and board memberships—including a high position with the Ford Foundation. But he accepted appointments to a number of national and international commissions for the improvement of education and human resource development. For fifteen years he was affiliated with the Committee for Economic Development as an advisor on research and director of the committee's projects on education. During this period he was also a trustee of the Carnegie Foundation.

In 1964 McMurrin was appointed E. E. Ericksen Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah, a chair that he held until he retired in 1988. But he was inveigled back into the administration in 1965, presiding over the institution's educational affairs as provost. Within a few months of McMurrin's accepting the position of provost, however, the dean of the Graduate School, Henry Eyring, announced his retirement, and McMurrin let the president know that he would prefer to serve in that capacity. He never liked budgets or personnel administration, and the move to the graduate dean's office in 1966 relieved him of those burdens, by and large. He served in that role for twelve years, teaching a course every academic term throughout this period.

I came to the University of Utah in the middle of McMurrin's years as graduate dean. I was a youthful newcomer as dean of Liberal Education, and my introduction to McMurrin and his thinking was two-fold. First, I remember receiving "Communique No. 4." to all faculty from the

graduate dean. I was taken aback by the imposing title of McMurrin's proclamation and remarked to that effect to a veteran faculty colleague. "Oh, that's just Sterling having fun," was the quick reply. "He *seldom* writes a memo, but when he does he makes the most of it."

My second encounter with McMurrin was over a piece I wrote about the aims and purposes of liberal education. He read it and sent me a critique.³¹ I still call his letter my "Well now, young man" initiation. McMurrin pointed out that I had pitted liberal education and career education against one another—a most unfortunate mistake. The *reasons* for liberal education go far beyond economic considerations, my senior colleague pointed out, but critical thinking, broad understanding, and other values associated with liberal education do, in fact, have enormous economic benefits. And these benefits accrue both to the individual and to the society. McMurrin, of course, was right on all accounts.

As graduate dean, McMurrin pioneered a process for combining the use of internal committees and external scholars for evaluating the quality of graduate programs and academic departments. This method played a major role in raising the stature of the University of Utah, and it has been widely emulated by research universities throughout the nation.

RETROSPECTIVE THOUGHTS

As he looks back over his career, McMurrin has said on a number of occasions that he regrets having spent "so damn much time in administration." Then why did he spend over twenty years at high levels of leadership? I have no doubt that he always enjoyed being in the thick of university, state, or national issues. While it is true that he never enjoyed the routine acts of administration—directing the work of other people, building and presiding over budgets, and writing memoranda—he very much enjoys being in a position to formulate broad policies and cut through bureaucratic nonsense. And, unquestionably, he enjoyed the tangible benefits of administrative office: highly skilled assistants, discretionary funds, and a forum from which to affect university and community directions and values.

Sterling McMurrin is clearly a man of quick and independent intellect, a philosopher by nature and disposition. He lives in a world of ideas, he thinks in terms of principles and ideals, and, beyond the sheer force of his mind and personality, he has never been oriented toward, or particularly good at, practical politics. But he is a builder of institutional sagas, a steady and graceful voice who reminds members and leaders alike that

31. Sterling M. McMurrin to L. Jackson Newell, 5 May 1975, Box 6338 H265, University of Utah Archives, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

educational and religious organizations exist not to perpetuate themselves but to advance knowledge, support learning, and promote human dignity.

A prolific lecturer, writer, and teacher, McMurrin has never thought of himself as anything but a professor. A professor doing a stint in administration much of the time, but a professor still. As his administrative career wound down, his scholarship picked up significantly, lending further credence to the depth of his professorial identity. Since 1980 he has written or co-authored two books on philosophy and religion,³² written and edited several other volumes, and published dozens of articles.

The nature of the influence and leadership that McMurrin exercised throughout his career, the scholar-in-action who forged institutions primarily through the strength of his ideas—and his courage in expressing and acting on them—continues to have enormous appeal. To whatever extent this kind of leadership ever flourished, however, it is clearly more difficult now than in the past. Bureaucracies are bigger, hierarchies are more complex, and external regulations are more confining than ever before—making leadership increasingly mechanical, reactive, and politically driven.

In universities this shift has made deans, vice-presidents, and presidents increasingly career administrators once they are appointed. They must still start as academics, but once in administration the die is often cast within two or three years, after which a return to teaching and writing is increasingly difficult and eventually unlikely. As a result, their orientation shifts inevitably away from education and knowledge. The university administration itself, and the advancement of their own careers, become the ends. The parallels with contemporary Mormon church leadership are compelling.

A careful analysis of McMurrin's leadership makes it clear not only that his career peaked in a different era, but, more importantly, that he was able to orchestrate his administrative appointments in such a way as to occupy those rare positions such as graduate dean where he could still keep the real ends of education—thinking, teaching, and writing—at the forefront. Leaders with McMurrin's orientation and temperament are clearly needed in all institutions today, religious, educational, and governmental. The question is whether the evolution of these institutions has significantly reduced the probability of the emergence of leaders who possess a moral vision . . . and retain the capacity to act on it.

32. Sterling M. McMurrin, *Religion, Reason and Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1982); Obert C. Tanner, Lewis Max Rogers, and Sterling M. McMurrin, *Toward Understanding the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990).

Contributing no doubt to Sterling McMurrin's success in keeping two kinds of lives going simultaneously, a reflective one and an action one, were his powerful childhood heroes and experiences. His grandfathers flourished in sharply contrasting walks of life; he revered them both, and as a teenager he fully tasted each way of embracing the world. Man of ideas, man of affairs: McMurrin refused to choose one over the other. At the age of eighty, he is writing books and essays in Salt Lake City and breeding horses in St. George.

CONCLUSION

From his earliest adult experiences and professional writing, McMurrin was drawn to the clash between authentic individuality and institutional loyalty. The moral and spiritual idealism about which he continues to speak and write is prompted by a deeply felt concern about a widening chasm between actual community, corporate, and organizational practices and those conditions that advance human dignity and individual liberty. In McMurrin's view, the unfortunate convergence of increasing organizational size and rising technological complexity has pushed our major social institutions further and further from ethical accountability for their actions and, consequently, diminished the realm within which individuals can make and execute moral judgments of their own.

The development of moral and ethical principles, therefore, and the critique of institutional behavior, have interested and concerned McMurrin throughout his life. Further, education and religion, the chief institutions that have conveyed moral ideals among past generations (and powerfully influenced McMurrin in his youth), have been noticeably weakened in their moral influence throughout the twentieth century.

This schism between technology and morality, between organizational conduct and organizational ideals, was the force that animated McMurrin's protest of the Mormon church's earlier proscription of priesthood ordination to males of African descent and drove his efforts to reform American education and religion. Neither religion nor education have been spared the awful dichotomies of displaced institutional values and bureaucratic abominations, but McMurrin has remained devoted consistently to the improvement of both of these institutions—to the end that they might make their badly needed offerings to a society he sees as being in serious decline.

Sterling M. McMurrin's lifelong intellectual leadership springs from strongly held and clearly stated ideas about human nature, formal education, and social organizations. Since his early adulthood, he has devoted himself to the refinement of religion, education, and government. Sorting out ends and means within his own cultural heritage as a youth, and as a

young scholar, put a distinctive stamp on his leadership that has served him, and his institutions, well. He has never seen himself as a servant of the institutions themselves. Rather, McMurrin has been, and continues to be, a trustee of the ideals they were created to advance.