

The Idea of a University

Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion, by Sterling M. McMurrin and L. Jackson Newell (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996). 389 pp., \$28.95 hardback.

The Lord's University: Freedom and Authority at BYU, by Bryan Waterman and Brian Kagel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998). 474pp., \$19.95 paper.

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Each of these books provides a thoughtful, intimate account of the uneasy co-existence of scholarly life and Mormon orthodoxies. Read together, the long journey of a prominent heretic and the recent conflicts over academic freedom at Brigham Young University suggest just how difficult—yet worthwhile—the intellectual life open to religious questions can be.

Matters of Conscience is an unusually engaging book. Sterling McMurrin (1914-1996) was a professor of philosophy and influential administrator at the University of Utah and the most prominent Mormon heretic of his generation, known for his *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* and his filial attachment to the religion despite his public disbelief in its basic claims. L. Jackson Newell, professor of higher education, came to the University of Utah as dean of liberal studies

and has been co-editor of *Dialogue* and president of Deep Springs College. Over a period of eight years, they met regularly for conversations that became oral history interviews; eventually they had nearly one hundred hours on tape. From that deep store Newell edited a conversational autobiography. In an introductory essay, he outlines the major events of McMurrin's life and the prominent themes in his work. That said, he invites readers to pull up a chair and listen in.

The result is a remarkable account at once more personal than most biographies and more probing than all but the most serious of autobiographies. McMurrin, as Newell observes, is a born storyteller, Newell the astute interlocutor who peels away unanticipated layers. McMurrin describes his mother as "a very beautiful woman, a person of true nobility, and very talented as a teacher and leader. . . . She was deeply religious but not extreme. . . . a person of very, very good sense and very open. I could talk to her about anything. . . ." The portrait he offers is warm but not quite distinct. Newell's response—"Can you give me an example?"—elicits a startling detail: "She would say, 'Do you believe all that stuff about the Book of Mormon?' That would make us think, you see" (MC 13). McMurrin describes Natalie Cotterel McMurrin, his spouse of over fifty years, in equally loving terms, even saying they have "never had a serious disagreement" (MC 95).

Newell's good-humored disbelief and his further questions elicit much about Natalie's incalculable role in McMurrin's life.

As grandson of a powerful member of the church hierarchy and a prominent rancher, McMurrin had a culturally privileged upbringing. B. H. Roberts, the serious Mormon thinker of the day, was a family friend he called "Grandpa Roberts" (MC 19); Harold B. Lee, later church president, was a second cousin. His father discussed theology with church leaders, disagreeing with Joseph Fielding Smith and laughing with J. Golden Kimball. When asthma forced the young McMurrin to leave California where he had attended high school and UCLA, he entered the University of Utah more at home with professors than fellow students: his early lessons in academic and church politics came in long conversations with philosopher E. E. Erickson and sociologist Arthur Beeley.

The most startling strand in his story is his apparent ease in heresy. No dramatic crises of faith, no devastating family meltdowns here. For McMurrin "becoming a good, well-rounded heretic" was a process of philosophical maturity. His "rather strong religious disposition" stayed with him, undiminished by his view that theology, "an attempt to be reasonable about religion," tends toward "wishful speculation" and "nonsense" (MC 108, 367). After he finished a master's degree in philosophy, his heterodox ideas did not keep him from work in the LDS seminary and institute program or success as a teacher of religion. But his fundamental deviation from the unwritten norm became increasingly evident as McMurrin—determined "to be absolutely honest"—ran head first into the dictum of Apostle John A. Widtsoe:

"preach the gospel, sugar-coat it where necessary" (MC 116, 122). His recollection of leaving the LDS institute at the University of Arizona to join the philosophy faculty at USC and complete his dissertation is telling: "I must confess that leaving church employment and settling into a great university lifted a great burden from me. I felt like a free man for the first time in years" (MC 127).

In 1948, McMurrin accepted a faculty appointment in philosophy at the University of Utah, which would be his professional base for the next forty years. The chapters on his studies in philosophy capture well the lively critical engagement with ideas and personalities that is the stuff of academic life. William James, John Dewey, and other thinkers appear in anecdotes as McMurrin explains his interests, which range from pragmatism to positivism to relations between science and moral judgment: "I don't want to be catalogued in a philosophical school. I have studied the history of philosophy and religion, and the unfettered quest for understanding remains the important thing to me" (MC 155).

In 1954, he was named dean of what became the university's College of Letters and Science; in 1960 he became academic vice-president. This was a heady, exciting time. With the "definite advantage" of a full-time secretary, and insomnia to provide "time thinking up something good to worry about" (MC 220, 221), McMurrin was able to continue writing and lecturing in the midst of administrative duties and a growing national profile. The latter came chiefly through his summer lectures at the Aspen Institute in the Humanities. "I became friends," he recalls, "with an amazing group of people": Supreme Court justices, labor leaders, and presidents of major corpo-

rations (MC 244). By 1961, he had the reputation and connections to be appointed U.S. Commissioner of Education in the Kennedy administration. McMurrin's reminiscences from these years—guided by able questions—offer insight into the complex negotiations required when academic values, democratic ideals, and politics meet. Always wary of bureaucratic structures ("outrageous in the federal government and very bad in the Mormon church" [MC 294]), he nonetheless found ways to use them to advantage in the fight to desegregate schools.

Within a few years of his return to the University of Utah, McMurrin became provost and then dean of the Graduate School. These positions and his appointment to a distinguished chair allowed him influence and freedom. He established formal procedures for internal and outside review of graduate programs that were soon followed widely elsewhere, twice chaired the university's self-study for re-accreditation, and then stepped down from administration in 1978.

McMurrin's departure from church employment fostered, rather than ended, his intellectual engagement with Mormonism. Many of his most incisive observations deal with conflicts in the church over freedom of thought in matters of science, history, and theology. The Mormon church, he observes, "is always vulnerable to ultra-conservatives, biblical literalists, and scientific illiterates" (MC 185), and he offers much anecdotal evidence. Though unsparing in his judgment of religious truth claims and bureaucracies, McMurrin attempts to respect individual people involved; it is here that his sense of himself as the "loyal

opposition" is most evident (MC 114). "Heresies and Criticism," the chapter detailing his lengthy meetings in the 1950s with apostles Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee—and, later, church president David O. McKay—documents an important period of theological turmoil and institutional change. To speak his mind frankly in the face of possible excommunication, McMurrin recalls, was so "liberating" he "felt a kind of physical buoyancy" (MC 195).

Such buoyancy is hard to find at Brigham Young University: so Bryan Waterman and Brian Kagel demonstrate in *The Lord's University: Freedom and Authority at BYU*. Waterman and Kagel, former student journalists now in academic and business careers, draw upon archival research, firsthand experience, and interviews to produce a significant and sobering chronicle of the academic freedom controversies of the last fifteen years, which eventually resulted in the 1998 censure of BYU by the American Association of University Professors.¹ To understand these events, they rightly argue, one must know something of what preceded them. Accordingly, they devote more than a third of the book to earlier debates and institutional changes that played a central role in defining the university environment in which the recent conflicts occurred.

The initial chapters introduce "the making of Mormon education" (LU 5) and review in some detail the history of women at BYU, the half century of censorship debates between student journalists and administrators, and the evolution of an Honor Code best-known for its regulation of appearance

1. For a detailed account, see *Academe*, September-October 1997, pp. 52-71.

and social behavior. The authors identify these chapters as contextual rather than comprehensive, but this is not to say that they simply summarize material already in print. Quite the opposite: while some pieces are familiar, the larger stories outlined here have yet to be fully told. The chapter on women and feminism centers on “three moments when discussions of gender roles seemed to dominate campus discussion” as national gender politics played out locally (LU 24). Drawing from primary materials as varied as student essays from the 1920s, 1950s promotional brochures, and faculty member Elouise Bell’s 1975 forum address, “The Implications of Feminism for BYU,” Waterman and Kagel show that feminism—and conservative backlash—have featured more prominently in the university’s history than some might suppose. So have debates over which topics may be discussed publicly on campus, as the chapter on the *Daily Universe* reports through accounts of disagreements between church apostles serving on the board of trustees, university presidents and deans, faculty advisors, and student newspaper editors over coverage of politics (for instance, “the Negro question” in the 1960s), contemporary culture (particularly rock concerts), and theology (such as the range of Mormon views on evolution [LU 78, 80, 96ff.]).

The last of these chapters traces the transformation of the Honor Code from a code of academic honesty to a system for enforcing appearance and behavioral standards and religious ac-

tivity. Much of this story is familiar: long-time president Ernest Wilkinson is known for his obsessive campaign to keep American student culture and left-wing politics of the late 1960s out of Provo. As he wrote to parents of entering students in 1968, he sought to stop “the emulation of undesirable contemporary characters” (qtd. in LU 139).² Waterman and Kagel emphasize the ideological thrust of the standards Wilkinson instituted: BYU was to be a university concerned above all with the production of model students who would become stalwart church members. Widely-reported incidents highlight the standards’ ludicrous effects: women taking exams in the university’s testing center wearing overcoats and underwear to get around the “no denim” rule, founding president Karl Maeser’s photo being airbrushed to remove his beard for a university publication (LU 154-155, 156, 175n153). But the authors argue persuasively that this evolution in the university’s sense of mission, which has continued to the present, has had serious effects as well: they cite two studies from the mid-1990s, one showing that BYU graduates were more likely than other Mormon university graduates to remain orthodox, the other that current students were “more accepting of authority, more perfectionistic, and less able to think critically” than their counterparts at other universities (LU 168).

With this background, Waterman and Kagel move into an extensive account of the conflicts over academic freedom in the late 1980s and 1990s. Their documentation of individual

2. In 1971, Wilkinson announced to the student body that the university perceived a correlation between the flouting of dress and grooming standards, traffic violations, erratic church attendance, poor academic records, and failure to inform the university of one’s current address (LU 150).

cases involving faculty members Cecilia Konchar Farr, David Knowlton, Brian Evenson, Gail Turley Houston, and others is an important contribution. They narrate these events with compelling immediacy while working to balance the fine nuances of each case with larger themes of academic freedom at the university and intellectual freedom in the church. (One chapter discusses the excommunication of several Mormon intellectuals during 1993-1995, another the eventual censuring of the university.) Their accounts make clear how very painful, personally and intellectually, these conflicts were for individual professors deeply committed to their scholarship, their responsibilities as teachers, and their faith. They show as well how criticisms directed at a single professor had a ripple effect: to impugn Houston's scholarship on gender in Victorian literature, for example, was to question the work of sociologists and others on campus as well (LU 351).

I followed these stories as they unfolded—as a BYU alumna who took a faculty position at another university in 1990, I found them impossible to ignore. (I had been slightly acquainted with Houston as a student in the early 1980s; I met Farr at an academic conference the semester following her third-year review.) For me, as I suspect for most readers, the broad outlines of

these stories are not new. Nor, by now, are the irony of firing one of few anthropologists to write about Mormon missionary work, the absurdity of treating anonymous attacks on faculty with respect, or the rhetorical overkill of charging a feminist professor with having “enervated” the university’s “very fiber” (qtd. in LU 357). What struck me most in Waterman and Kagel’s account, then, were the crucial details shaping larger events: a College of Humanities where the committee reviewing rank and status cases is all male; an evaluation and tenure process in which central administrators and irate colleagues may add materials to review files; a university where faculty discussion about religion is circumscribed but the rules in question are ambiguous and unwritten (LU 186, 207-208, 211-212, 239-240, 251n100). Anyone with even modest experience in faculty governance elsewhere will find such practices compromised.

Timeliness and research are the strengths of *The Lord’s University*: the authors make the most of their close access to key participants and their own experiences as students during this period of turmoil. Like other journalistic histories written in the heat of things, with key figures often unavailable for frank interviews, this book does have limitations.³ It necessarily draws from many documents not yet available in archives, so interested

3. These include minor errors of fact: for instance, BYU has a college, not a department, of religion (the exact name has varied), and Thomas Mathews, formerly a faculty member in Spanish, spells his last name with one ‘t’ (LU 43, 162, 260). Other inexact details matter more. The authors often cite the university’s self-studies, for example, but do not specify who wrote them. Also, while they differentiate clearly between the third-year faculty review and the final, sixth-year review, at times they use shorthand terms—“tenure reviews” and “tenure decisions”—that elide customary differences in expectations and procedure (LU 2, 307). This unfortunately obscures a point worth making: apparently BYU is so hierarchical that third-year reviews go clear to the president and provost, while at many universities they do not go beyond the dean of the faculty member’s college (LU 217-218).