Church Politics and Sonia Johnson:

THE CENTRAL CONUNDRUM

by Linda Sillitoe

It has been a year since Paul Swenson, editor of *Utah Holiday*, magazine, called to tell me he was receiving press clippings from the East which indicated that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was running an anti-ERA lobby in Virginia's General Assembly. The word was that it was being directed from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Because I had done an investigative article on Utah's tumultuous IWY convention in 1977 (from which article I had since recovered), I thought I might like to sort out Church and politics once again and would find my earlier experience useful.

On the basis of the IWY experience, I asserted that the anti-ERA lobby in Virginia was, no doubt, local, originating with a few politically active Church leaders who were simply using the Church’s official policy opposing the ERA to gain support. But if I had friends in Virginia, I wasn’t in school that quarter, and I'd missed doing a story on a controversial court case (both because I’d been advised by my husband, doctor, and mother to take life easier). It seemed an interesting, brief diversion. I agreed to look into it.

Thus began a year of long hours on the telephone, a file now burgeoning with information and clippings (which will soon find a home in the special collections archives at the University of Utah), four articles for *Utah Holiday*, constant “interpreting” between women in Utah and in Virginia as many of us took part in painful growth in less-conditional sisterhood—in sum a vastly educational and harrowing year. At the end of that year, December 1, Sonia Johnson was tried for her membership in a bishop’s court in Virginia. When donations to a support fund for Sonia from Mormons and non-Mormons in Utah, Washington, and elsewhere proved to be more than adequate to send witnesses to the trial, it was proposed that I go to Virginia “to get it on paper.” Where or how that story would be distributed, I wasn’t sure, for at that time I was committed to *Utah Holiday* only for a “face in the crowd” story on Sonia Johnson. *Sunstone* also expressed an interest in talking with me on my return. As it turned out, *Utah Holiday* made room for a cover story with Paul Swenson sharing the byline.

Since the *Utah Holiday* story went to press (well after deadline), I have talked with many individuals and various groups, usually in company with Kathryn Mackay, a Salt Lake City historian who testified at the trial. I have learned which questions repeatedly arise, which points need to be stressed even for *Utah Holiday* readers, and—always important for Mormons—how to come up with something coherent in answer to “What does this mean for you?”

Because the donors who paid my way to Virginia are unknown to me, my sense of constituency is urgent but

LINDA SILLITOE has published poems, investigative articles, reviews, and short stories. She is the mother of three children.
broad. I was the only journalist to attend the trial from Utah (although two television stations sent cameras and reporters) and, as far as I know, the only Mormon journalist. And so at Sunstone's invitation, I will try to respond to that second constituency, a study group in print, as a Mormon, within a Mormon context. I won't doff my reporter's hat since this will not be a personal essay (though it may sound like one to this point); but I will push that reporter's hat to the back of my head and leave the complexity of detail—crucial though it is—of the politics, charges, trials, and personal dynamics to those interested in reading further and deal with the context of Sonia Johnson’s trial—ERA and anti-ERA politics—the statements of the excommunication letter, and the issues relevant to each of us as Church members and/or citizens of the United States.

II.

The first two people I talked with in Virginia last year were friends and very active Mormons. Both were in some way connected with the LDS Virginia Citizens Coalition (which they said had begun as the Virginia Citizens Coalition). They confirmed that the group was indeed directed by the general authorities in Salt Lake City. Not until I spoke with Regional Representative Julian Lowe, who said he had organized the Coalition with the help of Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley, was I convinced. Elder Hinckley is a member of the Church's Special Affairs Committee which looks after political interests.

Beverly Campbell has just been appointed spokesperson for the First Presidency. A year ago she owned a public relations firm and was called by Elder Lowe to be chair of the Virginia Citizens Coalition. She takes credit for the organizational structure which is now used in other states such as Missouri. Stake Relief Society presidents are included on the executive board. The pyramid structure moves down through stakes and ward utilizing Relief Society presidents as stake and ward “key coordinators” and is further staffed by ten couples per ward.

As the Coalition went into action, funds were solicited by ward bishops from individual ward members, anti-ERA petitions were signed in ward lobbies, women were instructed in lobbying techniques by the founder of Virginia Stop ERA, who is also a Mormon. The Coalition and Stop ERA co-published 50,000 pamphlets called “Equality Yes, ERA No”. Thus was Virginia's General Assembly instructed in lobbying techniques by the founder of Virginia Stop ERA, who is also a Mormon. The Coalition and Stop ERA literature is also distributed in ward lobbies and at meetings, as informed sources. When asked if he was aware that anti-ERA materials were being sold in Church lobbies, Bill Evans replied, “I was not aware of that, but such activities are left to the discretion of the area leaders.”

Over the pulpit and in ward and stake newsletters, members are urged to support and “follow the Prophet” by working against the Equal Rights Amendment. They are instructed who and how to lobby at workshops and in meetings and advised, insist members from Virginia to Missouri to Arizona, to deny being organized at all—particularly by men—but to lobby as private citizens. (Salt Lake City elders asked by their quorums to picket pornographic movies as private citizens can recognize that dual motivation.)

While Church leaders at the local level and spokespersons at Church headquarters prefer to view the Mormon lobbies as voluntary groups (“good folks in a good cause,” enthuses Don Ladd, Virginia regional representative) they agree when pressed that the groups are organized in and by the Church; but because of the strong stand on the ERA, Ladd explains, it doesn't matter how finely the line is drawn.

In Virginia the eastern press shone a sudden spotlight on the hundreds or thousands (Virginia press carried VCC estimates of membership from 2,500 to 16,000—I think the first number is generous) of private citizens who wrote about the ERA's danger to the family on attention-getting colored paper and lobbied as an unregistered group of unrelated individuals.

Perhaps because of the curiosity evidenced in the press, headlines flared in Virginia and Washington newspapers when it was discovered that the Coalition had not registered as a lobbyist group (required of all groups who spend more than $100). That mistake seems...
natural enough for a novice group—and a pro-ERA Lutheran group made the same error—but the press was particularly intrigued by the Mormons. When it was discovered that their obviously well-organized interest group was supported by something called FACT (Families Are Concerned Today), defined by Coalition officers as “an organization that raises funds,” interest piqued again.

Ron Thomas, the CPA who managed the FACT account, stated that FACT officers were Julian Lowe and Beverly Campbell; they authorized payment for anti-ERA printing. But Thomas said he knew nothing about the Citizens Coalition. He could not identify any fundraising activities held by FACT; meetings had not been held nor was there a membership list. It was, all told, a bank account. Virginia ward members reported that the checks requested by bishops to support the Coalition were made out to FACT.

In Missouri the financing has been more direct. One stake leader was told that the stake had been assessed $2,000 to support the Missouri Citizens Council. Donations were accepted from individuals in the stake president’s office, says one who was invited to contribute, but the pledges and donations were made out to the MCC.

As this article goes to print, the Equal Rights Amendment is being hotly debated in the Missouri legislature. The Missouri Citizens Council is vigorously lobbying against its ratification. An active Mormon who was recruited by the Council told me: ‘Beverly Campbell appeared on a television station in St. Louis and said that the Church is not involved in opposing the ERA. She said, ‘The Mormon Church, as a church, does not bus people to legislatures.’ Well, this morning Relief Society was cancelled in many wards in Missouri, and everyone got on the buses in front of our meeting houses and went to Jefferson City to lobby.’

It is important to stress that it is legal for churches to lobby on any issue (although they may endanger their tax exempt status by endorsing or supporting candidates or by using central church funds). The Special Affairs Committee has confirmed the activities and guidelines of state anti-ERA groups, which are filled with dedicated, believing people working for a cause they believe has spiritual, moral and religious implications. One such lobbyist claims they are meeting others who are surprised and happy to discover “how nice Mormons are.” The lack of “Mormon” or “LDS” in the recent lobbyist logos, funds such as FACT which serve no obvious purpose except to disguise the source of revenue, and the insistence of Church members that they have been instructed to lobby as the general public rather than a homogeneous interest group (a tactic which significantly inflates the apparent anti-ERA sentiment in the state) give the lobbies a furtive aura.

More important to Mormons, however, seems to be the fact that most of them (like myself until recently) are not aware that such lobbies exist in the Church. Having accustomed my mind to that knowledge, it seems to me unnecessary that members in Utah should be shocked and disillusioned by the activities of their sisters and brothers in Arizona, Illinois, or Missouri or wonder what in the world Sonia Johnson is doing in Virginia. When a native Missourian visited her home state and told mem-
bers there of her Salt Lake friends’ reactions to the Missouri Citizens Council, it was the Missouri members’ turn to be shocked and disillusioned. They had believed, quite naturally, that the entire Church was aware of their efforts on the front lines of the political battlefield, approved, and were similarly engaged.

Common knowledge, however, does not insure unanimous comfort within that religious-political arena. Many, involved or not, approve, of course, and find that their political and religious feelings coincide very nicely on the issue of the Equal Rights Amendment—and some groups oppose other issues as well, such as abortion. Other members are not as eager but feel compelled to support the anti-ERA groups as a program of the Church. Still others in the spectrum privately agonize over problems they see in terms of practical politics and Constitutional overtones; still others have expressed concern about being “called” to what they consider a political crusade. Those members who are pro-ERA, quiet or vocal, find themselves religious members of the political enemy camp, particularly in states where ratification of the ERA is critical and the Church is organized to oppose it. One priesthood holder in Missouri inquired to what extent a member could be pro-ERA without coming into conflict with the Church. The answer received, he says, from his stake president through his bishop was, “A member may be pro-ERA, but may not oppose any program of the Church, including the Missouri Citizens Council.” Across that spectrum, then, there will be divisions of opinion on this issue, but that is preferable to total or partial ignorance.

Since the Church has confirmed that some members are actively lobbying against the Equal Rights Amendment with the blessing and direction of Church leaders (Special Affairs Committee consists of Elders Gordon Hinckley, David Haight, and James Faust of the Council of Twelve, and Elder Neal Maxwell of the Presidency of the Council of Seventy), it seems to me that it is time for the rest of the membership to inform ourselves about what we, as a Church, are doing.

As I have worked on these articles many of the weeks of 1979 and then taught Church history to a gospel doctrine class on Sundays, I have repeatedly been impressed by the similarity between the Church’s current political activities and the early political history of the Church. As I have been driven with the saints from Ohio to Missouri to Illinois, and now west to what will become Utah, the same attitudes are revealed, though issues and circumstances differ.

There is still the attempt to converge the spiritual and temporal worlds through political methods. And still the response to our fellow citizens’ uneasiness and eventual outrage is that we are persecuted because of the stirrings of Satan. “But the Church never involves itself in politics....” I have heard many say in response to the anti-ERA lobbies. These current activities are precedent-breaking only in terms of the last several decades. We are true to our beginnings.

I have a personal interest, of course, in a more informed membership concerning the Church’s anti-ERA efforts. I have been accused of “washing the Church’s dirty linen in public” or “pulling skeletons out of the closet.” The Church recognizes that laundry (and I see no
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reason why my Church should own dirty laundry) and says it’s been drying in the breeze all the time. Perhaps if those “skeletons” will don some of the “laundry” and stay out in the sunlight for a while, they will flesh out a bit and look healthier to everyone.

III.

called Sonia Johnson for an update before speaking at a recent study group. “What is the status of your appeal?”

“Well,” she answered, “it was hand-delivered to the stake president more than two weeks ago. Day before yesterday I received a letter from him saying that he has received it. I suppose you could say that my appeal is moving with all the speed of a wounded tortoise!”

That remark, in addition to being informative, reinforced something I have learned about Sonia Johnson: she favors a vivid word over a bland word every time. Not only does this consistent characteristic of her speech make her eminently quotable (a reporter’s dream), but it causes a more noticeable discrepancy between her words in print and her words as heard than is usually noticeable.

My first conversation with Sonia about a year ago surprised me: her voice was thoughtful rather than strident, unusually expressive instead of harsh; and her anger about the “men organizing my sisters behind the scenes to work against their own equal rights” seemed balanced by pain. I can only assume my expectations of her were formed by reading her words as quoted by the press—and that is true for most people who feel they know Sonia Johnson.

Since then I have discovered that her use of hyperbole and sometimes startlingly vivid language is usually humorous or ironic; but when she speaks from pain or anger, as in her speech given in September to the American Psychological Association meetings in New York City, her rhetoric strikes many Mormons as polemic and harsh. (Associated Students at BYU, in fact, distributed that speech to the BYU student body after her excommunication, an apparent disregard of copyright law.)

The APA speech describes the Mormon anti-ERA lobby in Virginia and the Church’s opposition to the Amendment, then broadens to the discussion of problems among Mormon women. Citing Utah’s alarming statistics on depression, “premaritally pregnant” teenage brides, teenage suicide, and rape, Sonia Johnson insists that “our sisters are silently screaming for help.” The next paragraph continues:

Because Mormon women are trained to desire above all else to please men (and I include in this category God, whom all too many of us view as an extension of our chauvinist leaders), we spend enormous amounts of energy trying to make the very real, but—for most of us—limited satisfactions of mother-and-wife-hood substitute satisfactorily for all other life experiences. What spills over into those vacant lots of our hearts where our intellectual and talented selves should be vigorously alive and thriving are, instead, frustration, anger, and the despair which comes from suppressing anger and feeling guilty for having felt it in the first place.

Returning to politics, the key paragraph of the speech centers on her cause:

But women are not fools. The very violence with which the brethren attacked an amendment which would give women human status in the Constitution abruptly opened the eyes of thousands of us to the true source of our danger and our anger. This open patriarchal panic against our human rights raised consciousness miraculously all over the church as nothing else could have done. And revealing their raw panic at the idea that women might step forward as goddesses-in-the-making with power in a real—not a “sub” or “through men”—sense, was the leaders’ critical and mortal error, producing as it did a deafening dissonance between their rhetoric of love and their oppressive, unloving, destructive behavior.

Copies of the “Patriarchal Panic” speech abound throughout Mormondom. It is the extreme, not the norm, of Sonia Johnson’s utterances and yet it identifies clearly the heart of what has become her dilemma. It is in this speech that she crosses the line between equal civil rights and the patriarchal system of the Mormon Church, a border also blurred by the Church by identifying the ERA as a moral issue upon which the Church is taking political action (in harmony with the July 4, 1979 statement of the First Presidency which explains that moral issues, so identified by the First Presidency and Council of Twelve, may be “worthy of full institutional involvement”). Thus it is no more possible to remove Sonia Johnson’s promotion of the Equal Rights Amendment from a Church context than it was possible for her to remove the anti-ERA petition from her ward lobby.

Shortly before her excommunication, Sonia Johnson told an interviewer she was “Mormon right down to my toenails.” The mother of four children ages five to sixteen, a university instructor in Africa and the United States, she still attends her Virginia ward regularly. As late as last summer she held down three Church positions: ward organist, gospel doctrine instructor, and cultural refinement teacher in Relief Society. She continued the latter until the end of November, the week before the second trial, and played the organ at fast meeting after the December 1 trial (when no decision had been announced.) She claims to have once been “on a pedestal,” determined to be “the perfect Mormon wife and mother.”

It was, ironically, in a Church meeting that Sonia Johnson says she became a feminist. She had been overseas and only vaguely aware of the women’s movement in the United States, she explains. At this meeting priesthood leaders explained the opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment expected of ward members in harmony with official Church policy. When she went to the meeting she says, she expected to agree with what was said, but somehow as she listened she saw “the implications,” and, she concludes, “I walked out of that meeting a feminist.”

While testifying before a Senate subcommittee on the Extension of the ERA, Sonia Johnson learned from the interaction between herself and Mormon Senator Orrin
It was, ironically, in a Church meeting that Sonia Johnson says she became a feminist. Away from the prophet, teaching false doctrine, etc.) thirty statements were also submitted to him at the trial testifying to the reactions of various individuals in the audiences. Ida Harris of Logan, Utah (Sonia's mother); Esther Peterson, former Utahn and Special Advisor to the President; and John Bailey, Teddie Wood, and Hazel Rigby of Mormons for ERA in Virginia were also there to testify but were never called. The trial was limited to an hour and thirty minutes, although it ran about an hour longer.

The witnesses report that Sonia Johnson was not only charged with hindering the worldwide missionary program, but also with damaging the genealogy, welfare, family home evening, and family preparedness (food storage) programs; that she was charged with teaching false doctrine, though no examples were given even when requested by the witnesses; and that she was charged with undermining the confidence of members and non-members in the leaders of the Church. Not until the excommunication letter arrived December 5 did the charges become available in writing:

1. Have your actions influenced members and nonmembers to oppose Church programs; i.e., the missionary program?
2. Have your actions and statements advocated diminished support of Church leaders?
3. Have you presented false doctrine which would damage others spiritually?

The findings of the Church court deal first with the "missionary charge," a widely-carried misquote which read variously, "If the missionaries come to your door, don't let them in."

That statement appeared first in a Montana news story after Sonia Johnson talked politics with a group of non-Mormon ERA supporters in Kalispell. She told them, according to the transcript of her talk, that the Church was involved in anti-ERA efforts and that they should lobby the Church since it has itself chosen to be a political body. A film clip of her remarks in Kalispell was flown into Virginia for the trial (and a few seconds were shown on NBC news), but due to the elapsed trial time, the film was not shown, and Sonia Johnson tried to explain the context and her intentions.

In an editorial in The Washington Post, Sonia Johnson explained her "missionary statement" this way:

Contrary to the statement in the church's press release, I did not testify that "(Mormon) missionaries should not be invited into people's homes." What I did do was tell ERA proponents in Montana that they should not hesitate to lobby the Church since it has itself chosen to be a political body and as such must expect to be lobbied. I told them that perhaps the only lever they had for deal-making (which is what lobbying in) is the church's earnest desire to have all members listen to its missionary message. "Therefore, I told them in effect, 'write and tell church leaders that you do not like what they are doing in ERA politics, and that if their missionaries come to your door you will say that you are not interested in a

Hatch of Utah that Mormons for ERA were attractive to the press. And it was when Virginia wards, homes, and stakes filled up with anti-era literature, petitions, coalition assignments, and strategy that she decided she must separate in her own mind the political and spiritual realms of the Church.

Reporter Marjorie Hyer wrote in The Washington Post late in 1979 about Mormons for ERA:

Earlier this year while they themselves were lobbying for the passage of the amendment in the Virginia legislature, Johnson's group forced the church to register as a lobbyist on the other side. In recent months, Johnson's group has become a sort of self-styled "truth squad" attacking the church's opposition in states where ratification is an issue.

Once Mormons for ERA divided the political anti-era aspect of the Church from what they saw as their spiritual and cultural center in Mormonism, they opposed the Church vigorously—and to their minds, politically. Banner tows carried signs such as "Mormons for ERA Are Everywhere" in Virginia and Utah (but never on Sunday), and pickets appeared at conferences. But the Mormons for ERA's main tactic was to expose and publicize the Church's anti-era lobbies. It soon became apparent, however, that the press was more interested in the personal angle of a toeing-all-lines-but-one Mormon woman battling her (male) church leaders on an issue of women's rights. That angle made good copy and the story of the Church's politics was mainly ignored, except as it was embodied in one quotable personality—Sonia Johnson.

In mid-November, Sonia Johnson was summoned to a bishop's court. Her bishop, Jeffrey Willis, agreed to postpone the trial to give her more time than the professed two days to prepare a defense and invite witnesses—and establish the charges against her. Another bishop counseled her to request a stake court, which she did on November 16th, the evening before the original trial date. That morning a story had appeared on the front page of the "Metro" section of The Washington Post concerning the trial; that evening her request was not only angrily denied, but she was told to appear in court the following morning.

The variety of charges, trial times and settings, the witnesses heard and not heard, the extraordinary procedures within the court, and the unusual support and press coverage outside the court are important and interesting, but complex. There is not space to discuss those things here, except in the most cursory way.

The witnesses who testified at the December 1 trial before Jeffrey Willis were all members in good standing (the Sterling Park ward bishopric checked before the trial): Dr. Ralph Payne from Pennsylvania who heard the APA speech in New York and volunteered his testimony; Kathryn Mackay from Salt Lake City who met Sonia Johnson in October and heard her speak at the women's conference at the University of Utah; Maida Withers, a fellow Mormon for ERA in Virginia; and a Church employee who heard her speak at the women's conference in Provo in October and who has asked to remain anonymous. Because the bishop seemed primarily concerned with the effect of Sonia Johnson's statements on others (undermining Church leaders, leading people
In the Sonia Johnson story, oversimplification is the lie.

church that is fighting your civil rights. In other words, tell church leaders if they will listen to you, you will listen to them. This, to my mind, is political lobbying, pure and simple.

That context was not understood or not acceptable to Bishop Willis, evidently. The excommunication letter reads, “You testified that you believe and have taught that missionaries should not be invited into people’s homes.”

The second finding has an even more complex history. Sonia Johnson participated on a panel of Mormon women at the University of Utah’s women’s conference in October. In that speech, “Off Our Pedestals: The Chronicles of the Uppity Sisters,” comprised of letters from Mormon women throughout the United States, Sonia Johnson said the words “savage misogyny” which followed her like a pair of open fangs. They appeared in the second paragraph of her speech, which she read verbatim:

Not long ago, my Bishop told me meaningfully, “I keep MY wife on a pedestal!” “Oh,” I thought, “so you’ve got her safely immobilized.” (I’m sure he wishes my husband would get me back on MINE!) And though pedestals really aren’t funny, I had to smile a little because I was reminded of a banner I saw in the 1978 Extension March in Washington. It showed two women sitting on pedestals at the bottom of a big deep hole. You could see ground level ‘way above them and the heavy boots of men walking around up there. And one woman was saying to the other, “I’m getting tired of this elevated position!” This made me think of one of my favorite rejected slogans for our airplane banner tow: PEDESTALS ARE THE PITS. It’s true, of course, pedestals are the pits.

I wish there were time to talk at length about why the pedestal, as a symbol of women’s immobilization and isolation in our male centered society, more than any other symbol—the gilded cage, the doll’s house—reveals our savage misogyny. Briefly it is physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually cramped. It is precarious and a fall is dangerous if not fatal. It maroons women and keeps us emotionally stranded from one another. And by placing us in the position customarily occupied by statues, reveals society’s attempt to render us as conveniently non-human, mindless, and will-less as they (statues).

The Deseret News that night ran a UPI article in which the nature of “savage misogyny” changed significantly:

Sonia Johnson of Arlington, Va., told University of Utah students Friday that the male leaders of the church were demonstrating a hatred of women by claiming to hold them in high regard while denying them equal powers with men.

“Pedestals are the pits,” said Ms. Johnson. “It shows most vividly the savage misogyny (sic) in the Mormon church.”

Sonia Johnson says she spent “more than two hours at both trials explaining ‘savage misogyny.’ Here is her re-collection of the December 1 trial:

I said, “I gave you that speech so you could read it and not misquote me. I read it just as you have it, and I said ‘society’—the world! Western civilization! Everyone, including women. All of us.”

And one of the counselors said, “All of us . . . even the church leaders?”

And I thought, why fight it? “Yes,” I said, “everyone.”

Jeffrey Willis states in the excommunication letter:

You testified that you believe and have publicly stated that our society, specifically including church leaders, has a savage misogyny; when, in fact, it is church doctrine that exaltation can be gained only through the love that results in the eternal bonding of man and woman.

The press release from the Church was made even more specific by Steve Coltrin who consulted first with Bishop Willis, then amended: “You testified that you believe and have publicly stated that our (Mormon) society, specifically including Church leaders, has (in Mrs. Johnson’s words) ‘a savage misogyny . . .’ ”

The Deseret News came full circle the night of December 5 when, while quoting the Church press release directly, it added its own, original spelling, “misogeny.”

The Washington Post editorial (not carried in Utah) contains Sonia Johnson’s explanation of these two court findings:

The unfortunate distortions came about largely. I believe, because of Bishop Willis’ insistence upon wrenching all statements and actions in question out of the political context in which they occurred, and forcing them into a religious context for which they were never intended and in which they cease entirely to reflect my opinions.

The third finding of the court, however, is a statement Sonia Johnson does not dispute:

You have publicly taught that the church is dedicated to imposing the prophet’s moral directives upon all Americans; when it is the doctrine of the church that all people are free to choose for themselves those moral directives dictated by their own consciences.

Taken in context, I believe that statement from the “Patriarchal Panic” speech does indeed reveal the true and major reason for Sonia Johnson’s excommunication:

The political implications of this mass renunciation of individual conscience under direction from “God” are not clearly enough understood in this country. The Mormons, a tiny minority, are dedicated to imposing the Prophet’s moral directives upon all Americans, and they may succeed if Americans do not become aware of their methods and goals. Because the organization of the church is marvelously tight, and the obedience of the members marvelously thoroughgoing, potentially thousands of people can be mobilized in a very short time to do—conscientiously—whatever they are told, without more explanation than “the Prophet has spoken.”

But Mormon anti-ERA activity, though organized and directed through the hierarchy of the church from Salt Lake down through regional and local male leaders, is covert activity not openly done in the name of the church. Members are cautioned not to reveal that they are Mormons or organized by the church when they lobby, write letters, donate money, and pass out anti-ERA brochures door to door through whole states. Instead, they are directed to say they are concerned citizens following the dictates of their indi-
Church had chosen not to send a representative. Sonia Johnson still refused to appear and of-
instance--and can speak for the Church.

"She has no authority. It looks as if this is just local Vir-
ginia politics. Someone should appear who knows about the Church's political activities in relation to the ERA.

Throughout the last few months, Sonia Johnson has stated virtually the same distinction: it is not her pro-ERA beliefs that have caused her conflict but her opposition to the Church's political activities in relation to the ERA.

By the time she received word of her excommunic-
ation, Sonia Johnson had received five thousand letters from all parts of the country, almost all supportive. The list of Mormons for ERA spiralled, the telephone rang incessantly, and the press coverage was heavy, particularly in the East. Beginning at a luncheon at which Presidential candidate Edward Kennedy spoke, and continuing as she campaigned for the ERA in various states, Sonia Johnson's introduction was met time after time with prolonged standing ovations. But in Utah the population quickly polarized, a polarization reflected in wards and stakes throughout the country.

Sonia had never watched the "Donahue" television show when she received an invitation to appear on the program. Friends enthusiastically encouraged her to accept, and the producer said they would request the Church to send a spokesperson to appear with her. Sonia Johnson explained that she would be happy to appear with any member of the Special Affairs Committee or with Barbara Smith. But when the Church provided the name of Beverly Campbell, chair of the Virginia Citizens Coalition, Sonia Johnson refused to appear with her. "She has no authority. It looks as if this is just local Virginia politics. Someone should appear who knows about the campaigns in other states--Missouri and Illinois, for instance--and can speak for the Church."

By the time Sonia Johnson arrived in Chicago, Beverly Campbell had authority--she had been appointed official spokesperson on the ERA for the First Presidency. But, knowing Beverly Campbell from the ERA politics in Virginia, Sonia Johnson still refused to appear and offered to return to Virginia without being on the program herself. Instead, the producer chose to give her the entire hour with the terse (and inaccurate) explanation that the Church had chosen not to send a representative.

Sonia Johnson reports that she enjoyed doing the program, but that her "Mormon hate mail" increases as the film travels from one area to another. Despite the fact that many Mormons do not respond favorably to the program, the Church has still expended considerable effort to gain "equal time." In Salt Lake City, the Church flew Beverly Campbell out to appear on a local television program where she indicated that Sonia Johnson had insisted on appearing on the "Donahue" program alone. After KTVX in Salt Lake City gave the Church thirty minutes following "Donahue" for Beverly Campbell to respond, the Deseret News ran a lengthy article on Beverly Campbell and mentioned that Barbara Smith had declined the "Donahue" invitation--members of the Special Affairs Committee were not mentioned. During the thirty minute response, Beverly Campbell read the court findings from the excommunication letter, commented, then spent the balance of her time discussing her opposition to the ERA. Questioned by news journalist Roy Gibson, she confirmed that she was called to the Virginia Citizens Coalition by a regional representative, and that anti-ERA literature was appropriately found in Mormon Church lobbies.

In mid-January it became known that the Johnson marriage had not survived the stress of the year. Attributing the break in the marriage to too many crises at the same time, Sonia Johnson said, "I don't want to blame the excommunication, but it didn't help."

Richard Johnson, a statistics professor, ERA supporter, and Mormon convert told the press he thought the break-up would be final. Frequently photographed at his wife's side during the two trials, he stayed with their children while she campaigned for the ERA early in 1980. An AIP story of January quotes him as saying, "Things got exacerbated, with the trial and the grief."

What few knew as the trial and excommunication were carried to the country via a surprisingly devoted media and press was that the pain and grief visible in Sonia Johnson concerning her rejection by the Church did not reveal the extent and seriousness of the private disaster.

At the beginning of 1979, Sonia Johnson believed that her Church very well might, allied with other organizations such as Stop ERA and Eagle Forum, defeat the Equal Rights Amendment. Efforts of Mormons in Nevada, Florida, Arizona, Virginia, and North Carolina were deemed significant, and Regional Representative Marion Callister was scheduled to rule on recision for Arizona and Idaho. "Missouri and Illinois are organized to the hilt to fight the ERA," she said in the early fall. But by early 1980, many feminists in the country believed that the Equal Rights Amendment had breathed new life. They attribute that rejuvenation to the focus of the nation's attention on a woman who is rapidly becoming a folk-heroine--except among her own people--who was cut off from her church for doing battle in a public arena that is, at once, religious and political.

IV

"But what does all this mean to you?" fellow members always ask over lunch, after study groups, over the tele-

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Many members, still active and caring, find themselves feeling disenfranchised within their own spiritual nest.

phone. (I like the refinement over the old Utah IWY question, "Which side are you on?"") I said at the beginning of this article that this has been an educational and harrowing year. Some things I have learned have not been pleasant, but I'm sure some have been invaluable, the two qualities not being mutually exclusive.

I have learned, for instance, that the Church court system, unlike the civil court system, does not protect the individual. Since the bishop is presumed to be acting with the guidance of the Lord, the protection of the accused person's rights and feelings is left to the brethren in charge of the trial. Since those protections are not inherent in the system, a Church court can be used as a weapon.

I have learned that women are at a true disadvantage in Church courts. Many Mormon men have served in ward or stake trials and/or have access to the General Handbook and its supplements. A woman has neither of those advantages. Unlike a man, she has limited knowledge of court procedure, no understanding of her rights and her responsibilities; she has no awareness of usual procedure, no knowledge of what to expect. That ignorance and the inaccessibility of the information is a handicap. There is also the inherent inequity of being tried by fellow saints who are not, and cannot be, totally aware of her point of view. While a man is judged by other men who share a common experience of temptations, challenges, and systems simply by virtue of being men, a woman is also judged by men who, despite their sympathies, have never for a minute of their lives seen the world from a woman's eyes.

I have come again, as I did when investigating the IWY article, to view oversimplification as the true enemy. In the Sonia Johnson story, oversimplification is the lie. I have not yet used all the information or resources in my file, nor do I have all points of view relevant to the case (Jeffrey Willis, for example, has refused to be interviewed not only concerning the court itself, but also about the situation in general), but I have tried to exhibit as much as space permits the information central to the story. Portraying Sonia Johnson as either a martyred saint or a wicked sinner accomplishes nothing, since she is a woman, articulate, determined, pained, devout, and audacious. She attributes her strength to the Lord, because of the fasting and prayer of many in her behalf; meanwhile, Jeffrey Willis and his wife have also given thanks for the moral and material support from their ward, considering the trial a time of spiritual growth.

There is nothing simple about the story of Church ERA politics in terms of organization, motive, event, or people involved. Members on both sides of the issue are believing, practicing Mormons who care intensely about the future of the Church and of the country. The current polarization among Church members is understandable in terms of the central conflict. There are many who view the one line Sonia Johnson did not toe as an essential one—not ERA politics, but obedience and loyalty to the Church. Thus her severance reinforces their own obedience and loyalty, and in some cases, but not all, their own political-moral beliefs on the Equal Rights Amendment. Others are in crisis because they view the situation in terms of the Church's position in national politics; not all pro-ERA, nor all vocal, they view Sonia Johnson's separation of the political and spiritual aspects of the Church as valid and for her—and possibly for themselves—necessary. Thus many members, still active and caring, find themselves feeling disenfranchised within their own spiritual nest. Though this may seem a morality play in Puritan costumes of black and white, it is instead a very human drama with all the peacock array of colors on our human earth, a vivid chapter in the evolution of human kind.

It has been a year of confrontation for me, of asking hard questions and flinching at the answers, then inflicting pain on those who question me. Yet for everything that has struck me as difficult, harassing, or even bitter, there have been other incidents and moments of true generosity and courage freely given, sometimes at considerable risk.

And so I pass that question, "What does this all mean for you?" back to you, the reader, with what seems to me the central conundrum. What is the Church's appropriate role in current politics? Is there a difference between official statement and institutional involvement? How many issues involving political action will be deemed moral issues? What should be the profile of the member who does not agree with the Church's position on such an issue? Can such a policy be considered revelation when Church members are not required to accept that position? Has the time come for Church members to align their political beliefs with their religious beliefs? Can members do otherwise without becoming goats in a fold of sheep? How do we heal the splits in families and ward families? How do we still the anguished questions, "Do I belong?" and conversely, "Do you belong?"

To return to the specific from the general: if a pro-ERA member, knowing it is her (or his) right to be pro-ERA, finds herself called to a citizens' group which will lobby against the amendment, discovers anti-ERA literature in the ward lobby, lobbying instructions in sacrament meeting, and buses waiting outside the stake center on Relief Society morning, how should she respond? Should she become a member of the Missouri Citizens Council (or Quest for Quality Government in Nevada, or Friends of the Family in North Carolina) to support her leaders? Should she join a pro-ERA group but keep quiet about the Church's plans and involvement? Should she use her individual voice (or join with a few friends) in loudly combatting a large and effective opposition lobby, thus choosing the most effective and dangerous route toward finding herself deemed anti-Church... as did Sonia Johnson.

Bibliography


1980 Call for Papers

Because of the success of our first Sunstone Theological Symposium (26 papers of good to excellent quality; 500 in attendance; comments generally very favorable), we have felt encouraged to proceed immediately with plans for a second symposium next August.

To give the greatest opportunity for careful thinking and writing (as well as careful review and selection) we are announcing that the 1980 Sunstone Theological Symposium will be held August 22-23. We are now making a call for Titles and Abstracts of prospective papers. These must be received by us no later than 1 April 1980. Papers should be about 10-12 typewritten pages or about 3000 words. They should be capable of being comfortably read in about 20 minutes. Invitations to submit papers will be based on the attractiveness and relevance of the proposals, but final selection will depend on the quality of research, thought, and expression in the finished paper.

We will consider papers on any subject related to Mormon theology. However, as we approach the 150th anniversary of the founding of the LDS Church, we especially encourage papers closely relating Mormon history and theology. Some suggested topics might be: the influence of Mormon theology on the writing of its history; evaluating the “new Mormon history”; analyzing the works of prominent Mormon thinkers such as Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, the Pratts, Orson Spencer, Eliza R. Snow, B. H. Roberts, John A. Widstoe, James E. Talmage, Joseph Fielding Smith, and others; and the development of Mormon beliefs, doctrines, and practices.

Other themes which might be considered include: problems and opportunities of international Mormon-ism in worship, thought, and spiritual development; Mormon epistemology; implications of the unique Mormon concept of God for worship and morality; is there a Mormon theology?; and analysis of contemporary issues from a Mormon theological perspective.

The success of the 1979 Sunstone Theological Symposium was largely due to the quality of the presentations and the enthusiastic response of those attending. With experience and additional preparation time, we of Sunstone fully anticipate that the 1980 Sunstone Theological Symposium will be even more significant and beneficial.

1980 Sunstone Fiction Contest

FIRST PLACE
Bruce Jorgensen
Linda Sillitoe
Born of the Water
The Long Walk

SECOND PLACE
Patricia Hart Molen
Miracle Pageant

HONORABLE MENTION
Rebecca Cornwall
Dean Hughes
Bela Petsco
Drowning
Eulogy
Blackness of the Darkness

SUNSTONE was gratified by the number of excellent entries submitted to our first fiction contest and looks forward to next year’s contest. In behalf of D. K. Brown, each first place winner will receive $375 and the second place winner will receive $100. “Born of the Water” by Bruce Jorgensen is included in this issue but because of space limitations Linda Sillitoe’s story will be included in Vol. 5, No. 2. Other fiction entries will be published in future issues. Deadline for the 1981 Sunstone Fiction Contest will again be October 1. Complete contest rules will be included in a subsequent issue.

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