

A friend asked me what my response was to the Tanners' "review" of my book in the latest Salt Lake City Messenger.

When I wrote *In Sacred Loneliness*, I was committed to producing a moderate, but honest, treatment of a difficult subject. I began the project due to an interest in Eliza Snow and her Smith sister wives, not because I wanted to focus on Joseph Smith and his polygamy. But I decided not to avoid the issue of the marriage to Smith, as it was an important experience in their lives.

Even though I understand that some will read my book only to glean "negative" details about Joseph Smith's polygamy, I am cheered when I find people who have read the book all the way through and have sympathetically relived the lives of 33 fascinating, remarkable women. Judging from their "review" of my book, the Tanners are not among that group. They merely excerpt passages about Joseph Smith for sensational effect.

As I read through their treatment of my book, I once again recognized aspects of their writing that are problematic for me. Though I appreciate their sincerity, and they are definitely a cut above anti-Mormons such as Ed Decker, and though they have done LDS readers a service in republishing early LDS-related books (though often sensational anti-Mormon exposés), in matters of interpretation, I have not found them to be reliable. For a treatment of their limitations by a respected non-LDS historian, see Lawrence Foster, "Career Apostates: Reflections on the Works of Jerald and Sandra Tanner," in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Summer 1984), 35- 64, revised and reprinted in Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher, eds., *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). Foster is especially telling when he criticizes the Tanners for applying an extreme negative critique to Mormonism, but not being willing to apply the same critique to their own Biblical and Protestant tradition. (p. 52.)

While the Tanners constantly accuse the LDS church of dishonesty, coverups, and hypocrisy, they themselves may be open to some of the same charges. I dislike Mormon history that systematically censors out anything problematic, tragic, or reflecting human fallibility (i.e., real humanity) in church members or culture. This kind of history is, to me, dishonest, and the opposite of "faith-promoting." (Authentic faith is never dependent on dishonesty or covering up the balanced truth.) Furthermore, this kind of history is often insipid and sentimental.

But on the other hand, I also dislike Mormon history that systematically censors out anything "positive." Mormon history is filled with wonderful people who have performed authentically Christlike actions. There are many stories of heroism and sacrifice. While some church leaders have been authoritarian and controlling, others have been warm and inclusive. Anyone who continually hammers on only the negative is guilty of censorship and coverup, just as is the person who censors out the negative. Both write unrealistic and unbelievable history. Furthermore, the person who includes only the negative can be guilty of sensationalism and the low moral atmosphere of yellow journalism. I sympathize with the Tanners in wanting to redress an oversimplified "positive" history, but their oversimplified "negative" history is just as bad.

In my view, the most honest Mormon history is a history that attempts to have balance, that is not afraid of negative or positive. When "negative" is found, balanced history will try to understand it, put it into historical and psychological context, instead of oversimplifying and sensationalizing it. On the other hand, positive events should not be turned into hagiography (one should not lose sight of the limited human dimensions of even very good people). Human beings, human social groups, and historical events are, of course, very complex. I remember my first reading of the Tanner's *Shadow and Reality* -- you come away from it believing that there has been no good Mormon at any time in all of Mormon history. The true story, of course, is that there are good Mormons, bad Mormons, and everything in between. The Tanners, in their thirst for negative judgment, radically oversimplify human history.

So I respect the Tanners' sincerity, but believe they have fallen into a trap. It is a natural human tendency to react against extremism by a contrary extremism. In other words, when conservative Mormons produce history without shadows, human faults, or problems, it is easy to respond by producing history intended to refute it that includes only shadows, human faults and problems. But that history is as unbelievable as the history it responds

against. Even though some of the details may be true (as in the overidealized positive history), the whole perspective is false. The honest reaction to dishonest extremist history is to write balanced history.

If the Tanners had been committed to providing a balanced perspective in discussing Mormon polygamy, they might have emphasized that polygamy was an accepted part of the culture of the Old Testament, practiced by a great prophet such as Abraham, so is not inherently evil. It is very understandable that a restorationist religion such as Mormonism would feel that it was necessary to "restore" it. Personally, I think that many elements of the Old Testament were not eternal, but related to the Semitic culture of the day, and that polygamy was a very patriarchal custom that does not fit with our present culture, in which women are seen as equal human beings. But if you had the restorationist idea that everything in the Bible needed to be restored (as many Protestants in early America and Protestant Europe did), practicing polygamy is very understandable, and given that limited perspective, even courageous. In addition, the Tanners may have known that other Protestant groups (such as the early Anabaptists) believed in polygamy and practiced it, and that Luther sanctioned polygamy -- but they did not mention this. A book that gives some of this background is John Cairncross, *After Polygamy Was Made a Sin* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974)(cited in my book on p. 640), especially pp. 36, 49. Luther and polygamy is a fascinating, complicated story that also includes disparities between public pronouncement and private practice, just as we find throughout the history of Mormon polygamy.

The Tanners made great mileage out of Joseph Smith's marriage to his youngest wife, Helen Mar Kimball. However, they failed to mention that I wrote that there is absolutely no evidence that there was any sexuality in the marriage, and I suggest that, following later practice in Utah, there may have been no sexuality. (p. 638) All the evidence points to this marriage as a primarily dynastic marriage. Furthermore, in the Protestant polygamist tradition, it is common to find examples of marriages to young teenagers. (Cairncross, p. 14.) I strongly disapprove of polygamous marriages involving teenage women, but my point is that it is inconsistent and unfair for a Protestant to denounce Mormons for doing such things while not denouncing his or her own tradition.

In the case of polyandry, the Tanners, if they had been committed to balance, might have admitted (as I pointed out in my book, p. 21) that many sincere, intelligent Protestant ministers in Joseph Smith's environment were developing theologies including "spiritual wife" systems. The New York Burned Over District era was a time of great religious ferment, resulting in many utopian colonies and a great deal of marital experimentation. (See Lawrence Foster's fine book, *Religion and Sexuality*, which considers Mormon polygamy in the context of two other early American Christian religions, the Shakers and the Oneida colony; and see books cited on my p. 640.)

On an individual basis, Mormons made many mistakes with polygamy, a social system that I believe does not work for "modern" (nineteenth and twentieth century) women. As I mentioned earlier, I do not think polygamy is an eternal system that will be the marriage system of our hereafter. However, it is a component of ancient Semitic culture, an important part of Old Testament culture, and it is entirely understandable that restorationist religions would be interested in restoring it. It is inconsistent for Protestants to accuse Mormons of gross sin in practicing polygamy when they accept the Old Testament, with its righteous polygamous prophets, and have polygamous Protestants in their background, motivated by the same restorationist ideals. I titled one of my chapters "Latter-day Hagar." Even Abraham, though a righteous prophet, had human failings, and did one of his plural wives a serious injustice by casting her out of his household when pressured by his first wife.

Some might ask me, what about many statements by General Authorities saying that polygamy was an eternal principle? I believe in Joseph Smith's adage that "a prophet is not always a prophet"; he, and other Mormon leaders, may have had moments of inspiration, and other moments in which they were expressing their own limited, fallible views. As I state in my book (p. 629), I am a practicing Mormon, of a somewhat liberal to moderate, Lowell Bennion sort, but I reject absolutist, oversimplified views of religion -- the idea that religious leaders, Biblical or modern, Mormon or Protestant, can be perfect or infallible. I think a non-absolutist view of religion, that allows for cultural and human complexity, is the only religious viewpoint that works, for the thoughtful believer.

While reading the Tanners treatment of my book, I was reminded of another technique they use that can distort an author's meaning. First of all, in choosing to reprint passages from an author's writing for sensationalist effect, they ignore the author's attempts at providing context. But then the quotations are covered with phrases in bold

added by the Tanners without attribution, which further sensationalizes and distorts the author's tone. In legal documents, when the author quotes and adds underlining or bolding to the quotes, he or she is required to expressly point out that she or he has added the emphasis. Most respected historians use this technique (adding emphasis to someone else's writing) only sparingly, if at all, probably because, if not used carefully, it can distort the integrity of the quoted material. The Tanners use it almost with the majority of their quotes, and never point out their added emphasis.

Finally, my wish for the Tanners is that they arrive at a more balanced view of Mormonism and their cultural heritage, even if they continue to practice in a Protestant Christian church (which practice I respect). I suspect the Tanners merely looked through my book for negative proof-texting; if so, I hope someday they actually read it completely. Personally, writing *In Sacred Loneliness*, experiencing the greatness of those thirty or so early Mormon women for five years, caused me to deepen my commitment to my Mormon heritage (within the context of a somewhat liberal, non-absolutist faith). I want to be part of the same church those women were part of -- though I am committed to helping the church solve internal problems with history and treatment of women whenever those are manifested.