

A NECESSARY TENSION

by Ashley Sanders

IN THE JUNE 2007 SUNSTONE, MARGARET TOSCANO listed five questions that need answering before determining whether boys are more important than girls in the LDS Church. Amidst Toscano's "how," "where," "what," and "why" questions, there is a "who" question: "Is gender equality in the Church to be measured objectively by outward criteria or subjectively by the feelings reported by LDS women?" This is an important question, since insiders and outsiders rarely agree, and since the answer to the question is important to individual happiness. To answer the "who" question, it might be helpful to examine the question of inequality in the context of another religion and then apply the analogous parts to our own. To do that, I will use an example from Deepa Mehta's film, *Water*.

The film follows the life of Hindu women living in widow houses called ashrams. Many Hindu women are married off at very young ages, frequently to older, Brahmin men. When the husbands die, Hindu beliefs dictate that widows leave their families, don white saris, abstain from certain foods, and live off the alms of others.

The film seems to suggest that social prisons need no keys—that ashrams stay full without guards or locks. From a secular or outsider perspective, these ashrams seem profoundly unjust. Without the explanations and expectations of a religious perspective, it appears that women are being forced to prop up the caste system by getting married to men who die and leave them to suffer the unfair consequences. Any secular analysis of the situation would conclude that the women are being degraded to reinforce a system in which males profit at the expense of others.

One of the main characters—a Hindu skeptic who has recently returned from school—points this out, and then offers the solution: Any scripture that requires or promotes injustice is not scripture and should not be followed. Easy for him to say. He is a secularist; he has separated himself from Hinduism because of its injustices. He is not bound by the powerful circular arguments, scriptures, and social fallout that would accompany his opinion were he still a practicing Hindu.

The widow woman he loves, and who loves him back (a sin for widows), sees it differently. She is still inside Hinduism though she sees its injustices. Her situation is different because she believes in Hinduism enough to recognize that religions operate differently than other institutions. She believes enough to understand that if there is even a chance that Hinduism is true—including all its necessary or inspired injustices—that it would be a mistake to treat it like a rationalist democracy. Not only that, but she would risk everything if she doubted it.

And what is the point of our analogy? The point is that a person who believes in something even partially—or, worse, who is wondering whether or not she believes it—finds herself trapped between the discourse of the insiders and the criticism of the outsiders, and she must somehow consider both without forgetting that the consequences of being wrong are terrifying.

This is problematic, since the two discourses not only disagree but tout entirely different methodologies. Outsider discourse might conclude, for instance, that women do

not appear to be equal in Hinduism, and that the stringent rules applied to widows seem designed to secure a power structure that favors men. A religious apologist might respond in one of several ways:

1. That the perceived inequality is a test of faith, and that faith in Hinduism means ignoring the ethical implications of a commandment in order to love and obey the true religion (the true religion being something apart from and above the ethical question of injustice).
2. That the gods have dictated these (possibly unfair) structures, and that the gods are either always right or else so unknowable that we cannot scan or judge their reasons.
3. That obedience is more important than ethics, and that faith is irrational.
4. That it may really be flawed and ungodly, but that most people in the religion could not handle repairing the flaw and therefore the religion must cater to them.

I will respond with secular counterpoints in a moment, but first I want to illustrate the power of the above arguments, even when they are presented to women to reinforce their inferior status.

In the film, a young girl joins the ashram. She is bold and brash and not yet conditioned to accept what others consider to be religious fact. She is one day sitting among a group of ashram women while a priest expounds from scripture—scripture that, ironically, proclaims the inferiority of women. The widows listen raptly, or at least dutifully, ready to accept the claims of authority. The young girl will have none of it, however, and interrupts the priest to ask, outright, why women have no power.

The odd thing is that the priest does not even need to respond; he does not have to punish, censure, explain or discuss. The women respond for him. They look terrified and shush the girl. The women respond! The very same women who were forced to marry certain men; the same women who had no choice in the matter; the same women who were sent to the ashram and separated from their families; the same women who cannot leave; the same women who cannot eat certain foods; the same women who must beg for money; the same women who must become prostitutes when their begging doesn't bring in enough.

And why? There are innumerable possible answers. The point is that the women, voluntarily, stay where they are put. The ashram is not locked; there is no guard. They stay because they love something enough to accept its injustices; they stay because they believe in irrational, unknowable gods, and they fear the dread consequence of rationality; they stay because they are afraid of what they will be called if they leave; they stay because there are a thousand-thousand explanations for why things are the way they are, and because these explanations never satisfy but insist, flatly, that there is no way to investigate them without challenging them utterly. They stay because there is no method for questioning the system while staying inside of it, because all the virtues in their religion are manufactured to reward staying and disparage leaving.

THIS IS WHY I do not believe we can judge equality in Mormonism by asking its insiders. I believe that the discussion of equality is an inherently comparative activity: It is

a comparison between two discourses that check and judge another—two discourses that will never entirely agree or even speak the same language. Equality invokes mathematics, which reminds us that an equation must have two sides. In this case, those sides are represented by secular ethics and religious circularity. Neither one can have primacy and satisfy the other, but I do think they should trouble each other.

A secular ethicist would have some hard responses to the religious explanations for earthly injustice mentioned above. To explanation 1, she would ask what "pure" religion would look like if taken separately from its structures, commandments, and practices, and if one shouldn't decide whether one believes in the former partly by referencing the latter. For explanation 2, she would reject the disconnect between authority and ethics and deplore the idea of an unknowable God. Believing that way she would argue, you could believe in anything, and religion is obviously not about believing in anything but in adjudicating belief. She would expand the argument to contest explanation 3, insisting that there must be reasons for believing everything, and especially for deciding what to believe—particularly when it concerns ethics, which is necessarily a world of reason and sharable discourse. Explanation 4 would also exasperate her, as it would appear to confuse the purpose of religion with its means.

To be fair, the religious person would have some good arguments against the secular ethicist, too. But that is not my reason for writing here. My main point is that insider opinion, although necessary, is not enough when determining questions of inequality. It is not enough for several reasons, some of which I have already mentioned.

1. It is not enough because equality is an inherently comparative term. Since evaluating equality is an ethical task, and since ethics is partly a question of representation, determining equality requires comparing the representation standards of one system with the representation standards of another.
2. It is not enough because public and private speaking is different. When a minority speaks to a majority to demand or even merely consider the question of equality, that minority must tailor its message to the accepted terms and speaking patterns of the majority. They must conform to these in hopes of getting a subversive message across to an institution that has a vested interest in limiting subversion. Thus, even those women who might negatively evaluate their position in the Church will mainly do so in accordance with accepted terms and positions.
3. Most insiders have to overcome a tremendous amount of inertia before they will apply to the institutions they love the same rigorous analyses they apply to other institutions. While this love might be instructive and vital to clearly understanding things, it must be balanced by evaluations from people who are not influenced by the social and cultural expectations that govern the inside.
4. Because religion frequently validates its claims by reference either to itself or to a God who does not follow human logic or timing, it leaves dissatisfied members little to cite but their consciences, and apologists with only anecdotes and positive personal stories. While claims of this type have a valid place, we must allow for the structural and historical critiques that are more readily shouldered by outsiders, recognizing that humane actions within a system do not necessarily imply a humane system.

For these reasons, I believe the ashram analogy is helpful; it helps us to determine if the question of inequality within the LDS Church resembles what I have called the prison that needs no keys. Without the helpful and necessary tension between insider and outsider methodologies, the system could easily remain a prison in which the inertia of allegiance would function as lock and key, with insiders voluntarily staying inside. I think that the question of equality is built on a more revealing riddle: why insiders in one institution defend practices and structures that they would condemn in another. I think we need both sides of the equality debate to start to have that discussion.