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THE VARIETIES OF IRRELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: Schoolmarms, Success-Mongers, and Sycophants

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Note: This topic will be explored further in Paul Toscano's presentation at the 2006 Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium.

In 1901-02, William James gave a series of lectures in Edinburgh: *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature*. My purpose is to address the varieties of *irreligious* experience, at least the three varieties I find most common.

By "irreligious experience," I do not mean an experience that arises out of agnosticism, atheism, secularism, or religious indifference. I mean a religiously motivated belief or practice that is obsessive, selfish, narcissistic, immature, or damaging and that arises upon the worship of God, not as a devotional end in itself but as a means to some end outside itself, such as power, pleasure, privilege, or prestige, and that tends to comfort its adherents by providing them with simple standards for identifying, judging, excluding, and scapegoating non-believers.

The first, most prevalent, and most noxious variety of irreligious experience, which I call "schoolmarmery," is characterized by an

obsession with outward purity achieved by avoidance of a list of taboo activities. This variety has grown with the appalling celerity and pestilential resilience of crab grass. It has invaded and threatens to overtake the manicured theological gardens of Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

I refer to this brand of irreligious experience as schoolmarmery deliberately to evoke the image of a hard-boiled, no-nonsense, demanding, pursed-lipped scold (more often female, but increasingly male, particularly as they function in leadership roles), seething with sexual repression, armored in self-righteousness, and ready to castigate, censor, and condemn any sign of sensuality or sexual irresponsibility. I dedicate most of my attention to this particular variety of irreligious experience because it enables and empowers the other two.

The second, less prevalent, brand of irreligious experience (to which I will give considerably less attention later on) is characterized by an obsession with outward measures of success. I refer to this variety as "Success-Mongery" deliberately to evoke the

image of a fast-talking promoter (usually male, but sometimes female) for whom truth is mirrored in the bottom line of a financial statement and to whom spirituality is synonymous with quantifiable material achievement.

The third type of irreligious experience is characterized by an obsession with certainty, simplicity, and infallible leadership, a variety promoted by hierarchies that rely on a weak and complicit rank-and-file membership that lusts for a strong father-figure to impose order, security, and tranquility and to promise divine approval.

I refer to this variety of irreligion as "Sycophancy" to evoke the image of a cloying kiss-up, a servile flatterer, one who serves the cause so the cause can serve him/her, an enabler of spiritual abuse, one who lusts for leaders who promise to remove from followers the burden of independent thought and judgment.

Though I will address these three varieties one at a time, they are not mutually exclusive. A single believer can be obsessed with purity, success, and authority all at once.

Schoolmarmery has exerted a remarkable influence in the political and religious life of America. It is unclear if this influence is the legacy of the early Puritan colonists and constitutes what remains today of the notion that America is a land reserved only for the righteous or whether it is an artifact of Victorianism with its double, double standard of rectitude that applied different ethical rules to the lower and upper classes and different standards to men and women.

Its influence was manifest in the reactions of Americans in the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, in the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, in the ratings of movies, books, and television shows, in calls for censorship of adults to protect children, and in on-going attempts to silence expressions that transgress conventional notions of propriety.

At the heart of schoolmarmery is prudery, which has ever been the rival of license, not only in the private spaces of people's hearts and intimate landscapes of individual relationships but with increasing frequency and intensity in the public arenas of politics and theaters of culture as well. In the 1960s and 1970s, the New Left, with its penchant for free love, drugs, and rock-and-roll, put license briefly in the lead.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a conservative reaction marked by a war on drugs, the collapse of communism, and an upsurge in religious fundamentalism marked by a preference for right-

leaning economics forefronted prudery as more and more Americans viewed abortion, homosexuality, and recreational drug use as intolerable national sins.

In the last half of the twentieth century, the cultural clash between personal freedom and societal control could be stated as sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll versus God-country-and-family-values. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the right wing of the Republican Party became dominant as the political center of schoolmarmery, leaving the languid, licentious left of the Democratic Party in confusion and disarray.

But why? Where does schoolmarmery derive its power? What in its assumptions, aspirations, and expectations attract so many--not only in America but the world over? The answer I believe lies in two assumptions: (1) the Judeo-Christian-Islamic assumption that Adam's fall corrupted human nature, leaving humankind susceptible to gluttony, lust, wrath, sloth, pride, envy, and greed; and (2) the assumption that only those who have renounced addictions and appetites and are disinclined toward self-indulgence can be trusted to do right. In sum, schoolmarmery is the religion of asceticism, the *Via Negativa* as it was called in prior ages of Christianity.

The power of the schoolmarm is the power of disapproval. People crave acceptance, appreciation, and admiration. They want the praise, esteem, and good opinion of others. The schoolmarm knows that she can control others by shaming, judging, rejecting, and disapproving their behavior and ideas, by grading and downgrading personal choices and values primarily by demeaning them as selfish or self-indulgent.

The schoolmarm overvalues order as essential and devalues individual liberty as inimical to the welfare of the group, be it family, tribe, clan, nation, or global community. She assumes that individual freedom is the cause of pain, loss, unhappiness, and chaos rather than the autocratic demands of controlling persons. She assumes that the solution to social ills is the repression of individual expression rather than accountability for the use and abuse of power.

There is some truth in these assumptions, which gives creditability to schoolmarmery. But there is also hypocrisy. For the schoolmarm does not condemn all forms of self-interest. The prudish objection to lust does not extend to greed.

To preserve order, security, and tranquility, the schoolmarm will eagerly invade individual privacy, choice, and expression in sexual affairs, but she is shy about making similar intrusions into business affairs. The schoolmarm does not or will not see that social controls can often exacerbate social ills. Specifically, the criminalization of recreational drug use, abortion, prostitution, and nontraditional marriage forms constitute an abridgement of the individual right to the pursuit of happiness. The intrusion of the police power into these private areas will not eliminate these practices but only transform them into lucrative underworld commercial enterprises, both foreign and domestic.

Despite its hypocrisy and short-sightedness, schoolmarmery has seized the higher political ground, both by its self-serving claim to be the selfless and disinterested exponent of righteousness—the tribe of the righteous—in contrast to its liberal, self-indulgent, dissolute, left-wing opposition. The power of the tribe of the righteous has grown in arenas both public and private, predicated as it is upon its eagerness to shame, judge, reject, exclude, disapprove, condemn, and vilify its opponents without troubling to advance either evidence or argument against them or in support of its own positions.

This power is fortified by its claim of abstinence—sometimes from trifles like coffee, tea, and alcohol, more often from tobacco and marijuana, but usually from dope, pornography, and promiscuous sex—and its claim to advance “clean living” as the key to prosperity and power. It is this ideal of “responsibility” that serves as a rallying point for those who see themselves as God’s favorites, who are willing to sacrifice personal pleasure for power, willing to exclude and disenfranchise opponents, willing to anoint themselves as God’s elite, and very willing demonize their opponents as an unrighteous mob.

The traditional dichotomy between the political right and the political left was secular and centered mostly on money: Is the purpose of government to promote commutative justice by facilitating the acquisition of wealth or to promote distributive justice by sponsoring programs to assist the poor? Since the conservative revolution of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the Christian right, the right-left dichotomy has been recentered on the question of good and evil. Religious Republicans have increasingly characterized certain political positions not merely as wrong but

as sins: political positions favoring women’s rights, reproductive rights, lesbian and gay rights, the regulated decriminalization of recreational drug use, and welfare programs intended to provide financial aid to the poor without a quid pro quo. By this means, the right wing has successfully laid the groundwork for demonizing Democrats as sinners and has seriously damaged political debate about unsettled questions over which reasonable people might intelligently differ. It has replaced debate with religious castigation and judgment, thereby weakening democracy.

How has schoolmarmery achieved this incredible victory? How have religious intolerance and narrow-mindedness managed to trump the American values of freedom and tolerance?

See you at Sunstone

THE “CRANE MISSIONARIES”

Rustin Kaufman

[*Note:* By popular demand to Brother Kaufman’s “Plight of the Single Sister” in the October 2005 number of *By Common Consent*, he has bent his attention to the plight of the single brother.]

In the Celestial Kingdom, the *married* Mormon brother can bask in the love of the people to whom he is sealed and who are sealed to him, and can also enjoy those to whom those he’s sealed to are sealed to, together with those in his sealing chain who are even more remote to him. He may never even meet thousands in his sealing chain, unless he takes time away from assistant world building to meet them. Helping him with such domestic bliss, of course, will be his help-meet(s), growing even more skilled at making patchwork quilts, while restored to their perfect frames and perfect mountain-time-zone permanents.

But what about the brother who never marries? What’s in store for him? I just figured it out: If he’s truly a “Crane” type, he’ll be sent to Lhasa.

As I see it, the Church is on the verge of its greatest “gathering” period. “Westward the course of empire takes its way,” said

George Berkeley. "Go west, young man," said Horace Greeley. Already the Church has moved from New York to Ohio to Missouri and Illinois, to Utah. And now the great plan is to move the headquarters farther west, to Tibet, to give the "Crane Missionaries" proximity to half the world's population--the people now living in China, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Nineteenth-century polygyny prepared us for what's to come--the single male life-long "Crane Missionary." He is to drift from one Asian woman to another, implanting righteous seed, and fathering far more Mormons than he could ever convert. He is called a "Crane Missionary" after Ichabod Crane--a man so homely no American girl will have him. But to the women of Asia, all Americans men look alike (i.e., they all have big noses and round eyes). Keep in mind that a Mormon man must be very homely not to be able to find an American Mormon wife, because Mormon women get panicky to marry, knowing that only priesthood holders can take them into the Celestial Kingdom.

The mission never ends. Are there to be lady Crane-like missionaries? Should clusters of LMs travel about in Asia, looking for prospective Asian fathers? The Brethren, in their infinite wisdom, think this is a bad idea, fearing that too many "rice-Christian" Asian men might come aboard just to reap the sensual benefits. So the single Mormon Crane-type sisters are to remain in the States to earn money at conventional jobs--money to support the peripatetic Crane missionary men in Asia. Such sisters can be sealed to Crane missionaries, while such missionaries are in missionary training, learning Asian languages and cures for E.D., at Church universities. That way, the single sisters can be assured of eventual celestial cohabitation, while on earth they will be allowed to just want to have fun, as working girls.

After a time, the center of the Church will move west again, this time to Baghdad, to convert the remainder of the Muslim world. I have no doubt that President Hinckley has already made clear this plan to Larry King and

President Bush (and this explains why we are in Iraq--to set up a government that will tolerate Mormonism). In the Middle East, the same Crane-missionary system will be used, this time with Asian Crane-type men, supported by working Asian single women. At this point, Armageddon will probably occur as Muslim men rise up in unrighteous protest.

The final westward move of Church headquarters, will be, of course, to Jackson County, Missouri, as the Millennium dawns, at which time the Crane missionary system can be abandoned.

THE CONFERENCE CRITIQUE for April general conference, due to lack of space, will appear in the September issue of *By Common Consent*.

"Thou Art That": On Mormon Divinity Part 2

Bob McCue

Useful Metaphors

As the questionable nature of Mormonism's foundational claims becomes more widely appreciated, the Mormon community will move toward metaphoric belief along a path blazed and then made bare, hard and wide by countless older religious traditions.¹ And many Mormon beliefs are well suited to this journey. However, a lot of rough edges (or even whole corners) must be knocked off the countless statements that Mormon prophets have made over the years to make these concepts work as metaphors. There is nothing new in this. Religious beliefs have always evolved on the basis of selectively emphasizing principles that work and creative reading (or even selective amnesia) regarding those that don't.

Ideas that are toxic when taken literally are often wonderful as metaphors.² I suggest

that this is the case with such Mormon dicta as man can become like God, "all things were created spiritually before they came into physical existence, "no unclean thing can enter the kingdom of heaven," "the Spirit speaks truth" and countless others. Taken literally, these ideas tend to breed egotism, perfectionism, abuse of authority, delusion, and depression. Taken metaphorically, they can help us take greater responsibility for our actions, find our most creative and satisfying modes of existence and, perhaps most importantly, encourage others to do likewise although this phenomenon requires us to accept ways of life we initially cannot understand. As we push from the known into the chaotic unknown, we will grow and hence become.

I suggest that "Man becoming god" provides a wonderful metaphor for contemporary life as well as how the switch from literalism to metaphor can work. (Part 1 discussed Joseph Smith's explication of this idea in the King Follett discourse.)

Mormon theology includes an element of scientific deference that could become its core belief. The Mormon God is not all powerful. The Mormon God exists within, and must operate in accordance with, eternal law. He is not, and does not make, eternal law. The Mormon God derives his power from obedience to, and hence mastery of, eternal law. We must presume that God understands how eternal law works. The only laws we can understand are those science allows us to test. No doubt there are many more, but since God does what she does on the basis of what she understands, we must stick to what we understand in order to mirror her behavior.

The Mormon God was once like us. She is both eternal and emergent,³ as are we. Her essence always was, and she became God through a process. Thus, we are part of nature's most fundamental aspect.

Like the Mormon God, we are both limited by eternal law and derive our power from it. We are invited to become as much as possible like God by learning to understand and use eternal law. As we do this, the object

of our attention and energy will shift from an idea--God--that is subsidiary to eternal law, to those laws themselves. As do this, we mirror God's behavior since the focus of her attention is not some other God (as far as we know), but rather eternal law and bringing what she values into being.

As we progress down this path, our actions will become more harmonious with eternal law, our assessment of our needs will become more realistic, and the circumstances in which we yield to desire and fear will be better chosen. We must choose what to value or accept what our group tells us. We have the power to act so as to bring at least part of what we value into being. By our intention--our choice--we spiritually create. And by our action, we realize.

My Mormon upbringing, and the baggage that rides with the uber-specific and personal Mormon conception of God, makes it especially important and difficult to de-personify my divinity. This loss was initially fearful and painful. Now that I am accustomed to a new way to perceiving myself and my place in the world, I have found increased peace.

A few mental steps were crucial to the process for me. For example, thinking of myself as "part of" eternal law does not produce images vivid enough to move me. Eternal law in any event describes only the structure that makes reality possible, not reality itself. So, I replace eternal law with "Nature." I now believe that everything can be ultimately explained by natural law. I recognize this belief as an act of faith on my part, a logical extension for someone raised at the intellectual end of the Mormon tradition.

It helps me to keep in mind Nature's abundance--the way life and energy continuously well up from it. We are dimly aware of how this abundance operates in the biological world, but Nature's abundance runs deeper than we can understand. At the quantum level, for example, there is a continual bubbling into existence of energy what some physicists call "quantum froth" or "foam".⁵ This is part of me; I am part of it.

Thus, I visualize my most elemental self. We are each creative to our core.

Nature is not somehow doing something to me. I am a cell in its body. I am a bud that burst from a twig through which Nature will channel its force in ways I cannot predict. And now that I give myself permission to just be--to try; to fail; to do whatever comes to me--I enjoy the creative process of which I am part as never before. I don't need to "make myself creative," "learn to be creative," or "be accomplished." We are creative down to each cell, atom, and quanta of our being. As we release ourselves to new creative activities, these forces well up within us and show us to ourselves in unimaginable ways.

And while we concentrate on eternal law, or Nature, we experience awe at the unknown and enjoy beauty of all kinds. As Einstein said: "A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty--it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man."⁶

It is a relatively short hop from what I

just described to that most scientific and metaphoric of theologies, Whiteheadian process theology.⁷ While it is not my cup of tea, I was not surprised to find that many people with Mormon intellectual backgrounds have used process theology to spice or even redefine their beliefs.⁸

[Part 3 will conclude this article in the next issue.]

Notes

Address queries to Bob McCue at
<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

1. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994); and her *The Battle for God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

2. Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (N.p.: Canongate 2005).

3. "Emergence," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergence>.

4. <http://www.naturalism.org>; www.religiousnaturalism.org.

5. <http://members.optushome.com.au/ausff/quantumphysics.html>; <http://universe-review.ca/R01-07-quantumfoam.htm>.

6. <http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Theology-Albert-Einstein.htm>.

7. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_theology.

8. C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (N.p.: Chalice Press, 1993).

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