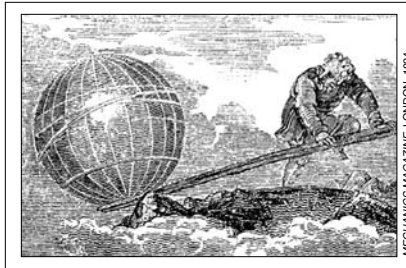


FROM THE EDITOR

PIVOTING THE SACRED

By Dan Wotherspoon



*“Give me a place to stand and a lever,
and I will move the whole earth.”*

—ARCHIMEDES

HISTORIAN OF RELIGION Jonathan Z. Smith tells the story of a moment of insight into the dynamics of religious life that he gained while working on a dairy farm. One of the requirements of his job was to rise at 3:45 a.m. in order to build a fire in the stove and heat the pan of water the farmer used to wash himself each morning when he arose a half hour later. After meticulous scrubbing, the farmer would then proceed outside and immediately pick up a handful of soil and rub it all over his hands. After Smith witnessed this ritual for a few weeks—and perhaps sensing a possible way for him to enjoy an extra thirty minutes of sleep if he didn’t have to rise to ready the stove and water—Smith asked the farmer about the incongruity between his careful washing and just-as-deliberate dirtying.

To Smith’s query, the farmer annoyingly replied: “Don’t you city boys understand anything? Inside the house it’s dirt; outside, it’s earth. You must take it off inside to eat and be with your family. You must put it on outside to work and be with the animals.”

Dirt. Earth. Same stuff, entirely different meanings. Later that summer, the farmer continued Smith’s schooling on the relationship between something’s substance and its esteem: “There’s really no such plant as a weed. A rose bush, growing in my cornfield, is a weed. In my flower garden—thistles, mullen and goldenrod make right smart plants, if you keep them under control.”

Because Smith’s farmer was so deeply immersed in a life in which he had to carve out his existence in the borderlands between the human and natural realms, he was more aware than most of us of his role as a creator of his own world. He understood, as Smith writes, that meaning is assigned according to

“situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed.”¹

The French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase “the pivoting of the sacred” to describe the fluidity in which the same substance, object, action, or even person, can be viewed as sacred in one context and profane in another.² His work demonstrates that, just as in the case of the farmer’s meticulous washing, it is usually through ritual and accompanying myths that things are vested with meaning, declared pure or dangerous, imbued with power or culled as insignificant.

I WAS reminded of Smith’s farmer and van Gennep’s pivoting as I worked with the articles by Mike Ash and Parker Blount in this issue. Each deals, at least in part, with religious understandings of sex—and what pivots more than sex when it comes to the way it is viewed on the sacred/profane scale? Within marriage, sex is holy, the highest expression of love, the means of mystical union with one another and the divine; in the farmer’s scheme, it is soil. Outside marriage, sexual activity is unholy, a base expression of lust and selfish desires, spirit-stunting; it’s dirt. Sexual relations between a man and a woman are declared natural, godly; between members of the same sex, carnal, devilish.

But though both Ash and Blount’s articles start as inquiries about sex—especially sexual sin and the severity scales by which transgressions in this area are weighed—they quickly diverge and take us into two different but deeply significant areas, different matters around which so much that defines us pivots.

Following a scripture trail that leads deep into the core of Christ’s message, Ash makes

sacred the intents of our heart. In re-examining Alma’s rebuke of his son Corianton who had committed that which is “most abominable above all other sins” (Alma 39:5), and which Church leaders have most often interpreted as Corianton’s sexual dalliance with the harlot Isabel, Ash’s study leads us to re-evaluate the way we teach and care for others. Could that “sin next to murder” in seriousness be related more to ego, selfish desires, judgmentalness, and lack of charity to others, especially children (literally and figuratively) in the gospel, than to with whom and in what situations we have sex? Ash’s arguments are compelling, and I appreciate his reminder of the sacred trust I’ve been given—or better, the trust *I make sacred* through my activities and the meaning I imbue them with—to build and nurture others instead of trying to wow or gleefully shock them with the breadth of my learning or peculiar philosophies.

Whereas Ash’s musings make sacred our heart’s intent, Blount’s makes holy its receptiveness to grace, its ability to forgive ourselves our trespasses just as God forgives them. Blount recounts the stories of four biblical women who (though honored by Matthew in his naming them in the lineage through which the Savior descended) would each be considered by today’s sex-obsessed morality standard as being tainted. Then through moving accounts drawn from his own experiences, he broadens our view of what it might mean to be virtuous. His reflections remind us how we so easily forget that we, like Smith’s farmer, pivot the sacred each moment, judging things as *this* in one context and *that* in another. But, more important, Blount reminds us that God often pivots the holy quite differently.

I’VE always felt reluctant to embrace the full implications of the plan of salvation, uncertain that I want the responsibilities of creation and judgment should I seek to truly realize my divine potential. Smith’s farmer reminds me of the futility of such fretting. I can’t escape those responsibilities. I create each day. I am Archimedes with a lever, moving the whole earth. With my judgments, I pivot the sacred. May I be more graceful with others and myself in the way Ash and Blount remind me to be. ☞

NOTES

1. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 290-92.

2. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).

SEATTLE SUNSHINE

ON A BRIGHT, crisp Seattle day, the 2006 Sunstone Northwest Symposium drew nearly eighty people to the home of Roy and Molly Bennion for fantastic discussions that ranged from Old Testament women to Alfred Hitchcock's use of the Book of Mormon in his final film, and ran the gamut from personal journeys to politics and religion in the Middle East. Nearly fifty people also attended a screening of the film *States of Grace* the night before the main event.

SYMPOSIUM SNAPSHOTS

- *The discussion following Parker Blount's session: what everyone dreams Gospel Doctrine class would be*
- *Energetic singing and Steve Jones's cymbal playing during "God of Our Fathers"*
- *Shirley Paxman on everything from architecture to the Stepford wives*
- *Twenty or so people engaging J. Bonner Ritchie a full fifteen minutes after his presentation on the Middle East*
- *"Colorful" memories from Levi Peterson*
- *Post-symposium jam session with Ardean and Merrill Watts on jazz piano and sax with Tom and Skye Pixton improvising on "Nearer My God to Thee" and "We Thank Thee, O God, For a Prophet"*



1. SCARLET THREADS IN THE LINEAGE OF JESUS, *H. Parker Blount*
2. DISCUSSION OF *STATES OF GRACE*
3. HITCHCOCK'S MORMON PLOT, *R. John Williams*
4. IMPROVISING A LIFE: A SERIES OF FORTUNATE EVENTS, *Ardean Watts*
5. A MORMON LIFE, *Shirley Paxman*
6. THE MIDDLE EAST STRUGGLE: ROOTS, REALITY, PROSPECTS FOR A LASTING PEACE, *J. Bonner Ritchie*
7. LOOKING FOR SIGNIFICANCE IN EVERYDAY EVENTS, *Levi Peterson*

Order your 2006 Northwest Symposium audio today!

DOWNLOADS, \$4 each; CDS or CASSETTES, \$9 each; FULL SYMPOSIUM MP3, \$20.
Prices include shipping and handling. Visit www.sunstoneonline.com, or call: (801) 355-5926

REVISED THIRD EDITION
FOR THOSE WHO WONDER
Managing Religious Questions and Doubts



D. Jeff Burton
With Foreword by Lowell L. Bennion

www.forthosewhowonder.com
FREE DOWNLOADS!

\$7 • LDS Bookstores • ISBN 1-883992-06-0



THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Sunstone is celebrating
TEN YEARS
in its office home at
343 N. Third West
in Salt Lake City!

If you have
an opportunity,
please drop by this
holiday season.

*Other than the editor's office,
it's usually in presentable shape!*