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Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology

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Adam S. Miller. *Rube Goldberg Machines:
Essays in Mormon Theology.*
Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2012.

Reviewed by Thomas F. Rogers

Philosopher Adam S. Miller, who teaches at Collin College in McKinney, Texas, and presently serves as director of the prestigious Mormon Theology Seminar, has written a small book that deserves big attention.

In his thoughtful preface, historian Richard L. Bushman asserts that “Adam Miller is the most original and provocative Latter-day Saint theologian practicing today” and that, like other philosophers and theologians, his writings reflect his possible doubt that his subject “can be reduced to a rational orderly system” (xi). But, for me, there is immense continuity to the book’s fourteen essays, each of which interfaces with the restored gospel in impressively universal terms—speaking not only in philosophical abstractions but also addressing everyday human concerns. It is clear that Miller got his initial scholarly training at Brigham Young University; he in fact credits particularly James E. Fauconer, Stephen E. Robinson, and Robert L. Millet. He also shares supportive utterances by a number of recent and present-day General Authorities—including President Ezra Taft Benson, President Boyd K. Packer, and Elder Bruce R. McConkie—that may further surprise you.

Rube Goldberg Machines is one of the best and most important commentaries on the gospel and on life itself that I have ever read. It can perhaps be best compared to *Ecclesiastes*, *The Annals of Confucius*, or the compact wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching*. Save for the electrifying thought of the French Jewess Simone Weil, one of Christ’s most astute modern-day disciples, whom, to my mind, Miller resembles, I can think of no one else who has so “universally extended” (Miller’s phrase) my understanding of the gospel’s essential concepts and their implications for an authentic and blessed spiritual life. The book’s seemingly facetious title is ironically self-effacing. Do not allow it to keep you from what it

contains, which is deadly serious and utterly orthodox in its devotion to the Mormonism we all know but do not fully enough fathom. That's why you need to read this book.

Toward the book's outset, Miller introduces the less familiar term "givenness,"¹ which he equates with Christ's universal bestowal of grace upon all humankind, whatever our circumstances (4). This concept reminds me of that grim "necessity" that Weil invokes in her renowned essay on *The Iliad* and to which we must properly resign ourselves but that enables our lives to be increasingly meaningful.² In repenting and coming to the Lord, we sacrifice our personal preferences and recognize our weaknesses, entitling us to his healing, sustaining grace. This prompts in me the realization that the countervailing "works" we most need to bring forth are neither more nor less than a broken heart and contrite spirit and all else they invariably lead to. For Miller, this links with Mormonism's "revolutionary" appreciation of eternal marriage and the perpetuation of family ties—"the task of unknitting the threads of fear and desire that have prevented me from unconditionally embracing my family and my family from unconditionally embracing me" (17).

Further, Miller helps me better understand than I ever did just *why* the Book of Mormon is such a distinctive scripture: besides its recurring testimony of the Savior, the travail and subjective witness of its various prophets—their confession of vulnerability and renewed commitment, with which all can identify—reaches deep into a reader's heart. Such witness is as potent as that of living peers. Miller further elucidates the underlying doctrinal thrust of the book of Revelation as well as Mormonism's subtle distinctions between spirit, body, and soul and the Lord's imperative to overcome all things: "If we do not choose to wear out our lives in the service of God and in the service of others, then our names will not be found [in the Lamb's book of life]" (45).

In the essay entitled "Recompense," which superficially resembles Emerson's "Compensation," but which, *transcendentally*, conveys even more, Miller's simple yet vivid metaphors come to the fore:

You will get lots of practice. The world will resist you. It will exceed your grasp. It will practice indifference toward you. Like a borrowed shirt, it

1. A term Miller takes from the work of the French phenomenologist, Jean-Luc Marion in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

2. Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force" (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1956).

will fit you imperfectly, it will be loose in the neck, short in the cuff, and the tag will itch. . . . Suffering the indignity of these rounds, you will, by default, be tempted to just flit from one offense to the next, simmering in frustration, stewing in quiet desperation. But to live, you will have to let these offenses go. You will have to learn how to make and accept recompense. You will have to forget the fiction of cash equivalences and barter with whatever is at hand. You didn't get what you wanted? Or even what you needed? Your life was repurposed by others for something other than what you had in mind? Join the party. I'm sympathetic, but in the end these objections are going nowhere. That bus, while always idling, never actually leaves the station. . . . Ask instead: what *were* you given? where were you taken? what was your recompense? Learn to like lemonade. (57)

In his arresting "A Manifesto for Mormon Theology," Miller contends that "human suffering, from blunt trauma to quiet desperation, is the perpetual crisis that precipitates theology. Charity is a name for the critical care that clears away the rubbish of self-regard, penetrates to the root of suffering, and dresses the wound." He then meekly adds, "Theology . . . is not an institutional practice. It has no force beyond the charity it demonstrates and it decides no questions beyond what the Brethren have settled" (59). In "Atonement and Testimony," he declares that "testimonies are essential because they reveal, in light of the Atonement, how things *can* be" (68). And, "In the strict sense, we do not have testimonies, testimonies have us" (70). Much later he again returns to the subject of testimony, reiterating that "in order for the gift of grace to be received, we must take up the truth as our own, as something spoken truthfully with our own mouths about our own selves"—once more suggesting what is so distinctive about prophetic utterances in the Book of Mormon (117).

I have myself asserted that Mormonism is the ultimate form of humanism. Miller backs me up in a later chapter entitled "Humanism, Mormonism," suggesting that "the humanities remain essential to any genuine education not because they directly address the question of the being of the world (this is the work of science), but because they are faithful to the question of what is other than 'what is.' Religion, art, fiction, music, film, theater, poetry, etc. are all essential because they protest the vanity of the world and aim to induce the birth of the new" (110). Thus, humanism and Mormonism have in common their quest for the yet unknown. In commenting on the Sermon on the Mount, Miller sagely observes that "Jesus concludes this series of reinscriptions [of the Mosaic law] by clearly formatting *the* principle on which novelty is

based: non-reciprocity” (111). He then cautions that “Mormonism intertwines with humanism in a complex way. . . . The new must be new *for us* without being reducible *to us*” (111–12).

Miller’s ecumenical reach is equally generous:

It is comforting to note the way that the primacy of the ‘Spirit of truth’ over the ‘word of truth’—the primacy of truthfulness over accuracy—makes possible transformative edification even if what one says may not be entirely correct. . . . It is just as possible for the new convert to speak in ways that are powerfully truthful even if what they say lacks the accuracy and orthodoxy that comes from a lifetime of study. . . . We might also detect in this difference a powerfully ecumenical spirit: edification and transformation are present wherever a transforming truthfulness is induced, regardless of whether it happens in a Catholic mass, a Buddhist temple, an Islamic mosque, or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. (115)

Toward the book’s end, one of Miller’s subheadings reads, “Speaking the truth truthfully, because it undercuts our perpetual pride, is hard” (118). Then, “as the prophets have themselves continually warned, we must beware the prophet who tells us what we want to hear (Hel. 13:26–27). Moreover, we must be especially careful of this danger when we are convinced that we belong to the true Church. It is easy enough . . . to treat even the true Messiah and a true prophet in a way that is not truthful” (120). Bedrock integrity recurs throughout Miller’s argument as an essential criterion. He then concludes with his own fervent, simply put testimony:

The substance of my conviction about Mormonism amounts to a running account of the ways in which, because of Mormonism, I have been and increasingly am awake. For my part, I can conceive of no other measure for religion. Does it or does it not conduce to life? Does it or does it not roughly shake me from the slumber of self-regard, from the hope of satisfaction, from the fantasy of control? Does it or does it not relentlessly lead my attention back to the difficulty of the real? Does it or does it not reveal the ways in which my heart, my mind, and my body have always already bled out into a world not of my own making, into the hearts and minds and bodies of my parents, my wife, my children? (126)

The “running account” that binds Miller to Mormonism includes “Joseph Smith, handcarts, extrabiblical scriptures, modern prophets, Jell-O molds, temples, missionary work, and all the rest” (126).

Before *Rube Goldberg Machines* came along, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute made observation concerning the rarity of engaging theologically with other Christian faiths, even among our finest thinkers. “B. H. Roberts and John A. Widtsoe may have had interesting insights in the early part of the twentieth century, but they had neither the temperament nor the training to give a rigorous defense of their views in dialogue with a wider stream of Christian theology. Sterling McMurrin and Truman Madsen had the capacity to engage Mormon theology at this level, but neither one did” (137).

Well, Adam S. Miller has done so. Brother Miller wakens us.

Thomas F. Rogers is Professor Emeritus of Russian at Brigham Young University. He received his MA in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Yale University and his PhD in Russian Language and Literature from Georgetown University. Rogers is a member of the BYU Studies Academy.