Review of *Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation* edited by Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes.

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Reviewed by Scott R. Peterson

> But we observe that they cannot yield anything clearer than a dream-like vision of the real so long as they leave the assumptions they employ unquestioned and can give no account of them. If your premise is something you do not really know and your conclusion and the intermediate steps are a tissue of things you do not really know, your reasoning may be consistent with itself, but how can it ever amount to knowledge?——Plato

The book, *Peculiar People*, is both phenomenological and phenomenal in its attempt to provide insight into the homosexual experience within the peculiar Mormon context. Largely a collection of thoughts, articles, speeches, and other excerpts from previously published works, *Peculiar People* purports to offer the reader an opportunity to "sift out" elements of a very complex subject in hopes of finding those that appear mutually consistent. To the editors' credit, early in the book they acknowledge that "there is not at this time a generally accepted, wholly consistent set of explanations," (p. xv) from which "the certain truth" of homosexuality can be ascertained. They continue: "The best one can do is to consider thoughtfully the experiential assessments made by homosexuals and others, the scientific data, incomplete as they are, and the theological evaluations, evolving as they are" (ibid). Regrettably, the editors do not remain true to their own formula for carefully considering an issue that demands great care both professionally and theologically. Their deviation from a reasonably sound method of inquiry is more a function of omission than commission. Herein lies the book's greatest flaw: the selections are grossly disproportionate in their over-representation of those who have embraced their homosexuality versus those that have chosen to make the transition out of gay lifestyles and behaviors. Consequently, the book may be an accurate commentary on practicing gays and lesbians who either are or were members of the Church, but due to the glaring absence of alternate viewpoints, it is in nowise a complete depiction of the homosexual phenomenon within the Mormon community.

**Phenomenological Fare**

The greatest difficulty in reviewing a book such as *Peculiar People*, lies in its phenomenological presentation. An individual expression of personal experience can neither be labeled right nor wrong, true nor false. Were this a book consisting of research, studies, and experimentation, we could critically examine design, issues of validity, reliability, statistical significance and so forth. But where personal opinion is based solely on personal
experience, as is the case with the majority of articles in this book, *De gustibus non disputatum est* (There is no disputing matters of taste).

While the content of such presentations provides little room for review, the process whereby conclusions of the writers are drawn provides interesting fare. Of particular interest is the manner in which many of the contributors fall into the trap of tautological reasoning wherein the validity of an opinion is self-determined therefore cannot be wrong. Such is the case of Jean Burgess' "And There Was Light." She concludes her chapter with,

> There are times when I experience pain and sadness as a result of the decision I made to leave the church and my marriage. I am also painfully aware that many of my choices have caused sadness in the lives of others as well. *But because I arrived at my decision through what I believe was a spiritual process, I have never had the need to question the ‘rightness’ of the choices I have made concerning my sexuality* (p. 90, emphasis added).

Such closed systems of logic preclude the possibility that Burgess' decisions could have been based on a process that was other than spiritual: a more likely explanation, particularly if one chooses to accept scripture and other prophetic utterances to contain even a shred of truth. This, however, seems to be one of the "mutual consistencies" indicative of the thought processes of many of the contributing authors: that personal experience is the sole criterion upon which opinion and subsequent behavior should be based. This mentality dangerously shifts the burden of proof from the practice of homosexuality to the millennia of godly proclamations upon which the Mormon faith is founded; in the balance, many of the contributors have chosen to reject the fundamental values of the Church. Rather than adjusting their behavior to accommodate the values of their religion, they adjust their own religious values to accommodate their behavior. What they seek is not explanation, but rationalization.

For example, the article entitled, "Solus" is written by an anonymous contributor who chooses to continue his homosexual behavior and lie during temple recommend interviews when questioned about masturbation and homosexuality, feeling justified because "it is highly unlikely that the church will accept a declared homosexual into fellowship" (p. 13); yet he considers himself as having "a strong testimony" and desiring to "remain loyal" (ibid). The logical inconsistencies of such self-serving reasoning are rampant throughout many of the articles.

"Solus" is also the initial introduction of the liberal use of "straw-man" arguments wherein the writer bases a conclusion upon an argument that in and of itself is at best illusory and serves only to divert attention away from more cogent issues. Another example of such sophistry is found in the article by Ina Mae Murri, "Lesbian and Mormon." Her assertion that, "The
church does not recognize scientific assessments of homosexuality nor the personal experiences of its own members," (p. 40) is a glittering generality that would not bear the scrutiny of an abundance of evidence to the contrary that is readily available to those interested in another perspective. This does not mean that there have not been individuals suffering from homosexual problems who have been misunderstood, rejected, and subjected to behavior that is much less than Christ-like. This is a regrettable reality that fortunately continues to improve.

But such positive change is not represented in *Peculiar People*. Based on the majority of personal reports selected for this work, one could be left with the false impression that aversion therapy is practiced at BYU, persons with same-sex attraction are summarily excommunicated, and Church-related therapies consist solely of admonitions to read the scriptures, pray often, and keep your hands to yourself—none of which are true.

Again, much of this problem could have been alleviated had the editors included the more recent experiences of individuals who have successfully chosen to alter their sexual orientation. Where, for instance, are the stories of members of Evergreen International, a support group whose efforts have helped hundreds of LDS men overcome homosexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors? Another noticeable deficiency is this book's failure to represent LDS therapists who have assisted many individuals to deal constructively with issues of homosexuality—individuals such as Victor Brown, Jr., Richard Ferre, and Thom and Ann Pritt, to name a few.

This imbalance continues its course through the section of the book dedicated to religious speculation. If this book supposedly reflects the Mormon condition, why do we hear from an Episcopalian bishop, a Methodist bishop, and a professor of Christian ethics at United Theological Seminary? That there are ample LDS scholars who have opinions regarding homosexuality goes without question. That the editors did not prevail upon such LDS religious thinkers is highly questionable. One gets the impression that the editors have patronized a theological supermarket in search of opinions that most closely match their own.

These questions continue to mount as one surveys the sources from which the book's selections originate: *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*, and *Affirmation*. While these publications and organizations offer many positive insights, those that are familiar with them will agree that they express a minority LDS viewpoint. Why were articles from other sources that have also expressed the similar theme that the LDS Church has both institutionally and doctrinally erred in its approach to the homosexual issue not cited? It appears that preconceived notions and preexisting biases have dictated the editors' choice of material, rather than an honest interest to
reflect accurately more than one viewpoint of the Mormon homosexual condition.

**Phenomenal Fray**

The editors of *Peculiar People* have taken upon themselves the phenomenal task, at least in terms of publications, of bringing to the forefront the plight of LDS individuals struggling with homosexuality. There is a pressing need for such recognition, for, in the words of President Spencer W. Kimball, in order "to help those who may already be involved with it, it must be brought into the open" (1977, p. 6). To heighten the consciousness of Church membership to the pain and sense of alienation of these brothers and sisters is the beginning step in giving them the fellowship that they need. And, as John Money (1990) points out, the greater the understanding we have of the plight of homosexuals, the greater our ability will be to separate the condition from the insensitivity and prejudice that accompanies it, this is the beginning step necessary to eliminating any form of persecutory behavior.

However, in their attempt to increase awareness and understanding, they enter the fray of scientific and not so scientific bantering of causation, particularly in reference to a biological or genetic component. There are no less than 20 references in the book that present allele or hormonal influences as causative agents of homosexuality. Regrettably, having been published in 1991, *Peculiar People* does not have the benefit of more recent findings that directly refute such biological arguments. In March of this year, for example, researchers Byne and Parsons concluded that "there is no evidence at present to substantiate a biologic theory" (1993, p. 228). Referring to genetic studies, biogeneticist Ruth Hubbard, professor emeritus of Harvard states, "In view of the complexities of doing accurate linkage studies and the necessarily small size of the samples, such studies are bound to come up with plenty of meaningless correlations which will get reported as further evidence of genetic transmission of homosexuality" (1993, p. 98). While study after study could substantiate or refute the different arguments of causality, the more critical issue is several of the authors' willingness to appear so assured of their own understanding of biological or other roots of homosexuality when such assurance is, at least to this point, non-existent. Consider these statements from *Peculiar People*: "Most homosexuality is biologically determined" (p. 112). Referring to his son, an anonymous father writes, "We accept homosexuality as an attribute from birth with him" (p. 242). Referring to her attraction to women, one female writer states, "Still my genetic inheritance could not be shed like an unwanted coat" (p. 15). This tendency again suggests either a misunderstanding of the so-called biology of homosexuality or an overreaching desire for justification at the expense of finding the truth.
Other contributing writers are less willing to attribute homosexuality to primarily biological causes. More moderate stances that include biology among many contributing factors are represented by Jan Stout (pp. 170–173), Marybeth Raynes (p. 218), and Melvin Wheatley (p. 288). Interestingly, these are professionals who work with the homosexual population or have interest in the subject versus those previously quoted statements of individuals who are homosexual or are related to someone who is. Perhaps the writer of the article entitled, “New Friends” most aptly described the most constructive posture we must all take in the absence of definitive data: “I have found that we really do not know enough about homosexuality to be dogmatic. The question of whether gay behavior is biologically determined or socially formed has not been answered” (p. 147).

Regardless of how much or how little is known about the subject, there rarely has been a subject that polarizes thought more than homosexuality. And where social conditioning, theological belief, and the inexactitude of science converge to create opinions that are potentially damaging to any member of human kind, there is no greater need for open-mindedness, tolerance, and the representation of information simply for the sake of enlightenment. *Peculiar People* has attempted to begin this process, but many more and differing viewpoints are needed to create a balance that this particular book lacks. In the meantime, we must be willing to scrutinize ourselves to determine if we have left our assumptions unquestioned, if we have reasoned consistently yet in the process, none of it has ever amounted to knowledge.

**References**


