Professional Organizations: Whither Thou Goest Will I Go?

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This past month I experienced a professional anniversary of sorts as my twenty-fifth membership year in the American Psychological Association (APA) came to a close. There is an increasing probability that I may choose to make it the final anniversary of membership. The reasoning for such a decision is direct and forthright. It is my contention that during the past twenty to twenty-five years, the American Psychological Association as well as many other professional organizations, particularly those in the behavioral sciences and helping professions, have become powerful weapons in a culture war that is becoming ever more prominent in this nation's public life. Candidly, I admit that this culture war is in my personal view, a further extension of a more fundamental spiritual conflict that has a much longer history. In practical terms, my entertainment of resigning from the APA is fueled by a realization that professional associations repeatedly seem to take positions, and advocate policies that are in direct conflict with my own values and commitments. To a greater and greater extent, the traditional functions of professional societies are being made secondary to social advocacy. My own contributed dollars are assisting such groups to influence the world in ways which undermine the political and moral principles in which I believe. This essay's purpose is to motivate AMCAP members to assess their own professional organizations with regard to the issues I am raising, and, at least on an individual basis, if not an organizational one, formulate a response.
My early experiences with the APA and other guild-related groups were much different from those of more recent vintage. There seemed to be little, if any, propaganda for social and political causes. Continued membership did not bring confrontation with moral dilemmas, nor demand soul searching about the activities and objectives of the group. Traditional definitions of professional societies and vocationally-related organizations left room for advocacy in regard to work-related issues and professional concerns. Back in the mid-fifties, the first professionally related organization I joined, the local musicians’ union, seemed to exist primarily for the purpose of collecting dues, and its activities consisted mostly of providing a contact point for finding available jobs and feeble attempts at discouraging the public from hiring non-union personnel. Political agendas and attempts at social reform had nothing to do with the union and its functioning.

Nearly a decade later, as a graduate student and full-time public school teacher, I joined the state education association. Though I chafed at the group’s push to require membership in the National Education Association, and observed that the national organization’s rhetoric sounded more like an old line labor union than a band of professional educators, there was no serious discomfort in maintaining membership until my tenure as a teacher ended when I completed my degree.

During the four years of doctoral study which followed, my baptism of fire with respect to theological, political, and social warfare arrived. It was the second half of the 1960s and in the land of contrasts, California. Even then, however, professional organizations with which I came in contact remained, for the most part, in the mold of the traditional professional society. Their goals appeared to be the exchange and dissemination of scientific information, the encouragement of scholarship, and generally promoting their various disciplines. While the membership of such groups could likely have been characterized as somewhat left of center politically, what could be called political agenda oriented activity was minimal. Social pressure or attacks, open or subtle, upon those adhering to other intellectual positions was never a serious concern. Just as an aside, it is interesting to note that this
was not the case in a church context, where factions were often engaged in a bitter struggle.

My decision to join the American Psychological Association was fueled by practical motives similar to those that had contributed to earlier affiliations. There was also encouragement from professors who saw it as a natural part of becoming involved in the profession. Additionally, the need to stay informed on issues both career related and scientific was legitimate. In short, involvement in professional groups was simply a part of entering one's chosen field. Over the ensuing decade, membership in a number of educational and/or human services organizations seemed necessary or relevant from time to time. These included what was then called the American Personnel and Guidance Association, the American Educational Research Association, and the Association for Curriculum Supervision and Development, among others. To the best of my recollection, all of these bodies, during the decade of the seventies, seemed to confirm the notion that they largely remained professional societies in the traditional sense.

Gradually, due to changes in my career activities, membership in these groups became less relevant, and were dropped. Perhaps during that period my attention was so directed to career development and family concerns that fundamental changes in those organizations simply proceeded unnoticed on my part. It may be that my current views owe something to an increased political awareness or a solidifying of personal positions during that period. But notwithstanding those possibilities, I am asserting that during the roughly two decades spanning the end of the Vietnam war to the present, many professional organizations in the human services and behavioral sciences have undergone fundamental transformations in purpose and direction. Whether subtle or obvious, of constant or erratic course, historically documentable as to pivotal dates or not, the American Psychological Association along with other societies are now active voices seeking to change the cultural, political, and moral landscape of the country. Admittedly, my direct observations have been largely confined to the American Psychological Association. It seems likely, however, that AMCAP members in other professional organizations have seen parallel
developments within organizations relevant to their own specialties, or would quickly discover them upon closer examination. Among my personal associates are those, for example, who have resigned their membership in the National Association of Social Workers due to a transformation they have witnessed in that body.

In order to illustrate this view of radical organizational reform, and to exemplify what I believe will be found in other organizations to which AMCAP members belong, let me cite some personal observations with regard to the American Psychological Association. Using as source material the group’s own publications directed to its membership, the organization has become a consistent advocate for every radical reform and social cause crossing the public stage during the past fifteen to twenty years. Its leadership have espoused the so-called “rights” of each new self-defined minority and special interest group complaining of discrimination or deprivation. Organization personnel and money have been engaged in filing “friend of the court” briefs or provided testimony in legal proceedings, invariably siding with the more liberal party involved in the action. Using techniques including selective coverage, the skill of journalistic nuance, and the misuse or fabrication of scientific data and conclusions, APA policy groups, leaders, and print media have consistently championed a range of social, political, and moral causes decidedly leftward in ideological geography. I view this development as being at odds with the traditional definition of a professional society, and is also, I believe, counter-productive in attempts to build a positive view of the profession among the general populace. The actions and positions taken are quite clearly out of touch with the inner workings of mainstream America. On some occasions, there appears to be a virtual disdain for the attitudes and beliefs of the public the profession serves.

Examples supporting these assertions are not few in number and range across issues as diverse as children’s “rights,” the effects of abortion upon women, the distribution of condoms to youth, and the acceptability of homosexual orientation and lifestyle. The two that follow, taken from the pages of the monthly APA Monitor, are not offered as thesis proof, but rather as illustrative of a pattern.
The Monitor is a newspaper of sorts informing the membership of advances in relevant research, organizational policies, position openings, and other professionally oriented features. Similar periodicals exist in most professions. Perhaps because of the Monitor examples I have selected—one each from the categories of political ideology and moral issues—it may be thought that they are naturally among the more overt available, they are, in fact, very representative in style, tone, and ideological content to dozens of others found in my informal recent review of nearly three dozen issues of the Monitor.

A part of the “Public Interest” section of the paper is devoted to a feature reporting court cases that “bear directly on the science or practice of psychology.” It is contributed by Division 9 of the APA, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. This is interesting in and of itself: it would seem more appropriate for Division 42, Law and Psychology, to be in charge of such a feature.

The subject matter for Judicial Notebook in September of 1991 was “victim impact” statements as admissible material for consideration by juries in their decision-making. This topic must be inferred, however, since the author entitles her piece, “Justice Thurgood Marshall: So Sad to See You Go,” and brushes past the judicial case reported in the first half of the column in order to gush profusely during the second half about the great wisdom of Justice Marshall, and the implied narrowness and cretin-like mentality of the court majority. The author, a Ms. Blackman of Upper Montclair, New Jersey, then recites a tired old liberal cliché by using a quote from Justice Marshall that predicts the abolition of individual constitutional liberties by a less competent and heartless (translate: more conservative) court majority. The last quarter of the column is pure personal editorial diatribe which rehearses liberal litany about the evils of the American and the capitalistic system which criminalizes poor people and imprisons the homeless (Blackman, 1991).

Now my purpose in selecting this example is not to discuss the pros or cons of allowing juries to consider victim statements. In fact, the prime point is not even to emit a complaint concerning the misuse of column inches by having them given to an author.
with apparent tendencies toward terminal judicial activist groupieism. Rather, it is to point out that at the major print organ of a supposed scientific society is using member dollars to propagandize a particular political ideology and social agenda. Whether or not it agrees with my own views, this is not appropriate. Even if it were agreed that such a setting was the appropriate place for such advocacy, intellectual fairness would demand roughly equal time and space for opposing or alternative views. However, the vast bulk of such propaganda is promulgated through authorized vehicles such as "Judicial Notebook" as if the material were reported news with no need of rebuttal. Using both the cloak and clout of supposed professionalism, the tacit assumption is apparently made that all right-thinking professionals agree with the positions taken. It is what could be termed "gnostic elitism" which is part of what I am censuring here.

If the membership desires it, fairly ground-ruled debate on all sorts of issues is legitimate. However, making monetary and literary assumptions about what is representative and thereby using the resources and influence of a supposed professional society to foster an ideological and political agenda while simultaneously ignoring the will of the membership regarding the appropriateness of such an objective, and to subsequently deny having done so while feigning objectivity and scientific neutrality is not only unacceptable, but deceptive and clearly unprofessional. In short, if I wish to read a journal of political commentary and opinion, I'll buy one.

But political/social advertising and persuasion isn't the worst of it. There is a moral component involved in this pattern of enterprise. A rather glaring example can be found in the March 1990 issue of the Monitor. It seems a group called "The Traditional Values Coalition" had held a conference two months before, in part to promote heterosexual ethics. The invitees apparently were mostly religious leaders and other individuals opposed to homosexual behavior. The Monitor reports that at the conference one of its leaders, a Reverend Sheldon, characterized homosexuality as an illness which could be cured.

The conference, or its contents, may or may not have been newsworthy. The real story, however, lies in the volcanic response
of APA in the form of Dr. Bryant Welch, at the time Director of the organization’s Practice Directorate. Welch, with evangelical zeal, dogmatically uses alleged research findings to prove a moral (or in this case, an immoral) point. The article outlines a press conference held by APA during the Values Coalition meetings to denounce the Reverend’s statements. The APA’ s Welch adamantly asserted that “the research on homosexuality is very clear. . . . It . . . is neither a mental illness nor mental depravity. It is simply the way a minority of our population expresses human love and sexuality” (Buie, 1990). Dr. Welch is as entitled to his personal opinions as is anyone else, even if they reek of “wished it” fantasies. But such a minor conference as that of the Values Coalition hardly requires the immediate attention of one of the APA’s heaviest hitters unless a nerve has been exposed.

The article highlights an APA news conference held to refute the remarks of Rev. Sheldon and to demean anyone who would dare to hold such foolish and unacceptable opinions. The news conference participants included officers for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and a group referred to as “Parents-Friends of Lesbians and Gays.” All are flanked in photographic splendor around Dr. Welch as if they were all scientists of the first order. The intent and motive of the article leave little room for doubt. Here sit radical reformists and aberrants masquerading as civil rights advocates in collusion with social scientists, under auspices of the organization that purports to represent psychology and its practitioners on a national level, passing off personal values and a splinter group political and social agenda as solid science. There is no attempt at even-handed discussion or presentation of diverse views on a highly controversial topic within a field (social science research) that is notoriously unsettled. Of course, no seminal studies were cited to buttress APA’s position because there are none. Further, how could research findings ever be put forward as serious proof of Welch’s assertion that homosexuality is simply a normal healthy expression of love by a portion of the populace? Validating such an assertion is not even a legitimate object of science. Research is largely irrelevant in what is first and foremost
a moral and value question. Relative to the course and destiny of a nation, however, they are of utmost relevance.

Perhaps the news conference and the Traditional Values Coalition meetings were then, simply, two religious groups, one in disguise and the other not, battling for the "correctness" or supremacy of their position. The nature of the APA response, however, suggests something deeper. It reveals the uniform of a soldier serving in the trenches of a culture war. There is no need to postulate conspiracy theories to justify such an assertion, although, depending on the definition one gives to the term, I personally believe that at some levels it is. It may simply be the case that the leadership in most of these professions, as is the case in the entertainment media, is predominantly of a similar world view: that they hold rather unitary personal values and see themselves as peculiarly qualified to determine priorities, tastes, and correctness of thought. It is quintessentially typical of this century's liberal movement to behave in this fashion to a much greater degree than the conservatives whom they condemn as being narrow, rigid, and dedicated to forcing their way on others.

While the above examples have been drawn from a periodical connected with a national group representing psychologists, similar specimens are likely to be gleaned from material printed by groups representing social workers, addiction counselors, psychoanalysts, and other mental health workers.

For those disposed to ignore or dismiss out of hand the issues I have raised, the topic is closed. For those willing to acknowledge the truth of what has been said, either now, or after some investigation and consideration, there remains the question of response. What is the best response to having the influence and resources of a professional organization to which you belong used to undermine the values and ideas which you are trying to conserve and promote? Is vocal opposition the answer? Are the column inches of "letters to the editor" pages the most appropriate battleground? Should an individual simply renounce his membership in the organization and resign as several dozen members of APA have done this past year? Is the best response on an individual or a group basis?
Given that a large percentage of the members of AMCAP are also members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, wouldn't it be likely to expect considerable response from either the membership or the group as a whole to the state of things as I have outlined it? Or, in fact, is it actually the case that there is no response from either individual or organization to these issues because AMCAP is composed of individuals who so segregate their commitments and values from daily life that they do only what is perfunctory, superficial, or safe? Perhaps there is no organizational debate on these issues because AMCAP is held together by only a surface unity, defined primarily by careful encounters, and an avoidance of anything thought to be potentially divisive. Is there truly any common element, theological or otherwise, that binds affiliates of AMCAP together?

Admittedly, spotlighting primarily the LDS portion of AMCAP membership, there are several factors that might be helpful in explaining why virtually no attention has been given to what I have proposed as being a perversion of professional organizations during the past two decades. Many of these same notions might lead to predict that the topic will continue to be ignored, or avoided, and that only a handful of the membership will choose to confront the transformation personally. The paragraphs which follow are offered therefore as a stimulus to both individuals and AMCAP as a body to carry out the organizational review and personal assessment I have urged earlier.

1. Generally LDS people are unprepared by religious training and precept to be either confrontational or contrary. The cultural norm seems to involve being agreeable. Often, anyone who, in a Church context, questions or takes a position divergent from that which receives official approval is labelled as contentious. This label is usually supposed to automatically class the person's question or position as being invalid. This pattern of cultural experience may place a person at a disadvantage in resisting that which may merit resistance. This may be true to an even greater extent in the world of ideas than in the realm of overt behavior. In order to avoid real or imagined social sanctions or the disruption of a seemingly harmonious atmosphere, an LDS person might be more hesitant
than some others to take a vigorous oppositional position. One possible consequence of this, of course, is that if evil is packaged with acceptable authoritative wrapping, or in a desirable form, we may be willing buyers.

2. A second contributing factor may be the sometimes obsessive need among LDS people for permission or authoritative approval, or a program before doing virtually anything. Even in the face of a clear need for intervention or help, there is a possibility that the needed action will not be taken due to a lack of any acknowledged authority giving his blessing to that action. There is also manifest at times an attitude that seems to indicate that if no formal program exists or if no one is officially assigned to do a particular thing, that it need not be done, or that the need may not be legitimate. One consequence of such social needs and attitudes may be that a particular act of compassion that needs doing, or that an evil or wrong that needs to be fought, will simply not be addressed without institutional instigation.

3. When significant numbers of Church members do take a strong position, either under official Church auspices or not, there is at times a tendency to partially equivocate as to why they are doing so. One example might be the efforts made to defeat passage of the ERA amendment some years ago. If people are propelled to actions or influenced in their formation of opinions by their organizational commitments, their personal values, or their understanding of church teachings or principles, why should one be reluctant to admit it? Primarily because such motives are often discounted or disparaged by people whose approval is apparently very much sought; such as those in positions of power or influence outside the religious subculture. Perhaps LDS people want to follow their principles if they can also receive respect and approval from the world as well. Is it true that many LDS people are in the same category as Dr. Welch in that they hide both their motives and objectives so as to be seen in a more respectable or prestigious light? It is my own observation that there is a near obsession with image at some official levels of Church government. Do a significant number of AMCAP members suffer from the same symptoms? Is taking a stand on an issue, or following personal convictions,
contingent upon a calculation of possible perceptions and reactions to the position or action to be taken? There is no shame in formulating positions based, in part, or in whole, on personal values, moral convictions, church teachings, or any other grounds that might be viewed by others as less than valid.

4. Some LDS people appear to act as though the resolution of all emotionally inflammatory issues, political and otherwise, will somehow be brought about by divine intervention and that, as individuals, we need not grapple with them. One might just as well believe that since all knowledge will eventually be revealed that we have no need to study and pray in order to acquire it. Hugh W. Nibley, and others, have pointed out such a fallacy with respect to gaining knowledge. Could evil triumph if good men did nothing? Outcome, however, is not the only consideration here. Irrespective of the result, it is often the process toward outcome that is the most rewarding portion of life, and that part which reveals and/or builds character, leadership, and other qualities, both human and divine.

5. Other individuals are likely to see the issues I have explored here as being trivial or insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Therefore to address them is clearly a waste of resources. If so, what is the criteria for attention? If crops and flocks are to be prayed over, what is not? What cause merits passion? Are those people who seem dedicated to causes I find incorrect or repugnant all devoid of the ability to discern between that which is worth effort and that which is not. If politics is seen as merely a worldly, dirty business, then where will be found the men and women to make it anything else? If individual choices, and minuscule attempts at betterment of self or the uplifting of others, are of no consequence, then who will step forward to light a candle in the dark? Surely the doings of professional organizations to which we belong, and to which we often contribute time and money, cannot be inconsequential.

6. Many of us have likely become so enamored with relative comfort or dependent upon predictable income that we fear risking our economic security and/or our social acceptance. Do we want what the world has to offer so much that we sculpt our moral
likeness to match the current coin of the realm? Is the world too much with us? Is the charge of some validity that the LDS culture is one of technicians, professionals, and business types who see the practical advantages of avoiding ideological risk, minimizing creativity, and maximizing material gain? What are the possible effects upon a professional career, and to sustaining a family if a person is too vocal or active in countering the prevailing wisdom and custom? Is there serious doubt that losing the approbation of relevant professional groups would hurt a practitioner economically? Perhaps there are those who remain silent on a number of issues, or who act contrary to their convictions, due to these considerations? Put in a theological context, just how much weight is given in our decision-making to what man can do?

Though some will undoubtedly brand it as manifest paranoia or doomsday rhetoric, I view the current world as filled with both danger and promise. It is a world where a nation is born in a day, and where virtually every aspect of behavior and thought is being coopted as a combatant in a much larger ideological and spiritual struggle. The fabric of society may be more tightly stretched than most might like to acknowledge. As it nears rupture prior to rapture, cultural, economic, social, and political fault lines begin to emerge, and confrontation appears on several fronts simultaneously. During this process, the restructuring of everything from information exchange and resource distribution to the concentration of political power and economic wealth will occur. This restructuring will determine much of the daily life and destiny of individuals and nations. In short, there is underway, if the phrase may be excused, the formation of a new world order.

The nature and functions of professional organizations are part of that upheaval. They will be shaped for good or ill in the struggle and they will be shaped primarily by people who perceive the influence such organizations can have, and who care enough, or are dedicated enough to shape them in either direction. Events within the last year would suggest, for example, that at some point in the foreseeable future, competent men and women could be condemned or purged from membership in some mental health organizations as a result of outspoken views in opposition to
homosexuality or therapeutic activities which support and advance the heterosexual lifestyle and value system. Is it really such a long road from the thwarting of vital animal research by radicals and activists and the ideological cleansing of academic departments to the use of professional ethics codes as a means of investigating and stripping therapists of their professional credentials due to the divergence of their values and beliefs from that which is "approved"? The inclusion of the ubiquitous but agenda relevant "sexual orientation" phrase in ethics codes and hiring policies may be only the beginning. Will there be standards of "professionally correct" thought and activity in the future? What does such a future hold for those who actively oppose such developments?

I have premised in this essay a rapidly escalating conflict of culture, ideology, and morality spreading to more and more aspects of daily life. Secondly, I have asserted that individuals in the helping professions hold no immunity from this conflict in which professional organizations have now become active warriors in the struggle. Additionally, I have attempted to stimulate members of AMCAP to consider seriously these premises and formulate responses to them on a personal and possibly an organizational basis. Several factors which may be impeding consideration and debate on the issues raised are also offered. In conclusion, I would suggest that in the scenario I have proposed, our pivotal choice is that of role. The two that readily come to mind are those of either victim or participant.

References
