

If I Were Satan

Samuel W. Taylor

IF I WERE SATAN, I'D KEEP A SCRAPBOOK, a book of remembrance, if you will, of the hidden face of evil. It would contain such eternal verities as this by English philosopher and mathematician William Kingdom Clifford, quoted from the preface to *The Haunted Fifties* by I. F. Stone: "If there is one thing in the world more wicked than the desire to command, it is the willingness to obey." Satan would be pleased by this reference to one of his basic principles, the voluntary surrender of free agency.

I sometimes suspect that Satan's chief interest in promoting the more obvious evils is simply to deflect our attention from more insidious distortions of truth. In *Myth and Ritual of Christianity*, Alan Watts points out that,

most people are not aware of any greater evils than lust, cruelty, murder, drunkenness, greed, and sloth. From the angelic point of view these "sins of the flesh" are as far from real evil as conventional goodness is removed from true sanctity or holiness. . . . Jenghiz Khan, the Marquis de Sade, Heinrich Himmler, and Jack the Ripper are mere blunderers. The true Satanist must always have the outward aspect of an angel of light, and will never, under any circumstance, resort to the cruder, violent types of evil. He must be so clever that only an expert in holiness can discern him, for in this way he may far more effectively mislead the sons of men and please his Master, whose supreme craft lies in deception, and subtle confusion of the truth.

I sometimes wonder who among us may be one of his minions. It has been said that "at every meeting held in the Lord's name, Satan also attends." Or, as Daniel Defoe puts it in *The True-Born Englishman*, "Whenever God erects a house of prayer, Satan always builds a chapel there." Perhaps members of my own Redwood City First Ward inadvertently foster Satan's precepts and principles.

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If I were Satan, I'd be pleased at the proportion of elders and prospective elders in Redwood City First Ward. As membership clerk, I kept the records of a total of forty elders, about half of whom were active, and eighty prospective elders whose prospects weren't very bright, for we never saw them. Out of the forty elders, just nine had temple recommends.

Things are different, I'm sure, in Deseret, where Church activity and position can be useful in business affairs and employment. But out here in the California boondocks it profits us not. If we're active, it's for different reasons, perhaps for the best of all reasons.

If I were Satan, I'd be sure to paste in the scrapbook as a sample of progress Carl G. Croyder's May 1975 article in *Harper's*, "In Defense of the Old Hypocrisy." Croyder laments that we've adopted aliases with our new lifestyles, so that the Seven Deadly Sins have "gone legit," becoming respectable in today's world. Pride's new name is Success. Covetousness is Lawsuit, Lust is Expression, Anger is Indignation, Gluttony is the Good Life. Envy, always the creep of the crowd, is Regulation. And Sloth's new name is Freedom. "Sloth," the author says, "may be lazy, but he's not stupid." Croyder adds to the ancient seven an eighth vice, a modern baddy, Hypocrisy, whose premise is that anything at all is okay so long as we get away with it. Under a Root-of-All-Evil subheading, I'd include George Orwell's sardonic version of 1 Corinthians 13:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not money, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could move mountains, and have not money, I am nothing.

Money never faileth; but whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

And now abideth faith, hope, money, these three; but the greatest of these is money.

Satan might also include in his money section Brigham Young's statement that Adam and his family paid tithing. The Devil might smirk: paid to whom?

Under a scrapbook section on Progress in Science and Technology, I'd include as another sign of progress General Omar Bradley's comment:

We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we do about peace, more about killing than we know about living.

And under Progress in Sales and Statistics, I'm sure this story would delight Satan: A missionary who had served in Germany told me that Elder Marvin J. Ashton on a visit to the mission had requested data not only on the number of baptisms but on the percentage of these converts who had remained active. Mission leaders collected data from the various branches and wards and were dismayed to find that 93 percent of converts fell away during the first year after baptism.

Now, if I were Satan, I would encourage the practice of sending out young missionaries who are taught an excellent sales pitch that isn't strictly accurate. In this way, converts come in the front door with stars in their eyes and then, after stumbling over a half-truth, slip out the back door never to be seen again. Thus far only one missionary assigned to my ward has ever heard of, for example, the Mountain Meadows massacre. Nor have they had any knowledge of the previous practice of plural marriage, except knowing how to change the subject.

My own research over a period of years has never uncovered a single truth, however "sensitive," one-tenth as dangerous as a half-truth. So, as Satan, I would foster happy mythology, history as we wish it might have happened. I also would severely frown on any attempt to use humor in writing about LDS subjects. I would studiously ignore Joseph Smith's statement that sometimes he spoke as a prophet and sometimes as a man. He must have been kidding, don't you think? I wonder if anyone knows of a single time, in our official history, when Joseph spoke as anything but a prophet. I don't.

As Satan, I would also encourage Church officials to ignore all attacks on the Church, such as the dedicated campaign of Jerald and Sandra Tanner of the Utah Lighthouse Ministry. I would simply pooh-pooh their violently unfriendly book, *Mormonism, Shadow or Reality*, issued in Salt Lake, together with the condensed version, *The Changing World of Mormonism*, published in New York. What do we care that the combined sales have been more than 50,000 copies? What does it matter that missionaries are hit with hard questions from readers of these books and are unprepared to answer?

But it isn't only past history or difficult doctrines which snarl missionary efforts. If I were Satan, I would have chuckled at an observation Anthony Boucher, author and critic, made to me after he and I had been on the program of the League of Utah Writers Round-Up. Boucher had been fascinated by the Peculiar People, but one practice bothered him. "I've heard it time and again from your people: 'Yes, I'm a Mormon, but I like a cup of coffee with breakfast.' 'I'm a Mormon, but I take an occasional highball.' 'Oh, yes, I'm a Mormon, but I smoke — in private, of course.' 'I'm a Mormon, but after two years in England I acquired the habit of morning and afternoon tea.'"

Then, bemused, Boucher said, "But, Sam, in all my life I've never heard a member of my faith say, 'Yes, I'm a Catholic, but I eat meat on Friday.' " Is the eighth vice Satan's trump card?

I'm sure Satan also hooted at the reaction of Rutherford Montgomery at the Round-Up another year. Monty, an old friend and author of more than 140 books for teenagers, had batched with we when we both were working at the Disney Studio. After the Round-Up, I took him on the Temple Square tour. Then, as we started back, I asked, "Well, Monty, how did you like Zion?"

His answer was from left field: "Sam, I'm ashamed of you and your people! You have a great and unique history that you should be proud of! Yet for an entire week I've heard nothing except apologetics for it from all sides."

A stranger, he was sensitive to an attitude to which I'd been long accustomed.

Perhaps we would not be so uncomfortable with our history if we were not so well practiced in whitewashing it. If I were Satan, I would certainly make every effort to keep a tight rein on Church history, in order to make it easier for such things as the Tales of Hofmann to haunt us again. Satan had to be happy with Mark Hofmann, former missionary and a master con artist, for he charmed both historians and General Authorities into paying big bucks for fake documents supposedly pertaining to early Church history. His prize counterfeit, for which he anticipated getting a cool million dollars, was to be the "discovery" of the lost 116 pages of the Book of Mormon. Wow! What an operator! Satan must have guffawed. But then historians began to smell a rat, so Hofmann killed two people with bombs in an attempt to cover his tracks. He then by accident was a victim of a third bomb, intended for someone unknown. He did recover, yes, and yes, he now is serving a life sentence. But the Tales of Hofmann have had a tremendous negative impact on the Church image. The president of a foreign mission told me that the Hofmann case had made conversions virtually impossible in his mission.

Satan's disciples are few in number, but placed in strategic positions. I couldn't qualify. Not that I'm particularly devout or especially spiritual, which I'm not, but simply because I've done my homework on him. And in the final analysis, I'm probably not worth bothering with anyway. Knock on wood. Besides, Satan doesn't recruit people who believe Ralph Waldo Emerson's maxim that "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." He avoids those who aspire to be among the valiant as described by William Wetmore Story's *Io Victis*:

They only the victory win
Who have fought the good fight and have vanquished
the demon that tempts us within;
Who have held to their faith unseduced by the prize
that the world holds on high;
Who have dared for a high cause to suffer, resist,
fight — if need be, to die.

And anyhow, he can't beat the Lord's deal. I'm convinced that however often and however badly I fail to measure up, the good Lord will give me another chance. Satan on the other hand will never forgive a single mistake or allow repentance for weakness. With the Lord's deal, all I really need is faith the size of a mustard seed and a contrite heart. I'd be foolish to bet on Satan. The Lord's game is the only one in town.