

and to provoke thought among scriptural literalists, the value of his work to the scholarly and non-LDS community is limited by his ahistoricism and excessive use of proof texts. This approach, regrettably, should be quite familiar to those whose knowledge of the gospel derives primarily from their favorite passages of scripture, quotations from prophets, sacrament meeting talks, and the instruction of the Church Education System. Yet Anderson's expectation of seamless coherence and logical consistency between twenty-first century science and statements in scripture and by Latter-day prophets, regardless of time and place of origin, is unrealistic. Obviously, Latter-day "doctrine" does not meet Anderson's expectation, but neither would the doctrines of any other religious organization. Anderson's portrait reflects the organizational myth of an eternal, unchanging gospel, but fails to capture the fluidity, creativity, and dynamism of Mormon culture.

Anderson shows that Mormons should not expect science and scripture to reveal the same everlasting truths. Yet he fails to move beyond this realization. In fact, like many apologists at FARMS, Anderson confuses the claims of scripture and prophecy with those of science and history. In this respect, he reproduces the very problem he identifies. As long as Mormons and ex-Mormons continue to conflate revelation with science and history, then Mormonism will continue to be plagued with a conflict between science and religion, so ably and accessibly outlined in this new book by Anderson.

Murder, with a Side of Philosophy

Paul M. Edwards, *The Angel Acronym* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 250 pp.

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Paul Edwards's first mystery novel, *The Angel Acronym*, is not exactly a religious novel, but it is a novel in which the characters spend a great deal of time talking about religion. And the religion that everybody is talking about is the Community of Christ, the religious organization known formerly (and in the novel) as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Nearly all of the characters—including the murder victim, the perpetrator, and the wise-cracking amateur sleuth—are employees of the RLDS Temple School in Independence, Missouri, and the culture of the Church and its bureaucracy pervades nearly every aspect of the novel.

The main character and crime-solver in the novel is Toom Taggart, director of the RLDS Education Department and, like Edwards himself, a philosopher by

training and lifetime academic. Taggart moves uneasily in the religious organization for which he works, none of whose essential characteristics are unique to one particular religion. Within this organization, faith always trumps scholarship, orthodoxy always trumps individuality, and obedience always trumps everything. Perhaps the best thing about *The Angel Acronym* is simply watching the scholarly, individualistic Taggart negotiate through an ecclesiastical hierarchy that seems to value neither scholarship nor individuality.

As Taggart navigates through the twin mazes of religious orthodoxy and bureaucratic inefficiency, he encounters—as the main character in a murder mystery must—a murder. The motive for the dastardly deed is actually set up in the novel's preface, which goes to Palmyra, New York, in 1829 to set up a conspiracy. In this preface, Abner Cole (a real historical figure) and two fictional accomplices alter the opening pages of the Book of Mormon to introduce an acronym of "Angel Moroni" in the first letters of the opening eleven paragraphs. They also forge letters between Joseph and Hyrum Smith indicating that the entire Book of Mormon is an attempt to defraud the people of Palmyra. Cole dies prematurely, however, and the documents never surface. But when the chief archivist of the RLDS Church uncovers them, unaware that they are forgeries, and wants to publish the results, someone in the Church murders him to prevent them coming to light.

A plot in which a Mormon character commits murder to cover up an embarrassing historical document is not an innovation in the contemporary mystery genre. Ever since Mark Hofmann made such murders eerily plausible, a dozen or so mysteries have been published with a similar plot device—including David Everson's *False Profits* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), the only other mystery that I am aware of that has an RLDS/Community of Christ setting. But *The Angel Acronym* is very different than any of these novels because it is set so firmly within the religious structure. Its main character, like its author, is a genuine insider with a commitment to the community rather than an outside observer being baffled by "those crazy Mormons."

Taggart's inside observations about the Church structure make *The Angel Acronym* an extremely compelling book. As the squarest of pegs at Church headquarters, Taggart must, in the course of a single day, dodge unreasonable requests from the Brethren, fend off a modern-day Porter Rockwell figure who tries to prevent him from asking questions about the murdered man, defend the importance of honest inquiry to a Church historian who believes in suppressing uncomfortable truths, and attempt to get a cup of coffee from a waiter who doesn't think that a man in his position should have it.

The extended philosophical discussions that Taggart has with other characters are both a significant strength and a minor weakness in the novel. Through these discussions, Taggart explores the nature of religious institutions, the difference between "faith" and "belief," the role of historical truth in an

epistemological context governed by faith, and the role of socialization in religious decision making. Consider the following thoughts from Taggart about the consequences of taking a life, even justifiably, in war:

Contingency killing unlocks the bonds of civilized behavior. It's the crack in the veneer of respectability. It's the exposure of human behavior. It says that the concept of humanity is primarily a lie. Before it happens, before a life is taken, a person doesn't believe that he or she could be a killer. At least, probably not. The killer is not you or me. At least, it's not who you consider when you consider yourself. . . .

What I am trying to say is that before you kill someone you don't see yourself as someone who would kill. Afterwards, you know there's nothing you wouldn't do. There's nothing more important to you, no reason powerful enough, no emotion deep enough, to prevent you—if that's your decision—from taking a life. The process works on you. Sooner or later it abolishes the sense that there's something special about human life, that there's something special about us. . . .

It's not something for which one can turn to a creator and be forgiven. What I am talking about is knowledge. Knowledge is lived, not forgiven. (199)

This is an excellent philosophical observation, deeply existential in its nature and reminiscent of key passages in Camus and Dostoyevsky. It is also an excellent theological point that has profound implications for our understanding of the meaning of the Garden of Eden and of original sin. However (and here is the weakness that I alluded to earlier), deep thoughts about religion, no matter how satisfying, do not always produce believable dialogue or compelling plot devices in mystery novels. The practical use to which Taggart puts the above observation—looking for the murderer only among those who served in Vietnam—is difficult to support given the fact that most murderers are not veterans. Though the observation is itself both sound and useful, it must be wrenched beyond the limits of soundness and utility to be converted into a “clue.”

Generally, *The Angel Acronym* does an excellent job of raising important questions about the relationship of religious institutions to their own histories and about the stifling effect of orthodoxy upon genuine historical inquiry. It does a somewhat less excellent job of presenting a compelling murder mystery in which a clever detective solves a difficult crime. Few readers will be surprised by either the murderer or the motive, nor will they be particularly impressed with the steps that the detective takes to come to what is actually a very obvious conclusion. The flaw is by no means fatal; Toom Taggart is a compelling character, and Edwards is an extremely insightful and gifted writer. His insights into the Community of Christ, and to religious culture in general, are profound and wide-ranging. A number of indications in the book (including its final words, “. . . to be continued”) suggest that Toom Taggart will be back. I, for one, will be here waiting.