These themes and shifts, a few among countless others, call for detailed historical, cultural, and à la Shepherd and Shepherd, statistical analyses. These authors and editors have bequeathed to scholars valuable, seemingly inexhaustible questions and answers. They give us new ways to look at the Mormon community, new ways to answer old questions about the role of prophecy in the LDS Church, theological changes, and how members and leaders have (or have not) adjusted to changing times and a changing Church. I look forward to the future conversations that will be generated by this fulcrum of primary and secondary sources.

Notes

1. Bates and Smith and Shepherd and Shepherd are in conversation with D. Michael Quinn. See D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994); Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997).

2. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 2007).

3. For extended discussion of this early Mormon understanding of the afterlife, see: Samuel M. Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Theology as Poetry

Adam S. Miller. *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012. 132 pp. Paper: $18.95. ISBN: 978-1589581937.

Reviewed by Robert A. Rees

> *If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?*
>
> *—Emily Dickinson*

While in Dallas giving a couple of firesides last June, I met Adam Miller. In response to one of my presentations he asked interesting questions and made statements that made me think. When he learned that I teach at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, he asked if I would be interested in reading his book, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology.* Who could resist a book with such a title! When Adam's book arrived (along with *An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma 32,* for which he served as editor), my eye immediately caught the blurb on the front cover: "Adam Miller is the most original and provocative Latter-day Saint theologian practicing today." My immediate response was to consider this puffery, until I saw that it was written by Richard Bushman, a scholar whose opinions I respect. "The most original and provocative Latter-day Saint theologian practicing today"? It didn't take me long to recognize that Bushman was right: *Rube Goldberg Machines* is not simply original and provocative, it is often thrilling, a word I don't ever remember using in relation to a book of scholarly writing.

In his introduction, Miller denigrates theology, or at least deflates it: "Theology is a diversion. It is not serious like doctrine, respectable like history, or helpful like therapy. Theology is gratuitous" (xiii). To emphasize this, he analogizes theology to an ingenuous, overly complicated machine whose function is to perform a simple task: "Doing theology is like building a comically circuitous Rube Goldberg Machine: you spend your time tinkering together an unnecessarily complicated, impractical, and ingenious apparatus for doing things that are, in themselves, simple" (xiii). Such a machine, Miller argues, is not really worth very much: "The Church neither needs nor endorses our Rube Goldberg flights" (xiii). Thank heavens that doesn't stop Miller from building his machines which, it turns out, are quite dazzling and it is counter to his argument that "theology has only one strength: it can make simple things difficult" (xiv). *Au contraire*, my dear theologian!

Part of what is exciting about *Rube Goldberg Machines* is that in it Miller stakes his claim as a Mormon theologian. In reading the chapter titled "A Manifesto for Mormon Theology," I was initially taken aback and then fascinated by Miller's assertion that "a critical theology is chartered by charity" (59). Miller elaborates: "Good theology . . . is grounded in the details of lived experience, and it takes charity—the pure love of Christ—as the only real justification for its

having been written" (49); "Theology participates in the illumination of patterns that show charity, produce meaning, and [ad]dress suffering" (59). Wow, I thought, that disqualifies a lot of theology that I have read which has seemed much more focused on argument than on charity, and yet, as soon as one reads such words, one experiences the shock of recognition that they are true—or ought to be.

Miller makes the same assertion about criticism—that it too should be grounded in charity, which would therefore likewise disqualify the vast majority of critical thinking and writing (perhaps, soberly, some of my own!): "A genuinely critical approach begins and ends with what is crucial. In the context of theology, this means that criticism is defined by charity (agape). Charity must both define the critic's disposition toward the subject and work to filter the acute from the cosmetic" (59).

Theology and criticism as essentially charitable impulses and actions is a radical concept, one that to my mind shifts the ground (and possibly shakes the foundation) of theological and critical discourse. Miller elucidates: "The key is to pose critical questions that will allow the voice of charity to respond" (62). One can imagine a whole new theology based on such ideas. Were Mormon theology to embody such an approach, it might constitute a sort of theological revolution, a sort of continuing revelation of what a Christ-centered theology should be.

As a Christian humanist, I found Miller's essay "Humanism, Mormonism" of particular interest. "Humanism" is a bad word in some conservative, including some Mormon, circles, and yet for Miller, as for me, humanism and Mormonism seem inextricably bound to one another. As Miller argues, "There is both a Mormon foundation to humanistic inquiry and a humanistic foundation to Mormon inquiry, because Mormonism and humanism converge in their commitment to the new" (107). Perhaps another way of saying this is that both humanism and Mormonism are based on the concept of continuing revelation, the one through the imagination and the other through the Holy Spirit, although from my experience, these ways of knowing often overlap.

Miller posits that it is the very idea of the possibility of discovering, inventing, or creating the new that gives being its meaning, which he expresses in another koan-like phrase, "Without the new, the being of everything is nothing" (109). It was precisely be-

cause Jesus made the world new with every word and every act that Christianity offers such hope. The genius and inspiration of Joseph Smith is that he understood this: "Mormonism explicitly reframes the Christian tradition as itself being vain without the intervention of the new. Joseph Smith's claim is that revelation—both new revelation and continually new revelation—is absolutely essential to the vitality of Christianity. . . . In reaffirming revelation Mormonism is reaffirming Christianity" (110).

The affinity between Mormon Christianity and humanism is that both have the capacity to open our hearts and our minds to endless possibilities, endless newness, if you will, both human and divine. This is the most exciting realization about existence. In fact, it seems to me that along with eternal love, eternal revelation is the only thing that makes the idea of eternal lives worth considering. God's declaration, "Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5), is, by extension through modern revelation, his promise to us, "Behold, if you are worthy, you too can make all things new" (implied in D&C 88:35).

I believe that contemporary Mormonism's failure to fully recognize the connection between the restored gospel and the humanities explains in part why it has yet to find its full flowering. Essentially, I feel that many Mormons remain suspicious of the humanities (not, I would say, without some justification, considering how far the humanities sometimes veer from their true and highest function) and thus remain blind to their possibilities for enriching (and even correcting) our religion. In fact, Miller sees Mormonism and humanism as "mutually corrective" (112). He adds, "For the sake of each, it is necessary to perpetually expose humanism to its inner 'Mormon' impulses while simultaneously exposing Mormonism to its own deep humanism" (112).

At times, Miller seems as much poet as theologian. Essay after essay does what Robert Frost says poetry is supposed to do: "begin in delight and end in wisdom," although at times Miller's essays begin in wisdom and end in delight. In reality, Miller's writing is as often theology as poetry. Consider, for example, the following from Chapter 1, "Benedictus": "When [the theologian] reads, she reads right off the edge of the page and onto her desk and into her yard and out under the sun. When she writes, she writes right off the edge of her page and onto her desk and up her arm and into her heart. Her arms are

tattooed with a fine scrawl of unrepeating names for God's grace. Her body is an unboxed tefillin. Her eyes, open" (1).

For those who do not catch the allusion in the next to the last sentence, tefillin are the small black leather boxes worn by devout Jewish men during morning prayers that contain scrolls with inscribed verses from the Torah. By using such a bold metaphor, Miller intends us to see the theologian's body as the container of God's word and her heart as inscribed with His name. This kind of metaphor is characteristic of the English metaphysical poets who used extravagantly bold imagery to awaken imaginative readings of their texts.

Miller's essays constitute philosophy in a new key. Much theological writing is esoteric, erudite, and impenetrable. Frequently it is characterized by labyrinthine rhetorical arguments loaded with theological jargon. Miller's theological writing is at times quirky, bizarre, and even Zen-like. For example, consider the following koan-like statements:

> "Theology helps us to find religion by helping us to lose it" (xv)
>
> "[The theologian] faithfully repeats what she is told by never faithfully repeating it" (1).
>
> "She reads the Bible by writing a new one" (1).
>
> "She is God's work and glory. She is that thing she had never dared suppose: she is nothing" (2).

No careful reader can simply keep on reading after encountering such statements. They stop the reader in her tracks and make her ponder. But since, as Miller argues, theology requires imagination, they stimulate her imagination as well ("How exactly can she write a new Bible by reading it?")

Miller also makes unexpected observations, observations that at first glance seem more in the realm of therapy than theology. Consider, for example, the following: "Mormonism makes plain what is otherwise left implicit: liberation from the bonds of sin cannot be disentangled from the work of sorting out our family relationships" (18). I never thought of that before, but it seems absolutely right—and even profound.

Here's another from his chapter, "Love, Truth, and the Meaning

of Marriage": "The potential infinity of the family is the matrix within which the drama of Christ's atoning love is enfolded" (90).(This chapter contains a number of other fascinating observations, including "Love is an experience of the nonrelation of sexual difference. It is an exposure to the gap of being human that is human sexuality" [96].)

At times, Miller's aphorisms are hidden poems. Consider the following, which I have titled using Miller's own lines and then arranged in stanzaic form:

Religion Is Revealed Geography

All sinners are expatriates–
not because they've left
some particular place behind
but because they've come un-
grounded from place all together.

As sinners, we no longer know
where we are. We no longer
feel earth beneath our feet,
smell rain in the air,
or stain our hands
with walnut hulls. . . .
Sky turns unnoticed.
Angels . . . point to the ground
and say, "Here!" (52)

The image of "walnut hulls" is a powerful because it evokes the difficulty of cracking open the hard shell (repentance) but also the delight of finding the fresh nut meat (forgiveness) within, rewards that are diminished to a soul racked with sin.

Miller's profound, provocative, and poetic essays each tempt commentary, but lest this review end up being as long as the book itself, I restrict myself to several and hope that the reader is enticed (seduced!) into reading the complete collection–and then start reading again.

While it is highly unlikely that Miller intended it, his fourteen small essays might be thought of as a sort of theological sonnet, with each essay corresponding to a poetic line in the typical sonnet form. While the metaphor is extravagant, it does fit imaginatively with Miller's deep poetic voice and sensibility. To extend my admit-

tedly strained metaphor further, I see the last two essays—"Groundhog Day" and "Shipwrecked"—as a sort of couplet, summarizing and tying many of Miller's rich themes together in a way similar to the final two lines of a Shakespearean sonnet.

In "Groundhog Day," Miller uses the movie by the same title (starring Bill Murray as the lead character, Phil) to illustrate the fact that our lives are full of diurnal, seasonal, never-ending, mundane repetitions:

> There is no escaping the minute specificity of repetition required for anything to be what it is. Again and again you must reach for the alarm, roll out of bed, straighten the sheets, and stretch your arms wide. Again and again you must wash your hair, rinse the conditioner, adjust the hot water, and reach for the towel. Again and again you must eat your lunch, pause at the water fountain, stop at the restroom, and wipe sauce from your chin. Again and again you must breathe in and breathe out, breathe in and breathe out. . . . Life is all nickels and dimes. Every moment, ten thousand points of resistance, ten thousand paper cuts, ten thousand pleasures, and ten thousand pains (122).

Miller gives us the depressing news that while we "may yet dream of the frictionless, of floating in zero-G" (122), like Phil, we have no place to go. And further, even the novelty (which Miller calls bluntly, "a red herring" [123]) which we crave to interrupt the endless banality of repetition, "won't scare the groundhog back into his hole" (123).

Then, in a way typical of Miller's thinking, he turns the seeming depression of the endlessly mundane on its head: "If you think I'm being bitter, you've misunderstood. I'm being compassionate. And I'm trying to be Mormon" (123), by which he means that Mormons have made the mundane eternal—or rather accepted the inescapable realization that endless repetition is—well—endless, part of the fabric of eternal life. Miller continues:

> In general the complaint about Mormonism is that it is all too mundane. God, for Mormons, is not supra-mundane. God has a body? Fingers and toes? He's married? He must, everyday, tie the sash on his white robe? His immortal lungs perpetually expand and contract? Heaven, too, for Mormons is supra-mundane. Heaven? Where people are still married, still work, still have children, still change diapers, still share casseroles? Heaven, too, for Mormons is what seals our union with the mundane rather than terminates it (123).

Miller continues, “Leave it to Mormonism to claim that even in heaven we’ll have to button and unbutton our shirts, show all our work, suffer paper cuts, and—of course, forever and ever again—breathe” (123). He concludes, “Leave it to Mormonism to see the nihilistic claim that there is nothing but the aching specificity of this repetition and raise it to the power of infinity” (123). And, like almost everything else Miller sees in our lives, this too is a gift: “There is no help on the way. No one is coming to save you from the grace of the mundane. Jesus came to give this grace, not take it away. Breathe. Nothing could be more merciful” (124).

Finally, in his last essay, “Shipwrecked,” using an image from Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels,* Miller sees himself as one who from birth “was already bound by the invisible twine of ten thousand threads to Mormonism” (125). But, he is quick to add, unlike Gulliver who wakens from his sleep to find himself powerless to unloose his bonds, “I have remained because of one conclusion that I have been entirely unable to avoid: I am convinced that not only did I wake to find myself bound to Mormonism but that it is Mormonism (with Joseph Smith, handcarts, Biblical scripture, modern prophets, Jell-O molds, temples, missionary work, and all the rest) that has done the waking” (125–26). He adds, “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” (126). This reminds us of Thoreau’s famous lines from the last paragraph of *Walden,* “Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The Sun is but a morning star.”

Miller concludes this essay and his theological sonnet, with these words: “Mormonism has indeed been marrow to my bones, joy to my heart, light to my eyes, music to my ears, and life to my whole being. Thus lit up, I woke to find Jesus leaning over me, smiling wide, with the Book of Mormon snapped like smelling salts beneath my nose” (126).

The good news for all of us who are awakened by Miller’s brilliant writing is that he is a young man with more books to write. On reading this volume of essays, we might say, as Emily Dickinson said upon reading Lydia Maria Child’s *Letters from New York,* “This, then, is a book, and there are more of them!”