

A STUDY IN SIN:  
RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY AND FANATICISM IN (AND OUT OF)  
*A STUDY IN SCARLET*

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Apparently some readers—and Sherlockians—do not hold *A Study in Scarlet* in very high esteem. There are a number of reasons, including one that has been amply documented by objective scholars as well as apologists: It is unjustifiably nasty about the Mormon settlers of the American West. The abuses it describes simply did not take place, being based on imagination, prejudice, or the occasional untypical incident. Critics of this story might also complain that *A Study in Scarlet* is the immature work of an immature author (Conan Doyle was 28 when it was published in 1887) and shows very little of the skill and depth that would soon be apparent in his works. A third complaint is that it is organized in two disconnected parts, one set in London and one mostly in Utah, so that the reader, in search of Sherlock Holmes, gets stranded, like poor John Ferrier, in the uncongenial reaches of the American desert.

Exactly the same criticism can be, and sometimes is, applied to *The Valley of Fear*, with its first part set at Birlstone and its second set in the Vermissa Valley twenty years earlier. *The Valley of Fear* is a much more mature work, the work of an experienced author at the height of his powers. One leading Sherlockian who did like it very much wrote that in *The Valley of Fear* we do not just have one of Conan Doyle's finest detective stories—we have, in fact, *two*. I have not heard anybody make a similar claim about *A Study in Scarlet*.

I want to draw attention to *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* by Joseph McLaughlin (University of Virginia Press, 2000). This book, more or less about late Victorian fiction and the way it portrays London, contains a long section about Conan Doyle. McLaughlin writes that *A Study in Scarlet* “marks a moment of transition, after which plots will typically be situated in either urban or frontier spaces, each of which will gain its own individual generic identity.” This single book is two for the price of one. We are accustomed to saying that with the Sherlock Holmes tales Conan Doyle invented the genre of the detective story. McLaughlin's book about the “urban jungle” suggests that at the same time he invented the genre of the Western. That innovation is usually attributed to the American writer Owen Wister, whose pioneering novel, *The Virginian*, appeared in 1902, as did *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. But *A Study in Scarlet* came fifteen years earlier, and however flawed

we may think it is, it is still an achievement in something besides crime fiction, and something besides the literary portrayal of London. It's an achievement in writing about the conflicts that arise in the wide-open spaces of the frontier, in this case the American West.

In looking for complaints to make about *A Study in Scarlet* unrelated to the Mormons, it would be fair to point out that it is hilariously inaccurate about the terrain that it purports to be describing. Suffice it to say that there is no great alkaline desert between the Colorado and the Yellowstone. Prairie grasslands, yes; a little thing called the Rocky Mountains, yes; but no desert of the kind described in the early paragraphs of Part II. But perhaps that doesn't matter much. In other Holmes tales, the author makes up places, from the county of Hallamshire to Pope's Court in east London—so why not a desert? Why not a whole American West, Mormon settlements and all?

It is true enough that the so-called Mormons, the Latter-day Saints, traveled west in 1846–47 from Nauvoo, Illinois, through Nebraska, eventually settling at what became Salt Lake City. What an adventure Conan Doyle has created around this nugget of historical fact! But perhaps it would perhaps be best for us to forget about historicity altogether, and treat every word of *A Study in Scarlet* as fiction, or at least the special kind of fictionalized history that we consider ourselves to be reading when we tackle any of Sherlock Holmes's adventures.

Jack Tracy wrote a little book on its accuracy, *Conan Doyle and the Latter-Day Saints* (Gaslight Publications, 1979). Tracy looks at the sources Conan Doyle must have used in writing his dreadful portrayal of the Mormons, and identifies a number of books, known in England in the 1880s, that described Mormon life, usually with more enthusiasm than accuracy, and with special emphasis on the horrors of polygamy. There was a sort of low-grade pornography of Mormonism, and whether or not Conan Doyle bought into it, he certainly took advantage of it. After all, he could have written pretty much the same book making Drebber and Stangerson members of any other group—the Taliban or the Southern Baptists—and still given Hope a motive for revenge against them.

But he chose Mormonism, and with the Mormon reputation for polygamy comes everything that the author and the reader know, or think they know, about Mormon religion. So the moment the Mormon caravan is introduced to the reader, one of its members is piously declaring that “He who could draw [water] from the rocks will not now abandon His chosen people.” The rest respond “Amen! amen!” Presumably the one who could draw water from the rocks was God Almighty, and a moment later one of the Mormon men identifies his people as “the persecuted children of God.” Later: “The hand of God is leading us,” and “the voice of Joseph Smith, which is the voice of God.”

In short, we have a very devout group here, or so one would think from the way they talk. But later we learn the reality. When the prophet, Brigham Young, comes to visit John Ferrier in chapter 3, there is no talk of God, as the Prophet is more interested in the topic of marriageable maidens. By this time, however, the reader has been introduced to a new character, Jefferson Hope, and no sooner does he come on the scene than he himself mentions God twice. By the end of the third chapter, he is Lucy Ferrier's acknowledged suitor, and chief among his qualifications, according to old John Ferrier, is that "he's a Christian, which is more than these folks here," that is, the Mormons.

This comparison requires me to give some explanation of what it means to identify Jefferson Hope, or anybody else, as a Christian. It is very difficult, as anyone can tell who reads the newspapers, to understand other people's religions, or to make comparisons on a reliable basis. Christianity allows, or even compels, endless argument and distinctions about who is genuinely Christian and who is not. In general terms, there are two approaches: The standard of membership is either a code of behavior, or belief in a body of doctrine, sometimes expressed as a personal relationship with God. The two are of course closely connected, since belief is supposed to lead to action, and action can be taken as evidence of belief, or the lack of it. Hence John Ferrier's comment that the Mormons around him are not really Christian. The Victorian opinion of polygamy was that it was a form of adultery, and hence a violation of the seventh commandment—and possibly also the tenth, the one which instructs that "Thou shalt not covet." There is no reason to think that Ferrier is objecting to Mormon doctrine, and in fact he reminds the Prophet that in general he has been adhering to the local code and even attending worship in the Temple, as was his obligation since converting to Mormonism there in the desert.

Converting from what, by the way? Notice that when John Ferrier and little Lucy were *in extremis* in the desert, just before the arrival of the Mormons, their final recourse was to prayer. The old man admits that he has not been much in the habit of praying, but he suggests it now, and Lucy makes him kneel in the customary way. Together they voice an "entreaty for mercy and forgiveness." The only prayer that can have been, the only prayer the old man might have remembered in the circumstances, would be the so-called Lord's Prayer, which is shared by Christians in all parts of the world. In its traditional English version, this prayer beseeches God, "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

John and Lucy Ferrier pray together, and Lucy makes a few theological comments. She is doubtful that God created this God-forsaken desert: "I guess

somebody else made the country in these parts. It's not nearly so well done." But she has no doubts about the country that lies ahead of her, and, with a child's faith, she expects to see her mother soon: "I'll bet she meets us at the door of heaven with a big pitcher of water." She speaks like a child who has been to Sunday school. Presumably so had Ferrier, although clearly he had not been to church lately. We do not seem to have any evidence about the specifics of his Christian background, or hers, and the possibilities are many. Although a number of the denominations now familiar did not exist in the middle of the 19th century, some certainly did, and there were other Christian groups that have disappeared in the intervening century and a half. But we have no way of judging whether the Ferrier family, in happier times and a few states further east, had been Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, or Baptist.

The same goes for Jefferson Hope, bearing the name of that great American freethinker and optimist, Thomas Jefferson, tentatively identified for us as a Christian. He uses the name of God somewhat liberally, both when wooing Lucy Ferrier and a couple of decades later in London, confronting Drebber and Stangerson. He forces Drebber to choose one of his two pills—the poison or the placebo—and shrieks at him, "Let the high God choose between us." The high God apparently does choose, and Drebber takes the poison and falls dead.

Hope insists that he is no murderer; God and justice are on his side. This is a dark and a vengeful God, and if Hope is, in fact, a Christian, he is practicing a savage and judgmental Christianity. In 20 years of preparing, pursuing, and planning, he seems not to have considered the words of Jesus: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you," or the advice of Saint Paul, "Recompense to no man evil for evil." Probably few would-be Christians can manage to live up to this standard, but surely there is some obligation to try, and 20 years provides ample opportunity to forgive, if one is so inclined.

What about Hope's antagonists and eventual victims? I was about to identify them as "the Mormons," and perhaps the author intends for us to see the thousands of Latter-day Saints as uniformly wicked and oppressive, but again, that would be somewhat unfair. Only a few of the Mormons are presented as individuals or have any opportunity to do wrong to anyone, chiefly Drebber and Stangerson and the Prophet Brigham Young. The two young men—not so young by the time Hope catches up with them, but young when they cast lecherous eyes on Lucy Ferrier, the Flower of Utah—show no interest in religion whatever, not so unusual for young men. The Prophet, too, has nothing to say about God. His three references to the "true faith" all have to do with the rules of everyday living, marriage in particular. This in itself is no criticism of him, because the

teachings of Jesus and of Christianity are far more about life in this world than they are about theories of the world to come. But the Prophet's code of living does not seem to be a good match, any more than Jefferson Hope's own vengefulness, for the commands of loving one's neighbor, avoiding lust in one's heart, and removing the beam in one's own eye rather than fretting about the speck in someone else's. The Mormon hierarchy, as portrayed in these pages, uses the name and trappings of God to decorate its greed for power and good farmland and also, implicitly, its lust for pretty women. When Jefferson Hope gets away from Salt Lake City, with Lucy and her old father, the judgment executed on them by the Avenging Angels has more to do with vengeance than with angels, who are supposed to be the messengers of God. The best we can say for these Mormon leaders is that they are neither the first group nor the last to use religious power for selfish purposes.

We have in *A Study in Scarlet* a study in religious hypocrisy, in which neither Drebber and Stangerson nor their eventual killer comes off well. An explanation can be found when we realize that the author of these pages was a young man who had been rather pushed around by religion—pushed around by the Jesuits of the schools he attended, and by some devout and not terribly subtle Roman Catholics among his relatives. Arriving in Southsea to set up in medical practice in 1882, he severed his ties with the church in which he had grown up, and all his life he remained suspicious of organized religion, although he did say some very complimentary things about Jesus in his books on Spiritualism. It is perhaps not surprising that his first published novel takes as one of his themes the abuse that a powerful church can visit on individuals who refuse to conform to its rules.

It's worth casting an eye over the later Sherlock Holmes stories to see what examples they offer of the same kind of thing. We find a very limited collection of religious figures in these pages, and even fewer if we do not count Sherlock Holmes himself, who disguised himself once as an Italian priest and once as a "non-conformist," which is to say Protestant, clergyman. We could also look at Conan Doyle's many non-Sherlockian writings. His novel *The Refugees* largely deals with religious oppression in 17th-century France and Quebec.

There have been a number of Sherlockian attempts to label Holmes a religious thinker, mostly on the basis of a passage in "The Naval Treaty" about the goodness of providence, and a passage in "The Veiled Lodger" in which he tells Eugenia Ronder that "Your life is not your own." But theology is not organized religion, and while a church presumably requires some body of doctrine behind it, not everyone with ideas to quote is necessarily a member of an organized body. It seems very unlikely that Holmes was a regular churchgoer, although I

once wrote a pastiche, which I thought rather good, in which he based an important deduction on something he had learned long ago in Sunday school.

Here and there we get mentions of religious leaders, from the Pope (who was actually one of Holmes's clients) to the beaming clergyman who performs Irene Adler's wedding, and the "Hebrew rabbi" mentioned in the same story. But none of them really figure in the plots. On the other hand, Holy Peters of "Lady Frances Carfax," masquerading as the missionary Dr. Schlessinger, is central to the story but is neither an authentic clergyman nor a credit to his religious professions.

As for laity who demonstrate a connection with organized religion, there are, so far as I can tell, only two. One is John Scott Eccles, of "Wisteria Lodge," whom Watson describes as "a Conservative, a churchman, a good citizen, orthodox and conventional to the last degree." Hardly a strong recommendation for the church—although we can be confident that Eccles will not be setting vigilantes to follow anybody through the desert, killing the men and kidnapping the women, like the Avenging Angels. There are not many Avenging Anglicans.

The other churchgoer is Nancy Barclay of "The Crooked Man." We are told that she "was, it appears, a member of the Roman Catholic Church, and had interested herself very much in the establishment of the Guild of St. George, which was formed in connection with the Watt Street Chapel for the purpose of supplying the poor with cast-off clothing." On the night of her husband's death, she was at a meeting of the Guild—a meeting that, remarkably, lasted only forty minutes. I have been at a great many church meetings in my time, and I can tell you that very few of them have been that short. We have here something that appears to be very rare in Conan Doyle's writings, a professing Christian who actually behaves like one and tries to do something toward helping those who need it.

"The Crooked Man" can be said to have a religious background of sorts, along with *The Sign of the Four*, for the crimes in both stories trace their roots to the horrors of the Indian Mutiny in 1857. The Mutiny (or, as it is now called by some writers in India, the "First War of Independence") was in part a religious event, an uprising by Hindus who felt that their religion was being insulted and oppressed by their British Christian rulers. I have no intention of trying to untangle the relationships of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs as they were in 1857 and as they are portrayed in these stories, particularly as Conan Doyle seems to have been amazingly cavalier about names, and managed to create a character named Mahomet Singh, who presumably was both Muslim and Sikh. (He was just as bad when he created names for *The Mystery of Cloomber*, ending up with alleged Buddhists named Ram Singh and Goolab Shah.)

In *The Sign of the Four*, Jonathan Small is inclined to class the lot as “devil-worshippers,” although he later makes a pact with three of the Sikhs that he clearly intends to keep. “But,” as Abdullah Khan tells him, “the Sikh knows the Englishman, and the Englishman knows the Sikh.” It may be important to note that Sikhism, like Christianity—but unlike popular Hinduism—worships a single God and takes its doctrine from a holy book, so there is some affinity. But both the so-called Christians in this story and the so-called Sikhs, for all their “solemn oaths,” end up behaving in ways that hardly do justice to their religions.

The most casual observation of human behavior, never mind the close observation one might expect from Sherlock Holmes, makes it clear that even the best rarely live up to what they profess. The Christian term for this failing is “original sin,” and it means the gap, which seems to be part of our very nature, between what we know is right and what we do. It is traditional to blame this imperfection on Adam and Eve, and to say that their sin of disobedience (or apple theft, if you want to look at it this way) put a taint on all.

It only remains to add that at least there is a bright side. If people habitually followed the precepts of their religions—Presbyterianism, Mormonism, Judaism, Sikhism, Islam, or any of the others—there would not be much occasion for detectives and detective stories. The young men of the Mormon settlements would not lust after innocent maidens, and Sikh sentries who learned the location of a fabulous treasure would not kill to gain possession of it. And there would be no tales of Sherlock Holmes for us to read. But religion remains an ideal rather than a goal we have achieved, and so there still is crime, and there still are stories of crime—and *A Study in Scarlet*, however unhistorical and unfair it may be, still rings very true.