

**Peter Jeffery**

### **Secret Gospel: Response to the Panelists**

I thank all the panelists for their thoughtful contributions. As before, I will start with observations about Clement, the putative author, and then move to observations about Morton Smith. Robin Jensen's summary of Thomas Talley's theory correctly shows that, in trying to use the Secret Gospel to explain the organization of Lent in Constantinople, he had to hypothesize an Alexandrian lectionary that never existed. Though I considered him a dear friend, I have to say he did not make sufficient use of suggestions I made to him regarding either Alexandrian or Palestinian lectionary evidence that pointed in a different direction from his conclusions.

We could use more study of the various groups Clement of Alexandria opposed. The unnamed libertine group that Jensen mentions (Strom 3.18.109) was not the only one, there was another that made a practice of "corrupting boys" (Strom. 3.36.5). But these groups were evidently not the Carpocratians, which Clement criticized for sharing wives on the model of Plato's Republic. The author of the Mar Saba text picked the wrong heretical group, inspired, evidently, by Scholem's picture of the Frankists. Clement does speak about life and death symbolism in connection with baptism, but not about bodily resurrection. The Pauline doctrine of baptism as incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus is remarkably absent in patristic writers of the second century, as first noted by André Benoît in his 1953 book, *Le Baptême chrétien au second siècle: La théologie des Pères*, Études d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses de l'Université de Strasbourg 43 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953). Particularly informative here is Clement's *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, where the life and death symbolism is sandwiched between two paragraphs that reference Jesus' own baptism in the Jordan, the dominant symbolism for every Alexandrian group about which we have information. In the same way, Clement's most famous and extensive passage on baptism does equate it with illumination and perfection; indeed this passage is alluded to in the Mar Saba text. But when the passage is read in its entirety, once again the key idea is that Jesus, unlike us, was already perfect when he was baptized by John; no Easter, Passover, or Resurrection event is being referenced here. Clement of Mar Saba's theology of Christian initiation simply cannot be reconciled with Clement of Alexandria's.

As for Raymond Lawrence's "less heated" conversation, I certainly think Clement of Alexandria frowned on sex outside of marriage, and frankly even with marriage. I am not prepared to debate whether that was the general Christian view as I have tended to

assume. I do suspect that Galatians 3:28, “there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus” is more likely to be about celibacy than proto-feminism. But Lawrence knows more about this than I do. I think the fact that his perspective is more clinical than academic is very important to “the hot conversation,” however. From my own experience working as a trained volunteer on a suicide hotline, I know that Smith’s writings, and especially his memoir *The Secret Gospel*, are full of statements that the average academic would pass over, but that would be red flags to a clinician. They go well beyond the mistrust of psychiatry that would be understandable in a homosexual of Smith’s generation. Among them are Smith’s frequent protestations that he cannot trust his own memory, as if warning us that we should not either.

I also agree with Lawrence that a sympathetic, objective, and well-documented biography of Morton Smith ought to be written while there are still many witnesses around who remember him. Besides the question of the Mar Saba text, his experiences in the Holy Land during World War II, as an Episcopal clergyman, in the academic cultures of Harvard, Hebrew University, Brown, and Columbia would all be fascinating. I do not intend to undertake such a huge project so far from my home field, and I fear that some of the many people I would need to interview would not trust me at this stage. But I have assembled a lot of information preliminary to such a project. The unpublished letters in the back of my handout shed light on Smith’s decision to remain an inactive priest, despite the urging of his bishops to either return to active ministry or formally exit the priesthood. This seems to me an honest and responsible decision on Smith’s part. What Smith says about the Mar Saba text, on the other hand, is identical to what he says in his books, and therefore has the same truth value, whatever that is. A statement does not become truer by being repeated more often.

The difficulties that would face any biographer are illustrated by the fact that the stories I have heard about Smith range widely and often contradict other stories. Two people told me that Smith left the priesthood after being caught in a sexual situation with a young boy, but Freedom of Information requests to the police departments in the cities where Smith lived have so far failed to turn up any record of such an incident, nor does the Episcopal church admit to having any such records. Others have said that as a Columbia professor he used to sexually harass attractive male students, but many former students remember him as a helpful and caring mentor. I was told he was so cruel to women students that one of them paid somebody to throw a pie in his face, yet Robin Jensen’s experience of Smith was that he was “unfailingly gracious.” I haven’t had the patience to go to Columbia and leaf through the campus newspaper issue by issue to try to verify that the pie-throwing incident actually happened—one of many onerous tasks I will leave to Smith’s eventual biographer.

However, I did have extensive discussions with Donald Capps about the unpublished material I had collected, and his paper references some of this. Among them is a 1995 conversation about Smith’s mental health and strange behavior that anyone can access in the archives of the b-greek e-mail discussion list, b-greek-digest V1 #708- 713 (<http://www.ibiblio.org/bgreek/archives/greek-3/msg01038.html> to <http://www.ibiblio.org/bgreek/archives/greek-3/msg01043.html>). I was unaware of this conversation when I wrote my own book. I approached Capps because I was taking so much heat from reviewers who accused me of gratuitously defaming Smith. One question

I asked him what he thought of my idea that Morton Smith probably suffered from Bipolar II disorder. His writings, I thought, revealed many of the criteria that define a Hypomanic Episode in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV TR* (p. 368): Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity. Extreme talkativeness evident in his compulsion to pontificate authoritatively on subjects about which he had little actual knowledge (such as comparative religion, Christian liturgy and ethics, psychiatry). His tendency to overwhelm the reader by piling up huge quantities of relevant and irrelevant evidence might be seen as "racing thoughts" or distractibility. Bipolar II is less crippling than Bipolar I, and in their manic periods people with Bipolar II are able to achieve at a high level of creativity and productivity. Planting a false document in a monastery library in order to publish it as a discovery is surely the kind of high-risk behavior that typifies people in manic states. But any discussion of this kind runs into another question. As a musicologist I am very aware that every text is an authorial performance: to what extent should the pen-and-ink Smith be identified with the flesh-and-blood Smith?

But as a non-professional, I think Capps is probably right that Narcissistic Personality Disorder makes more sense than Bipolar II. The most remarkable thing is how Smith, in his Harvard book, went out of his way to quote and identify unpublished opinions by the eminent scholars of his time, even taking the unprecedented step of listing all these people by their initials in his bibliography. This kind of networked approach to leaving no one unbesmirched is why I described this affair as "the most grandiose and reticulated fuck you ever perpetrated in the long and vituperative history of scholarship." If Smith's forgery is justifiable as a light-hearted "teachable moment" aimed at the whole profession, why did he make such a point of implicating so many prominent individuals by name? And, of course, why did he not reveal the hoax in short order so that the lesson could be learned and everyone get back to work?

I have not turned up any confirmation that Smith was interested in Harry Houdini, though I did hear a story that suggests an early interest in magical escape. According to this tale, Smith once amused someone at an SBL meeting by saying that, as a child, he was forced to go and live with a relative he didn't want to live with. To solve this problem he pretended to sleep walk, pulling pranks each night such as turning items of furniture upside down. This gem of a story would be highly revealing if a biographer could confirm that it happened, since it implies that Smith grew up in an environment where he was not allowed to express his feelings, and therefore resorted to bizarre pranks and falsified altered states of consciousness of the sort that he later attributed to Jesus and his followers. But because I cannot confirm it, it remains within the oral tradition. Perhaps it will provoke those who knew Smith best to compile a biography that they consider accurate and fair. I would welcome such a book, and I would not be the only one. Like the strange tale of the alleged Nietzsche book *My Sister and I*, it would reveal a lot about the history of religion, magic, sexuality, and academia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the era which, I maintain, provides the true historical context for the Mar Saba text.

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