November, 2008

"Sick Souls" and the Faith of Cubs Fans

Eric Bain-Selbo
In 1902, during a decade in which we could legitimately talk about a Cubs dynasty, the psychologist and philosopher Williams James published *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This wide-ranging and important work quickly became a key text in the academic study of religion. The subtitle of the book is *A Study in Human Nature*. Indeed, James provides us with a compelling account not only of the nature of the religious life and mind but of human life and mind more generally. One of the key distinctions that he makes is between the “healthy minded” and the “sick souled.” This famous distinction certainly is applicable to any analysis of the Cubs faithful, and provides insights into the tortured psyches of baseball’s most heart-broken fans.

A “healthy minded” person is one who has a soul of “sky-blue tint, whose affinities are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions, who can think no ill of man or God, and in whom religious gladness” is an inherent quality (James, 79-80). The “healthy minded” have a temperament “weighted on the side of cheer and fatally forbidden to linger, as those of opposite temperament linger, over the darker aspects of the universe” (James, 82). This attitude, however, is not simply exclusive to particular religious people nor are most people devoid of it. “In fact, we all do cultivate it more or less,” James argues. “We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a
poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is” (James, 87).

While the “healthy minded” may live a contented and pleasant life, let’s face it, they can be pretty annoying. James concludes that the “healthy minded” have a “constitutional incapacity for prolonged suffering, and . . . a tendency to see things optimistically is like a water of crystallization in which the individual’s character is set” (James, 114). Give me a break! Doesn’t such a “pie-in-the-sky-the-glass-is-always-half-full-keep-on-the-sunny-side-of-life” personality strike us as naïve and shallow at best and psychologically imbalanced and dangerous at worst? Wouldn’t you just want to slap such a person? But does that mean we want to have the capacity for “prolonged suffering”? Do we want to be Cubs fans? Do we want to have a “sick soul” instead?

Probably not. The “sick souled” are of “the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence” (James, 116). While the “sanguine and healthy-minded live habitually on the sunny side of their misery-line, the depressed and melancholy live beyond it, in darkness and apprehension,” James observes. He adds, “There are men who seem to have started in life with a bottle or two of champagne [what teams drink, by the way, when they win a championship] inscribed to their credit; whilst others seem to have been born close to the pain-threshold, which the slightest irritants fatally send them over” (James, 120). While having a “sick soul” refers to a form of introspection that denigrates the self, “sick soul” also refers to an outward view of the world around us. From this viewpoint the world “looks remote, strange, sinister, uncanny. Its color is gone, its breath is cold” (James, 132). In sum, the “sick soul” is one that sees itself and the world as lacking, as failing. James concludes:
Failure, then, failure! so the world stamps us at every turn. We strew it with our blunders, our misdeeds, our lost opportunities, with all the memorials of our inadequacy to our vocation. And with what a damning emphasis does it then blot us out! No easy fine, no mere apology or formal expiation, will satisfy the world’s demands, but every pound of flesh exacted is soaked with all its blood. (James, 122)

What better describes the Cubs faithful? Failure? No team can top the now 100 years of failure by the Cubs. Blunders? There are many. There was the grounder through Leon Durham’s legs as the Cubs lost the decisive fifth game to the Padres in 1984. Even this year in the divisional series the Cubs committed four errors in a disastrous 10-3 defeat to the Dodgers in game two. Lost opportunities? There are many—the infamous collapse of 1969 when the Cubs blew an 8-1/2 game lead on August 19 to end up losing the division by 8 games to the Mets (who, by the way, went on to win the World Series); the disappointment of 1984 when the Cubs demolished the Padres in the first two games of the league championship series, only to lose three straight (it was the best of five then) and miss another chance to make it to the World Series; and, of course, there was 2003 when the Cubs were a mere five outs away (and leading three to nothing) from winning the National League Championship Series and a fan—a Cubs fan!—prevented Moises Alou from catching a foul ball in the stands, leading to a Marlins rally that won game six and setting up a heartbreaking game seven loss the next night. And though the “pounds of flesh” exacted from Cubs fans may not be “soaked in blood,” they are drenched in tears.

Ideally, Cubs fans would find some balance in their lives between “healthy-mindedness” and being a “sick soul.”
But that’s not the life of a Cubs fan. Though Cubs fans hold out hope that their team will one day win the big prize, though they keep that faith, they nevertheless view the universe as an agent actively working against their desires. Lonnie Wheeler writes: “Every spring holds the blithe hope that perhaps this is the season in which Satan will grow weary and ease up on the headlock in which he has diabolically held Chicago’s mightily struggling National League baseball team since its last world championship in 1908” (Fulk and Riley, 203). Given that the forces of darkness are at work against the Cubs, it is little wonder that the team constantly would bring heartache and sorrow. The columnist George Will writes of becoming a Cubs fan as a child growing up in central Illinois: “Barely advanced beyond the bib-and-cradle stage, I plighted my troth to a baseball team destined to dash the cup of life’s joy from my lips” (Fulk and Riley, 172). Will also claims that Cubs fans “are ninety-three percent scar tissue” (Senor, 39-40).

Despite all this “doom and gloom,” Cubs fans somehow hold out hope—and in this sense exemplify religious commitment. In an essay entitled “Should Cubs Fans Be Committed,” Thomas Senor concludes: “There are dark days for the devout, days when joy is gone and peace is not found, when even the eyes of the faithful see a world that appears without meaning and mercy. During these times the faithful who are virtuous do not lose hope” (Senor, 54). But that doesn’t mean that the faithful are “healthy-minded,” and certainly the Cubs faithful are not. Their hope is always couched in a deep suspicion and wariness about the world—realizing that at any moment it will crush their hope like Jonathan Edwards’ God crushing the insignificant spider. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that even if someone is born with “healthy mindedness,” being a Cubs fan will drive that out of him. As Senor notes, “aligning yourself with the
Cubs is setting yourself up for pain and disappointment” (Senor, 45). But perhaps the Cubs fan can at least take solace or pride in this insight from James. He writes:

The method of averting one’s attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one’s self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth. (James 140)

So enjoy your championships you Yankees and Sox (Red and White) and just about everyone else. Cubs fans might not experience the joy of victory, but they have a better grasp of reality. They perceive a deeper level of truth. So take that you “healthy minded”! Go “sick souls”! Cubs win!

References