Reflections on Secular Anti-Mormonism

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Anti-Mormonism of the evangelical kind has come, with a few exceptions, to bore me intensely. It is not only that it tends to be repetitious and uninteresting. (My friend and colleague William Hamblin and I have laughed about doing an autobiographical film entitled *Bill and Dan's Excellent Adventure in Anti-Mormon Zombie Hell*.) It is not merely that the same arguments reappear ad nauseam, no matter how often they have been refuted, and that reviewing essentially the same book for the thirty-second time grows tiresome. (One definition of *insanity* is that the insane one keeps doing the same thing over and over and over again and expects to get different results.) It is also the deep streak of intellectual dishonesty that runs through much of the countercult industry, the triumphalism that exaggerates and even invents problems on the Mormon side while effectively pretending that no problems remain to be addressed on the so-called "Christian" side. (This could not possibly be more clearly illustrated than in recent evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant use of DNA data to cast doubt on the Book of Mormon. In what can only be described as a display of either stunning ignorance or appalling cynicism, these anti-Mormon crusaders ignore the fact that the assumptions fundamental to current deep-historical DNA studies flatly contradict traditional

A similar version of this paper was presented at the Seventh Annual FAIR Conference at the South Towne Exposition Center, Sandy, Utah, on 5 August 2005.

and widely held conservative Protestant understandings of the book of Genesis.)[1]

I believe that secular anti-Mormonism, which I often find much more interesting and intellectually challenging, will constitute the real locus of action in coming years. I call this essay "Reflections on Secular Anti-Mormonism"; oddly, the descriptor that actually came to my mind for it was the title that the great nineteenth-century German biblical scholar and orientalist Julius Wellhausen gave to one of his publications: *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten* ("Sketches and Preparatory Studies"), and my ruminations should really be seen as merely preliminary thoughts. I will be discussing mostly people who happen to be on the political "left," simply because secularism tends to be associated with that political tendency; evangelical anti-Mormonism, by contrast, is often found among people who trend politically rightward (a fact that may cause difficulties for the Latter-day Saint governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, should he seek the Republican nomination for the U.S. presidency in 2008).[2]

A Message Board Jam-Packed with Angry Apostates

One message board that I like to monitor is, in its way, a kind of wildlife preserve for secular anti-Mormons. Although it is of unquestionable sociological and psychological interest, it offers little if anything of intellectual merit. What was once said of William Jennings Bryan could be said of even many of the star posters on this message board: "One could drive a prairie schooner through any part of his argument and never scrape against a fact."[3] Several, even, of the

1. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Of 'Galileo Events,' Hype, and Suppression: Or, Abusing Science and Its History," *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): xvi–xxxi, where I discuss the videocassette *DNA vs. the Book of Mormon* (Brigham City, UT: Living Hope Ministries, 2003).

2. Why seemingly unrelated positions in politics and beyond are, in fact, commonly associated in clusters, so that if a person's opinion of one issue is known, her opinion of another is often fairly predictable, is a fascinating question. Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), attempts to address the issue from a politicoeconomic point of view.

3. Reportedly said by David Houston, one of Bryan's colleagues in Wilson's Cabinet. See John A. Garraty, "Bryan: The Progressives, Part I," *American Heritage* 13/1 (1961): 6.

contributors with the greatest intellectual pretensions on the board have consistently demonstrated themselves incapable of accurately summarizing Latter-day Saint positions and arguments, let alone of genuinely engaging them. Even the most learned and widely respected Latter-day Saint authors are mocked and denigrated and their positions caricatured. Thus, for instance, Richard L. Bushman, winner of the Bancroft Prize and Gouverneur Morris Professor of History, Emeritus, at Columbia University in New York City, recently had the temerity to publish a fine biography of Joseph Smith that does not toe the board's militantly anti-Mormon line.[4] Accordingly, one of the regulars at the site declares him "an out-and-out flack 'historian,'" "no more a genuine historian than Hulk Hogan is a real wrestler." As another critic put it, Dr. Bushman's book has merely "a veneer of credibility." These remarks are typical of what one finds taking the place of argument and careful analysis on this board. To disagree with these people is to confess oneself either a ridiculous buffoon or a mendacious scoundrel, or both. No evidence or analysis is required to demonstrate guilt. That is simply assumed.

It is hard not to think in this context of Groucho Marx. "From the moment I picked up your book until I laid it down," Groucho wrote to the novelist Sydney Perelman, "I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend reading it."[5] Many on this particular message board seem to be of the same mentality as the academic who was asked whether he had read the new book by Professor Jones. "Read it?" he replied. "Why, I haven't even reviewed it yet!"[6]

What the board does offer are displays of bravado and strutting, of believers' arguments completely misunderstood and misrepresented, of bold challenges hurled out to those who are systematically barred

4. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

5. Attributed to Julius Henry "Groucho" Marx. See, for example, the Wikimedia Foundation, "Groucho Marx," *Wikiquote,* at wikiquote.org/wiki/Groucho_Marx (accessed 6 January 2006).

6. Sydney Smith (1771–1845), English clergyman and essayist, reportedly said, "I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so." See Hesketh Pearson, *The Smith of Smiths: Being the Life, Wit, and Humour of Sydney Smith* (London: Harper, 1934), ch. 3.

from responding, and of guffaws of triumph over enemies who are not permitted to reply. Dissent is rigidly excluded from this board, even as its denizens criticize the church for its supposed "repressiveness." However, notwithstanding the rigorous exclusion of all troublesome dissent from their domain, the faith these posters have in their own unanswerably brilliant selves is oddly refreshing to see in atheists, whom you would not expect to believe in any God at all.

Voltaire once explained that "My prayer to God is a very short one: 'Oh, Lord, make my enemies ridiculous.' God," he said, "has granted it."[7]

But this does not exhaust the pleasures of that message board. It is rife with personal abuse and bloodcurdling hostility, not uncommonly obscene, directed against people the posters do not know and have not met—against President Hinckley, Joseph Smith, the Brethren, the general membership of the church, and even, somewhat obsessively, against one particular rather insignificant BYU professor. Ordinary members of the church—*Morgbots* or *Morons* or *Sheeple,* in the mocking jargon of the board—are routinely stereotyped as insane, ignorant, tyrannical, emotionally impoverished, cheap, bigoted, ill-mannered, irrational, sexually repressed, stupid, dishonest, greedy, foolish, rude, sick, brain-dead, and uncultured. There was once even a thread—and I am not making this up—devoted to discussing how Mormons noisily slurp their soup in restaurants. Posts frequently lament the stupidity and gullibility of church leaders, neighbors, parents, spouses, siblings, and even offspring—who may be wholly unaware of the anonymous poster's secret double life of contemptuous disbelief. It is a splendid cyber illustration of the finger-pointing and mocking found in the "great and spacious building" of 1 Nephi. Whenever the poisonous culture of the place is criticized, however, its defenders take refuge in the culture of victimhood, deploying a supposed need for therapeutic self-expression as their all-encompassing excuse.

Contemplating a depressing number of the posters on that board, I have thought to myself, "If this is what liberation from the Mormon 'myth' makes you—a vulgar and sometimes duplicitous crank, cack-

7. Voltaire, letter to Étienne-Noel Damilaville, 16 May 1767.

ling with malice and spite—then I would prefer to spend the few brief years left to me (before I dissolve into the irreversible and never-ending oblivion many of the board's atheistic contributors prophesy for me and all humankind) with people who have not been liberated." I think of the apostates of Ammonihah, mocking Alma and Amulek in prison, "gnashing their teeth upon them, and spitting upon them, and saying: How shall we look when we are damned?" (Alma 14:21). Surely the damned will not look much different from this.

But I am troubled by the capacity even of far less malevolent message boards to supply a supportive sort of ersatz community as an alternative to the fellowship of the Saints, and I worry about what participation on even relatively benign boards does to some Latter-day Saint souls. I have in mind one frequent poster in particular, who claims simply to be doubting and troubled, but who in fact never misses an opportunity for a snide remark about his church, in which he remains active, and its teachings. However, the question of the truth or falsity of Mormonism—and of Christianity and theism generally, however one ultimately answers it—does not appear to deserve laughter and cheap jokes. These teachings involve weighty matters of utmost import. Millions have placed their hopes in the gospel's message, and, if this were false, it would be tragic and unutterably sad. Perhaps the cynicism that this poster and many others cultivate is no more than a psychologically understandable defensive shell, a self-protective whistling past the graveyard of doubt. But, even so, it is a shell that will, I fear, block the Spirit. I am not optimistic about his long-term prospects, barring a fundamental shift in attitude (and, even less likely, I fear, perhaps in personality).

Characteristic of much secularizing anti-Mormon participation on the Web is a corrosive cynicism that, in my experience, will erode *anything* with which it comes in contact. It is not so much a reasoned intellectual stance as an attitude, or even, perhaps, a personality type. Those afflicted with such cynicism are like the dwarfs toward the end of the last book in C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, who are, as Aslan expresses it, so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out of the walls in which they have enclosed themselves. Such

people claim to know the price of everything and everyone, although they seem to recognize the value of nothing. But the problem may well be in the cynic rather than in the object of his scorn. "No man," as the French saying goes, "is a hero to his valet."[8] Why? The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel is surely right when he responds: "Not because the former is not a hero, but because the latter is a valet."[9]

European Secularism

A more interesting form of secular anti-Mormonism springs out of, or at least is related to, elite European secularism generally.

Some years ago, with time on my hands following the close of an academic gathering in Graz, Austria, I spent the better part of a day looking through the city's bookstores. The dollar being weak, prices being high, and my luggage being cramped, I did much more looking and browsing than buying. I soon discovered an extraordinarily interesting topic: The treatment of Mormonism in travel books published for America-bound Europeans. Since then, I have enjoyed many similar books in French and Italian bookstores as well as across Germanic Europe. Almost uniformly, the tone is one of astonishment—subtly expressed or, often, quite open—at the stupidity and gullibility of the Latter-day Saints. Additionally, Mormon history and doctrine are plainly deemed too patently absurd to justify much effort at accuracy.

But Latter-day Saints represent merely an opportunity for a more general European attitude to focus on a particularly ludicrous target. In a recent book attempting to explain the American mind to bemused German speakers, Professor Hans-Dieter Gelfert observes that,

8. "Il n'y a pas de grand homme pour son valet-de-chambre." Ascribed to the French wit and woman of letters Mme A. M. Bigot de Cornuel (1614–94). See Charlotte Élizabeth Aïssé, *Lettres de Mademoiselle Aïssé à Madame Calandrini,* 5th ed. (Paris: Dentu, 1853), 161.

9. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction,* trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 87–88. Hegel was born in 1770 and died in 1831. A variant of Mme de Cornuel's observation also appears in the German poet Goethe (1749–1832): "To a valet, no man is a hero" (*Es gibt für den Kammerdiener keiner Helden*). See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften,* ed. Hugh B. Nisbet and Hans S. Reiss (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971).

> To Europeans, American religiosity must necessarily seem naïve, if not primitive. Here [in Germany], educated people are assisted, above all, by enlightened [*aufgeklärte*] theologians who reinterpret Christian teaching as an ethical doctrine suited for the everyday, but at the same time philosophically abstract. In the meanwhile, there are pastors who believe that they can get by altogether without mentioning God's name. It's completely different in America, where the Bible is still the Word of God.[10]

According to Phil Zuckerman, of Pitzer College, rates of agnosticism or atheism in Scandinavia, the Czech Republic, and France reach levels higher than 50 percent.[11] There and elsewhere, underused churches are being converted into concert halls, museums, art galleries, stores, restaurants, condos, even nightclubs. In Scandinavia, for some reason, it is popular to transform churches into carpet stores.[12] It is well known that the late Pope John Paul II believed that the future of Catholicism lay, not in spiritually dying Europe, but to the south, in Latin America and, perhaps even more so, in Africa. Benedict XVI appears to share that view, with reason.

"In the eyes of many if not most Europeans," Professor Gelfert observes, "American taste is equivalent to tastelessness."[13] (One is tempted to suggest that, given their own still relatively recent history of something rather worse than poor taste, a bit of humility might be in order for the Germans, at least. And I say this as something of a Germanophile.) Thus, European disdain for American religiosity functions as part of a broader contempt for American culture, nicely embodied, as a surprisingly large number of residents of both the

10. Hans-Dieter Gelfert, *Typisch amerikanisch: Wie die Amerikaner wurden, was sie sind* (Munich: Beck, 2002), 17, translation by the author for all Gelfert quotations.

11. Phil Zuckerman, cited in Joel Kotkin, "Sects and the City: The New Urbanists Have Forgotten Thousands of Years of History," *Weekly Standard,* 2 May 2005, 32. In Japan, which, obviously, has a very different cultural and religious background, roughly 65 percent of the population is atheistic, whereas, by contrast, just under 10 percent of Americans so identify themselves. See Kotkin, "Sects and the City," 32.

12. Kotkin, "Sects and the City," 33.

13. Gelfert, *Typisch amerikanisch,* 136.

Continent and the British Isles see it, in George Bush—our religious fanatic cowboy president. And what could be more American than the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, widely known for its freshly scrubbed, naïve, nineteen-year-old missionaries, often hailing from the American West.

Anti-Mormonism in Europe is overwhelmingly of the secular variety; evangelical anti-Mormonism, on the whole, is no more than a minor irritant because the same general European secularism that directly challenges missionary success on the Continent and in the British Isles also confronts and hampers evangelicals. But secularist anti-Mormonism is doing real damage to many fragile testimonies there, and an adequate response has still not materialized. This is a challenge that apologists in Europe itself but also in the church's American home base urgently need to address.

The Media

The eminent German-American sociologist of religion Peter Berger once famously observed that, if India was the most religious of nations and Sweden the most secular, the United States appeared to be a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes.[14] For the gap between ordinary Americans and the American elite on religious matters is vast, and perhaps growing.

At least since the famous study by Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter of attitudes among elite journalists,[15] it has been clear—and the finding has been replicated in several studies since—that the chattering classes, as they have been termed, are far to the "left" of the American mainstream in terms of social attitudes, political preferences, and religious beliefs. Congregated, for the most part, along the two coasts (and notably in New York and Los Angeles), elite journal-

14. Peter L. Berger, in an interview with Krista Tippet; see "Globalization and the Rise of Religion," the 19 May 2005 episode of the public radio program *Speaking of Faith*. For a transcript, go to speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/globalization/transcript.shtml (accessed 6 January 2006).

15. See, for example, S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter, *The Media Elite* (Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1986).

ists, screenwriters, producers, and directors are isolated—liberated?—from much of the rest of America, which they term "fly-over country." Its ways are strange, foreign, and threatening. As shown in probably a dozen or more films during the terrifying Reagan years of the 1980s, innocent urbanites whose cars broke down in, say, San Bernardino County, were very likely to fall prey to corrupt southern-accented fascists in murderous small-town police states where rampant intermarriage was obvious in the very faces of the slack-jawed yokels. A friend of mine, born and raised in New York City and educated at Johns Hopkins and Princeton, caught the spirit of the outlook beautifully, if unintentionally, when he told me, years ago, of what was to that point his only transcontinental journey, a jet airplane jaunt to visit his girlfriend in Berkeley: "There really *isn't* anything," he said in an awestruck voice, "between the East Coast and California." I thought immediately of those maps that show the United States as seen from New York: a rather detailed image of Manhattan, with the Great Plains stretching out featurelessly behind until the Golden Gate Bridge appears to break the monotony.

In a recent magazine article, Joel Kotkin, an incisive observer of social trends, supplies a nice, concrete example:

> When Fargo, North Dakota, businessman Howard Dahl boards a plane for the East Coast or flies to Europe and beyond, he is often struck by the views of the people he encounters, especially their preconceptions about his part of the country. "There's a lot of condescension. You'd think no one here ever read a book," Dahl says, "or ever had a thought about anything. They think we're religious fanatics."[16]

How much more so, then, Salt Lake City? Since, as studies have shown, journalists strongly tend, on the whole, to be secular, politically liberal, anticorporate, and socially and morally "progressive," Mormonism constitutes a perfect target. They will be naturally antipathetic to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a church

16. Kotkin, "Sects and the City," 30.

that is widely regarded as socially retrograde, politically conservative, and hierarchically corporate.

"Still today," writes Gelfert,

> Americans promote a striking hero cult with regard to the great figures of their history. In England, a tendency to dismantle onetime heroes set in after the First World War, with Lytton Strachey's book *Eminent Victorians* (1918). The same thing happened in Germany after the Second World War. Whenever, among us, an article appears in *Spiegel* about a once-revered heroic figure from German history, one can just about wager that this person will have lost his luster thereafter.[17]

In this regard, American journalism seems very, very European. Since the days of Woodward and Bernstein and Watergate, it has tended to be adversarial, very often operating on the presumption of a guilty cover-up. What could be a more inviting target for contemporary journalists than a church with a highly controversial, very visible, and widely documented history, and wielding considerable economic power, that claims to be led by living prophets and apostles? It is heroes and valets, all over again.

The prominent Pennsylvania State historian of religion Philip Jenkins, commenting on secularism among political and social liberals, notes

> a rich vein of bilious anti-clericalism, that class-based contempt that imagines every pastor as Elmer Gantry, every believer as a budding recruit for the Christian Taliban, and every Catholic as a mind-manacled helot of a pederastic priesthood. This tendency reached its apex at the [Democratic] party's

17. Gelfert, *Typisch amerikanisch,* 76. One wonders whether the psychosocial character of the "Bloomsbury group," to which Strachey belonged, helped to motivate a desire to "unmask" erstwhile heroes (and whether it was related to the striking lack of interest in long-term consequences encapsulated in the notorious remark by John Maynard Keynes, another member of the "group," that, "*in the long run* we are all dead"; see John M. Keynes, *A Tract on Monetary Reform,* vol. 4 of The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes [London: Macmillan, 1971], 65). If so, one might speculate even further about certain contemporary secularist ex-Mormon groups.

> 1992 convention, at which liberal and pro-labor Pennsylvania Gov. Bob Casey was excluded from the rostrum because of his opposition to abortion, while feminists handed out badges caricaturing Casey in papal robes.[18]

Amusingly, every element of the attitude toward mainstream Christianity mentioned by Jenkins, down to the very language, can be paralleled—indeed, finds almost daily parallels—on my laboratory message board with regard to Mormonism. But this attitude is not confined merely to the fever swamps of Web bigotry. In an article published as recently as 15 July 2005, in a New Zealand periodical but evidently also in many other venues, the American leftist journalist Suzan Mazur, reporting on the corporate machinations of us Mormon theo-fascists, even included purported illustrations of the Latter-day Saint endowment ceremony. They were reproduced from that essential and utterly reliable 1882 classic, J. H. Beadle's *Polygamy; or, The Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism,*[19] and were accurate right down to details like the bishop's miters—clearly modeled on the pope's hat—worn by temple officiators.[20] (To those who have actually attended the temple yet have seen no such garb and no such rituals, Mr. Beadle might well say, as Groucho's brother, "Chico" Marx, once demanded, "Who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?").[21]

General Secular Antitheism

Agnosticism (or atheism) is the default setting in most circles of elite opinion, in the United States nearly as much as in Europe. To an

18. Philip Jenkins, "Prophets on the Right—and Left," review of *God's Politics,* by Jim Wallis, and *Exodus,* by Dave Shiflett, *American Conservative,* 6 June 2005, 31–32. See also the book note on Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice,* in *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 361–62.

19. J. H. Beadle, *Polygamy; or, The Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism* (Philadelphia: National, 1882).

20. See Susan Mazur, "Diebold and the Mormon Mason Handshake," *Scoop,* 15 July 2005, at www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0507/S00222.htm (accessed 12 December 2005).

21. Often mistakenly attributed to Groucho Marx, but really said by his brother, Leonard "Chico" Marx, in the 1933 film *Duck Soup,* while impersonating Groucho's character.

extent, secular anti-Mormonism is merely an illustration, or even an echo, of that broader phenomenon. An important articulation of this view is the British philosopher Antony Flew's essay "The Presumption of Atheism,"[22] though I note with considerable satisfaction that Professor Flew—probably the most vocally atheistic English-speaking philosopher since the death of Bertrand Russell in early 1970—recently announced that, compelled by what he sees as evidence for intelligent fine-tuning in the universe, he has abandoned his atheism and come to embrace a form of deism.[23]

Some nontheists are rather passive about their unbelief—one wit recently coined the term *apatheism* to describe the indifference to religion and religious issues that he regards as a distinguishing mark of modern intelligence—but some are extremely aggressive, even if they rarely descend to the crudity of the message board that is my preferred research location for field studies in intellectual pathology.

It is not uncommon, for example, to hear and read references to faith as "religious insanity."[24] "Religiosity," said the psychologist Albert Ellis,

> is in many respects equivalent to irrational thinking and emotional disturbance. . . . The elegant therapeutic solution to emotional problems is to be quite unreligious. . . . The less religious they are, the more emotionally healthy they will tend to be.[25]

In this, Ellis was only following the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. Religion, Freud wrote, is "the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity."[26]

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22. See Antony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism and Other Philosophical Essays on God, Freedom, and Immortality* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976). Julian Baggini, in his *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), sets out a similar argument.

23. See www.biola.edu/antonyflew (accessed 25 January 2006).

24. As cited, for example, by James R. Lewis, *Legitimating New Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 184–85.

25. Albert Ellis, "Psychotherapy and Atheistic Values: A Response to A. E. Bergin's 'Psychotherapy and Religious Values,'" *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 48 (1980): 637.

26. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion,* ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 55.

> Religion . . . imposes equally on everyone its own path to the acquisition of happiness and protection from suffering. Its technique consists in depressing the value of life and distorting the picture of the real world in a delusional manner. . . . At this price forcibly fixing them in a state of psychical infantilism and by drawing them into a mass-delusion, religion succeeds in sparing many people an individual neurosis. But hardly anything more.[27]

This is more sophisticated than the description of Morgbots constantly employed in my message board laboratory, but its general content is remarkably similar. Yet it is demonstrably wrong. The data rather consistently demonstrate that Latter-day Saints who live lives consistent with their religious beliefs experience greater general well-being, greater familial and marital stability, less delinquency, less depression, less anxiety, and less substance abuse than those who do not, and there is very little evidence that religious belief and practice are harmful to mental health.[28]

As James R. Lewis argues in his 2003 book *Legitimating New Religions,* "attacks on alternative religious groups are attempts to psychologize—to *medicalize*—a controversy that, on deeper examination, is clearly a controversy over ideology and lifestyle."[29] In language that cannot possibly fail to remind Latter-day Saints of evangelical anti-Mormonism but that, oddly, forms a point of contact with the most virulent forms of secular anti-Mormonism as well, Thomas Langham, reviewing Lewis's book for the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* remarks that

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27. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents,* ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 36.

28. See Daniel K. Judd, "Religiosity, Mental Health, and the Latter-day Saints: A Preliminary Review of Literature (1923–95)," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members,* ed. James T. Duke (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 473–97. This article was originally published as "An Overview of Mormonism and Mental Health," in *Mormon Identities in Transition,* ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 112–24.

29. Lewis, *Legitimating New Religions,* 185.

> opponents of new religious movements have worked to delegitimate them through acting as "moral entrepreneurs" who have used anti-cult ideologies to market negative stereotypes, like the "cult" label, to the broader community. Such activities have led new religious groups . . . to be classified as illegitimate "dangerous organizations."[30]

Yet, Lewis says,

> it is not self-evident that secularism should be the standard by which religion is evaluated. . . . [A] humanistic methodology . . . should attempt to describe religionists as acting out of reasonable motives rather than from errors of judgment or psychopathology.[31]

In fact, as is increasingly recognized nowadays, religious people tend to be healthier, not only mentally but even physically, than their irreligious counterparts.

With specific regard to Latter-day Saints, Utah death rates are below rates in the nation at large and in the Mountain States for most major causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, cerebrovascular disease, accidents, pulmonary disease, pneumonia/flu, diabetes, liver disease, and atherosclerosis. Utah suicide rates are higher than the national average, but lower than the Mountain States as a whole. Studies of specific LDS populations in California; Utah; and Alberta, Canada, show that Latter-day Saint men are about half as likely to die of cancer as other men. Latter-day Saint women also have lower cancer mortality, but the difference is not as great as for men. Death rates are lower for Latter-day Saints who have higher levels of religious participation. In short, adherence to the Mormon code of health appears to lower death rates from several diseases.[32] The benighted Morgbots seem to be doing rather well.

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30. Thomas C. Langham, review of *Legitimating New Religions,* by James R. Lewis, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73/2 (2005): 555.

31. Lewis, *Legitimating New Religions,* 226.

32. Tim B. Heaton, "Vital Statistics," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life,* 114–15. Compare James E. Enstrom, "Health Practices and Cancer Mortality among Active California Mor-

But what of the atheists and the agnostics? We need to take a look at another laboratory: contemporary Europe, which has not altogether unfairly been called a "godless continent." Europe is in a state not only of demographic but, arguably, of cultural barrenness, and it is certainly afflicted, these days, with a profound historical amnesia as its churches grow empty and the central role of Christianity in creating Europe and defining its identity is forgotten.

A striking drop has occurred in European birth and marriage rates, which Zuckerman connects with the equally striking decline in religious belief. "Religion," he says,

> seems to be critical to people's decision to raise children. People in these advanced industrial societies see children more and more as a liability. Some realize that this life is better without children. And you don't even need to get married since there is no legal advantage to doing so.[33]

Consider the following statistics out of the former Soviet republic of Latvia, drawn from remarks presented by Inese Slesere at the Sixth Annual World Family Policy Forum, held at the J. Reuben Clark Law School of Brigham Young University during the summer of 2005. Slesere, a member of the Latvian Saeima (Parliament), said that, between 1989 and 2004, the Latvian population decreased by 13 percent, from 2.6 million to 2.3 million. During the same period, the number of children aged seventeen and younger decreased by nearly 30 percent, from 681,000 to 469,000. In the meantime, other, less desirable, parameters are dramatically rising. With 61 percent of Latvian

mons," *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* 81 (1989): 1807–14, reprinted in *Latter-day Saint Social Life,* 441–60. Also James E. Enstrom, "Health Practices and Cancer Mortality among Active California Mormons, 1980–93," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life,* 461–71; John W. Gardner and Joseph L. Lyon, "Cancer in Utah Mormon Men by Lay Priesthood Level," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 116 (1982): 243–57; George K. Jarvis, "Mormon Mortality Rates in Canada," *Social Biology* 24 (1977): 294–302; Joseph L. Lyon, John W. Gardner, and Dee W. West, "Cancer Incidence in Mormons and Non-Mormons in Utah during 1967–75," *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* 65 (1980): 1055–61; James E. Smith, "Mortality," in *Utah in Demographic Perspective,* ed. Thomas K. Martin, Tim B. Heaton, and Stephen J. Bahr (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 59–69.

33. Cited in Kotkin, "Sects and the City," 32.

marriages ending in divorce, the nation's divorce rate is among the highest in Europe. More and more children are being born out of wedlock each year. Fully 39 percent of the Latvian children born in 2003 were illegitimate, as contrasted with only 17 percent in 1990. Yet, at the same time, the Latvian abortion rate is chillingly high. In 2003, for example, there were 691 abortions for every one thousand live births. As Slesere analyzes the situation, the bottom line is that half of the Latvian women aged between twenty-five and thirty-nine years have chosen not to give birth to children.[34]

But Zuckerman, who is himself professedly antireligious, is alarmed at the contrast of the low European birthrate with the high birthrates of the rapidly growing Muslim minorities within Europe. Muslims already make up at least a quarter of the residents of Rotterdam, Marseilles, and Malmö, Sweden, and 15 percent of the residents of Brussels, the capital of the European Union. Within the next few decades, several European cities will probably acquire Muslim majorities.[35] Observers have begun to speak of "Eurabia," and "Europistan." Others have alluded to what seems to be a "collective death wish" among Europeans, as their birthrates have fallen below levels required simply to replace themselves.[36]

During a trip to England a few years ago, I went beyond my habitual haunts into certain relatively nondescript parts of the country. While I have long been accustomed to the large Muslim population of London, I was astonished to see *halal* butcher shops and Muslim garb in the most ordinary towns. Virtually everywhere. Immediately after his assassination a few years ago, the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn was portrayed in the media as anti-immigration, which was true. But he was also portrayed as right wing, which was false. The reality was considerably more interesting than initial stereotypes suggested:

34. See Inese Slesere, "Latvia—Implementation of the Principles of the Doha Declaration," in *The Natural Family in the Third Millennium: Global Insights,* ed. A. Scott Loveless and Thomas B. Holman (Westport, CT: Praeger, forthcoming). I am grateful to A. Scott Loveless (JD, PhD) of the World Family Policy Center for providing the Latvian information to me.

35. Kotkin, "Sects and the City," 32–33.

36. See the information provided above on Latvia.

He was, in fact, a man of the left, and a practicing homosexual, who feared that the demographic ascendancy of scarcely assimilated conservative Muslims in his country would doom the ultrafree sexuality that he and many others currently value as essential to the culture of the modern Netherlands. And, surely, the recent murder of the filmmaker Theo Van Gogh on a midday street in Amsterdam by a Dutch Muslim, and the very recent London bombings carried out by British Muslims, seem to bear out his worries. "The best lack all conviction," wrote the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, "while the worst are full of passionate intensity."[37]

But, of course, however much she may wish she could, and however clearly she may see the benefits of belief, an unbeliever probably cannot, in most cases, simply will herself to believe. It simply does not work that way.

One vocal ex-Mormon critic explained at the most recent Sunstone symposium that it was a specific case of God's apparent failure to intervene to prevent evil that, rather suddenly, killed his faith. I take him at his word. I find his reaction plausible, even understandable, and see his subsequent arguments against Mormonism as derivative from that initial conclusion, which serves as their presupposition.

But, here, an observation needs to be made: If, as in this case, the unbeliever's loss of faith stems from what he might well regard and characterize as a particular, almost revelatory, realization, then whatever arguments he puts forward afterward will be, to some degree or other, *ad hoc,* designed—no less than those of apologists for *belief*—to support a paradigm that was actually chosen on different grounds.

For example, Dan Vogel's take on the witnesses[38] strikes me as embarrassingly strained and almost desperate. From his presupposed atheistic point of view, however—having conceded that the witnesses were both sane and sincere, but still unwilling to grant the accuracy of their statements—it is necessary, almost unavoidable, that he explain

37. William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats,* ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1996), 187.

38. Dan Vogel, "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon,* ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 79–121.

them away as nineteenth-century visionaries to some extent culturally incapable of distinguishing fantasy from reality.

It is a matter of what are sometimes termed "prior probabilities." As Sherlock Holmes said to Dr. Watson, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable,* must be the truth."[39]

The problem of evil itself—so lethal to the faith of that Sunstone atheist—will serve as an illustration of how paradigms and prior probabilities function in these matters. To an agnostic or an atheist, someone who assigns a very low probability (or even none at all) to the existence of God, the existence of massive human and natural evils in this world constitutes a serious and perhaps fatal, if not merely redundant, blow against theistic belief. To someone, however, who regards the existence of a benevolent and powerful God as probable, even highly probable or certain, on other grounds, the existence of such massive evils represents merely a problem to be worked out in the light of her theistic presuppositions. Her proposed solutions will seem gratuitously *ad hoc* to atheistic critics, but, from within her paradigm, function much the same way as refinements to broad scientific theories function under the stimulus of new data and problems. Similarly, defenders of the Book of Mormon are sometimes accused of *ad hoc* improvisations when, from their point of view, they are merely refining and making more precise a paradigm that they regard as reasonable and supportable on other grounds. However, as I have tried to illustrate, such refining is not restricted to theistic paradigms; it occurs just as clearly in naturalistic attempts to explain away claims of the divine. It is not a matter of black and white, but of relative plausibility and richness of explanation.

Some atheists are positively giddy with the good news of unbelief. One reason, of course, is the sadly checkered history of religious believers. "When one considers how much blood has been shed in the name of faith—in whatever God it might be—one might perhaps wish," says Gelfert, speaking this time not as a mere observer of the Americans

39. Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Sign of Four," in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1930), 111, emphasis in the original.

but as himself, a religiously skeptical European, "that the founders of expansionist religions, among which Christianity figures, had recommended not faith but humble doubt as the royal path to God."[40]

The very notion of strong religious belief has become suspect in the modern era, particularly since 9/11. Take, for example, the words of Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY), a very intelligent man who represents, in more ways than one, one of the bluest of the blue states, during a June 2003 hearing on the nomination of William Pryor to serve as a judge in the United States Court of Appeals:

> In Pryor's case, his beliefs are so well known, so deeply held, that it's very hard to believe, very hard to believe that they're not going to deeply influence the way he comes about saying, "I will follow the law." And that would be true of anybody who had very, very deeply held views.[41]

"Deeply held views," you see, is frequently a code term for *religious* views these days and savors of a dreaded theocracy. During a visit a few years ago to Iran, under the auspices and with the sponsorship of the regime there, I was pressed by more than a few of the two dozen or so other American academics who were part of the group to acknowledge the allegedly strong similarities between Utah and the Islamic Republic. It is fashionable in some circles to speak of Utah as a theocracy, and even of the Latter-day Saints as America's Taliban or, for short, the "Utaliban." Which is, of course, utter nonsense. But the avowedly antireligious Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven,* which portrays Mormons and Mormonism essentially as a violent threat to non–Latter-day Saints, was a recent bestseller.[42] Moreover, as I write, a new Hollywood film (entitled *September Dawn*), which will apparently use 1857's tragic Mountain Meadows Massacre to reinforce that image, is shortly to appear.

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40. Gelfert, *Typisch amerikanisch,* 151.

41. Cited in Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Certainty," *Time,* 6 June 2005, 96. Krauthammer's article is well worth reading in this context.

42. Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of a Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); see the review of Krakauer's book by Craig L. Foster, "Doing Violence to Journalistic Integrity," *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 149–74.

Critics of religious belief point recently to al-Qa'ida, the Taliban, and Wahhabism. But they should not be permitted to forget Josef Stalin, nor, for that matter, the entire murderous twentieth century, in which atheists and quasi atheists killed tens of millions. Hitler, a virulent anti-Christian, regarded humanity as a bacterium on the earth's surface. And Stalin railed against God even on his quite horrible deathbed in March of 1953. He had suffered a severe stroke that had left his right side paralyzed, and his last hours were spent in virtually unbearable pain. As his daughter Svetlana later reported, her father choked to death while those around his deathbed looked on. Although, at the very last, he had seemed at most merely semiconscious, he suddenly opened his eyes and looked about the room, plainly terrified. Then, according to Svetlana, "something incomprehensible and awesome happened that to this day I can't forget and don't understand." Stalin partially lifted himself in the bed, clenched his fist toward the heavens, and shook it defiantly. Then, with an unintelligible murmur, he dropped motionless back onto his pillow and died.[43]

I confess that I find those who rejoice in atheism baffling. It is not merely the thought of the atheist's funeral: "all dressed up with nowhere to go." I think of Beethoven, hiding down in the basement with pillows to his ears, desperately trying to save his fading sense of hearing as he was working on his majestic *"Emperor" Concerto*. Or, a little later, conducting the magnificent *Ninth Symphony,* which he never heard, having to be turned around by the concertmaster because he did not know that the audience was applauding him. I think of Mozart, feverishly trying to finish his own *Requiem*—dead at thirty-five and thrown into an unmarked pauper's grave. So many lives have been cut short, leaving so many poems unwritten, so many symphonies uncomposed, so many scientific discoveries unmade.

43. See Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Twenty Letters to a Friend,* trans. Priscilla J. McMillan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 5–11. See also the account given by Ravi Zacharias in his Harvard Veritas Forum, 19–20 November 1992. Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, was an eyewitness to the scene. Zacharias heard the story from Malcolm Muggeridge who, in his turn, based his report on three weeks of interviews with Alliluyeva, conducted for a three-part BBC series.

In fact, it is hard to think of *anyone* who has achieved his or her full potential in this life. Tragic foreshortenings do not only happen to geniuses. A neighbor and friend was stricken with multiple sclerosis in her midtwenties and now, in her thirties, lies bedridden in a rest home. Barring some incredible medical breakthrough, this is her life. Absent hope for a life to come, this is all she will *ever* have to look forward to. My own father, for the last six years of his life, blind from an utterly unforeseen stroke suffered during routine and relatively minor surgery, was incapable of any of the activities in which he had once found satisfaction and pathetically asked me, every few weeks, whether he would ever see again. What comfort would there be in saying, "No, Dad. This is it. Nothing good is coming. And then you'll die."

Of course, something may be unpalatable and unpleasant yet accurate. I can certainly understand coming to the sad conclusion that this is in fact the truth about the human condition: That we live briefly, then we die and we rot. That so, too, do our children and our grandchildren. And that so, also, does everything we create—our music, our buildings, our literature, our inventions. That "all we are is dust in the wind."[44]

But I cannot understand those who regard this as glorious good news.

Perhaps, on second thought, though, I can understand those who might see it as a liberation. "If there is no God," says Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, "that means everything is permitted."[45] Why? Because nothing matters at all. Everything is meaningless. However, this liberation comes at a very, very high price. "If we believe in nothing," said the great French writer and Nobel laureate Albert Camus,

> if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any

44. Kansas, "Dust in the Wind" ('70s lyrics), *Point of Know Return,* album, Epic/Legacy Recording, ZK 34929 © 1977 Don Kirschner.

45. It appears that Ivan never actually says this in the book; however, the *idea* is attributed to him by several characters. See, for example, Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 69, 81–82, 263, 589, and 625.

> importance. There is no pro or con: the murderer is neither right nor wrong. We are free to stoke the crematory fires or to devote ourselves to the care of lepers. Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.[46]
>
> At the point where it is no longer possible to say what is black and what is white, the light is extinguished and freedom becomes a voluntary prison.[47]

Consider, too, this supremely complacent remark, offered by a vocal atheist critic of Mormonism during a 2001 Internet discussion: "If there were a God," he reflected, "I think (s)he'd enjoy hanging out with me—perhaps sipping on a fine Merlot under the night sky while devising a grand unified theory." Only someone very comfortably situated could be so marinated in smugness about the question of the reality of God.

But the vast majority of the world's population is *not* so situated, and, for them, atheism, if true, is very bad news indeed. Most of the world's population, historically and still today, does not live, well fed and well traveled, to a placid old age surrounded by creature comforts. Most of the world has been and is like the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, the slums of Cairo, the backward rural villages of India, the famine-ridden deserts of northeastern Africa, the war-ravaged towns of the southern Sudan and of Rwanda. If there is going to be a truly happy ending for the millions upon millions of those whose lives have been blighted by torture, starvation, disease, rape, and murder, that ending will have to come in a future life. And such a future life seems to require a God.

Yes, the problem of evil is a huge one. But to give up on God is to give evil the final say. It is to admit that child rapists and murderers dictate the final chapters in the lives of their terrified and agonized victims; that Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot really did triumph, forever, over the millions they slaughtered; that, in the rotting corpses of Darfur and Iraqi Kurdistan, we see the final, definitive chapter of thousands of lives;

46. Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt,* trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 5.

47. Camus, *Rebel,* 71.

that there *is,* really, no hope for those whose health is in irreversible decline; that every human relationship ends in death, if not before.

This would not be good news, and I see no compelling reason to accept it. In fact, I see numerous persuasive reasons to reject the claim. But that is a subject not just for another occasion but, necessarily, for a great number of other occasions.

Secular anti-Mormons typically criticize the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on two broad grounds. First of all, they say that its claims are untrue. Second, they accuse it and its leaders of wrongdoing—with respect, for example, to the origins of plural marriage, its supposed manipulation of history, and the Mountain Meadows Massacre. But it is not clear that, on a purely secular and naturalistic basis, either form of critique can be coherent. In order for one or both types of criticism to be coherent, it may be that theism is a necessary precondition.

Permit me to explain, very briefly. I will take them in reverse order.

First, the critics' basis for criticizing Mormonism on moral grounds is unclear, and its coherence needs to be demonstrated. "Rebellion cannot exist," observes Camus, "without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right."[48] But on what basis can a materialist, whose universe is exhausted by material particles and the void, claim that something is objectively wrong? Do right and wrong not become matters merely of personal preference and, perhaps, of power? Not only existentialists but many superficial "life counselors" suggest that we should construct our own "meaning" for life. But is such a self-constructed meaning really meaning at all? Or is meaning not, rather, something that can only be *received* from another intelligence? And why should anybody else pay even the slightest attention to somebody's self-constructed "meaning"?

Camus observes of the atheistic French revolutionaries of 1793 that, when they effectively guillotined God, "they deprived themselves forever of the right to outlaw crime or to censure malevolent instincts."[49] "From

48. Camus, *Rebel,* 13.
49. Camus, *Rebel,* 39.

the moment that man submits God to moral judgment, he kills Him in his own heart. And then what is the basis of morality? God is denied in the name of justice, but can the idea of justice be understood without the idea of God?"[50] If those who deny any objective basis for morality nonetheless go on behaving morally and invoking morality, we can only be grateful that they have not pursued the implications of their position to their logical end and that they continue to live on borrowed moral capital. Of the nihilistic revolutionaries who are the subject of his brilliant meditation in *The Rebel,* Camus remarks that

> All of them, decrying the human condition and its creator, have affirmed the solitude of man and the nonexistence of any kind of morality. But at the same time they have all tried to construct a purely terrestrial kingdom where their chosen principles will hold sway.[51]

It is not surprising that, just prior to his tragic and early death in a 1960 automobile accident, Albert Camus was evidently giving serious consideration to being received into the Roman Catholic Church. He was, I am guessing, horrified by the revolutionary excesses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and had come to suspect that only theism could provide an objective basis for moral judgments. It is precisely the same kind of reasoning that led the Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden to embrace Christianity: He found himself sitting in a movie hall in the late 1930s, in an area of New York City then heavily populated with German immigrants. As a newsreel played, depicting acts of Nazi barbarism toward European Jews, the audience around him erupted with cheers and surges of pleased laughter. Shaken by what he had witnessed, Auden realized that his secular worldview could not provide him with a firm moral ground from which to protest that Nazi brutality was objectively evil.

Camus and Auden may have been right. On the basis of what moral principles do secularizing critics pronounce the church wanting? How were those principles chosen, and why should anybody else

50. Camus, *Rebel,* 62.
51. Camus, *Rebel,* 100.

defer to them? Even if one were to grant the factual claims on which they stake their moral judgments, it is not at all clear that those moral judgments are capable of bearing any objectively real weight.

But then, neither is it clear, given secularizing principles, that concepts like "factual claims" and "personal preference" are even coherent—which brings us to the second type of secular objection to Mormonism: The critics' basis for criticizing Mormonism on intellectual grounds, saying that it is untrue, is unsure, and its coherence needs to be demonstrated.

Why? We all know essentially what it would mean to say that an astronomer's thinking about the atmosphere of Jupiter was correct, and what it means to say that the conclusion of a syllogism follows from, or is entailed by, the *premises* of the syllogism.

However, on a completely secularist, naturalistic view, it seems that "thoughts" are really merely neurochemical events in the brain, able (in principle, at least) to be described by the laws of physics. But the laws of physics are deterministic—I will leave quantum indeterminacy out of consideration here because I do not think it helps either side much—such that, if "thoughts" are merely physical, it is unclear how we can really say that a conclusion follows from premises. Why? Because any given brain state seems to be causally determined by the preceding brain state. And it is hard, moreover, to see how the neurochemical condition of the brain can have a relationship of either truth or falsity with the atmosphere of a distant planet—or, for that matter, with anything else. A lump of cells is neither true nor false. It is not "about" anything else. It just is.

Thus, truly consistent secularist critics of Mormonism may have sawed off the limb on which they were sitting. They may have deprived themselves not only of a standard of moral judgment that cannot be dismissed as merely subjective, but of a coherent claim to be able to address questions of truth and falsity (with respect to Mormonism and every other topic). Some form of theism, or, at least, of nonnaturalism, may be required to save their position from being merely self-refuting. (If it is not, this will have to be demonstrated.) But if they

adopt theism, or even mere nonnaturalism, they will no longer be *secularist* critics, but will have become something else.

Many years ago, as missionaries in Switzerland, another elder and I met a woman at the door while we were tracting. When we told her that we represented the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she smiled quite oddly and, even more oddly by Swiss standards, invited us in. She immediately fetched her husband, and asked us to tell *him* the name of the church that we represented. He too smiled oddly when he heard it, and I began to wonder what sort of people we had found. But then he explained that he was a Yugoslavian-born physician who had once been a Melchizedek priesthood holder in our church. And he told us a story that, I confess, I have never checked since; I may have some of the details wrong, but the gist of it is as follows: Decades before, he had served as a counselor to a priesthood leader in his native country as the communists were consolidating their power there. Several times, he said, this priesthood leader had dreams warning him that members of his congregation needed to flee because the secret police would soon be coming for them. And the man was right every time. However, the former counselor, with whom I was speaking, had eventually made his way to medical school in Switzerland, where his studies had taught him that revelation was an illusion. But how, I asked, did he account for his former priesthood leader's remarkably accurate record of forecasting visits from the secret police, a record of which I knew (and know) nothing but what he had told me? "Brain chemistry and chance," he replied. There was, in other words, no substantial or necessary link between the various brain states of the priesthood leader and external events. That they coincided was just sheer good luck for those who thereby escaped the clutches of the commissars. (I might add that the German missionary with whom I was working that particular day, a converted German merchant sailor who was, to put it mildly, plainspoken, thereupon asked if he could visit the home again with his tape recorder because, he said, this man furnished an unforgettable specimen of how Satan deceives people. Visibly surprised by such bluntness, the man agreed that he could return.)

If there were powerful arguments compelling us to forsake religious belief, and if there were no persuasive arguments for such belief, we might feel ourselves obliged to accept what I, at least, regard as the bleakness of the secular, naturalistic worldview. But we are not so compelled, and there are persuasive arguments for belief. The question is *at the very least* equally balanced. And in such a situation, as William James brilliantly argued against W. K. Clifford, religious belief represents a rational choice.[52] Even if one thinks the matter only fifty-fifty—which I emphatically do not—the advice that is sometimes attributed to James, to "choose the sunny side of doubt," strikes me as eminently reasonable. Besides, as we now know, it is healthier.

I am grateful to Louis Midgley for drawing my attention to an anecdote related by the eminent Protestant church historian Martin Marty with reference to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It involves the famous eighteenth-century French hostess Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, the Marquise du Deffand, a friend of Voltaire and other leading intellectuals of the day. When Cardinal de Polignac informed her that the martyr St. Denis, the first bishop of Paris, had walked a hundred miles after his execution, carrying his head in his hand, Madame du Deffand replied that, "In such a promenade, it is the first step that is difficult." She meant, of course, that it is not the claim that St. Denis walked a hundred miles that poses a difficulty. Perhaps he actually walked only ninety-nine miles. Or perhaps he walked a hundred and two. Such differences are immaterial. The fundamental question is whether, after his beheading, he walked at all. As soon as that essential point has once been granted, the rest is mere detail.[53]

Marty uses the story to identify what is fundamental in Latter-day Saint claims, particularly as they have come under the lens of what he terms "the crisis of historical consciousness"—by which he intends the skepticism and intense scrutiny of modern historical scholarship, which has been directed against virtually all traditional claims, religious and otherwise, around the world. "By analogy," he writes,

52. See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956).

53. See Louis Midgley, "The First Steps," *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): xi–xiv.

> if the beginning of the promenade of Mormon history, the First Vision and the Book of Mormon, can survive the crisis, then the rest of the promenade follows and nothing that happens in it can really detract from the miracle of the whole. If the first steps do not survive, there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full interest in the rest of the story.[54]

Whatever may be said about church involvement with the Equal Rights Amendment and California Proposition 29, or about Brigham Young's personality, or about the church's history with racial issues, or about church finances or the Indian placement program, or about possibly imperfect local leaders, or about any number of other matters in which we sometimes become lost, the fundamental issues are really quite few.[55] But they *are fundamental*. And, on them, I believe we fare quite well. We simply need to keep our eyes, and so far as possible, our critics' eyes, on the ball.

Just the other night, I was rereading the classic tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* of "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp." (I had to work the Arabs in here, somehow.) You probably remember the story: By means of the genie in his magic lamp, the impoverished young Aladdin has achieved unparalleled wealth and married the beautiful princess Badr al-Budur. But an evil magician from north Africa covets the lamp and, one day while Aladdin is out hunting, comes to his palace disguised as a merchant who wishes to trade "new lamps for old." The princess, knowing nothing of the power of the lamp and regarding such a trade as a ridiculous no-brainer, surrenders her husband's nicked old lamp for a bright and shiny new one. We would, I firmly believe, be just as mistaken as she was to trade the lamp of the gospel for a new lamp that lacks its miraculous power.

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54. Martin E. Marty, "History: The Case of the Mormons, a Special People," in Martin E. Marty, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 311.

55. Davis Bitton, "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 337–54.