

Do Smart Mormons Make Mormonism True?

**And Answers to Other "Tough Gospel Questions" in Reply to a
Faithful Mormon Scholar's Defence of Mormonism**

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Nothing falsifies history more than logic. François Guizot

Introduction

In a June 13, 2004 article on page B7 of the Observer/Faith & Reason section of Calgary Herald ("Mormons See Joseph Smith as genius, beloved prophet"), Dr. David C. Wright, a professor of history at the University of Calgary and a faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly referred to as the "Mormon Church") provided a classic example of the kind of defence well-educated Mormons mount in favour of their faith and its founder, Joseph Smith.

I empathize with Dr. Wright's indication that the feeling in his men's group at a Mormon Church was somewhat depressed while considering David Hedley's May 30, 2004 Herald article ("Leaving the Fold") that described some aspects of Mormon history and belief, and included an excerpt from a written interview I provided to Mr. Hedley. An expanded version of the information I gathered for that interview can be found at the web address noted above under the title "Answers to the Most Common Questions I Am Asked About Leaving Mormonism".

I recall being affected as was Dr. Wright and his men's group by the few things critical of the Mormon faith that made it onto my radar screen while I was a faithful Mormon. And, I understand the palpable relief that many Mormons will feel after reading Dr. Wright's response. He is, after all, a respected scholar whose opinion should bear weight. Many if not most of the faithful will conclude that, "If it is good enough for someone like Dr. Wright, it is good enough for me", and dismiss all contrary opinion as the inane ramblings of those who are deceived as a result of their ignorance, sin, pride, lack of humility, etc. That is the effect, intended or not, of most Mormon and other religious apologetic writing – it gives the believers the excuse they need to ignore disconfirming evidence, and so to continue in their beliefs, however erroneous. This facilitates continued ignorance, and avoids the pain that learning often requires.

Dr. Wright is a respected academic whom I have not met. I suspect that he is similar to my father and many of his Mormon university professor friends among whom I was raised in Orem, Utah (near Brigham Young University) and then Victoria, British Columbia where Dad taught history for over 30 years at the University of Victoria. These people are generally typical Mormons in terms of their good intentions, neighbourliness, etc.

Practising Mormons are fine people, by and large. I bear them no grudge. I regret that their feelings may be hurt by my speaking publicly about my former beliefs as a practising Mormon, and the manner in which those beliefs were in my view shaped by the suppression of information within the Mormon community. However, I believe that it is so important that the code of silence among the few who are aware of these things within the Mormon community be broken that the imposition of discomfort on people whom I respect, and in many cases love, is required. And I believe that the pain that many will feel as they address these issues will be helpful to them and others in the longer term.

I wish I had access to the type of information I provided to Mr. Hedley as I was maturing within the Mormon community, and so feel that the right thing for me to do at this point in my life is to be prepared to bear some discomfort in order to live by the standard set down by Christ and many other religious leaders and wise people in what is known in the Christian community as the Golden Rule – do to others what you would like them to do (or to have done) to you. The same rule, under different names, is part of most other religious and faith traditions that have been of consequence throughout human history, many of which preceded the Christian tradition.

As the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer wrote, true learning almost always involves "undeception", and is painful. The pain suffered in this regard is the price paid for the opportunity to grow that learning affords both to those who suffer, and more importantly, to the younger generations who take their cues largely from their older, and presumably wiser, family and community members who are entrusted with the duty to look after the interests of those who follow them. Mormon leaders, in my view, have breached this trust by attending first to the interests of the Mormon institution and as a result often harming trusting individuals. People like Dr. Wright, wittingly or not, aid this ill-conceived project.

One of the things that fascinates me about the Mormon and other similarly authoritarian, information suppressing cultures is how scholars such as Dr. Wright (or me as I was for many years as a practising tax attorney who was also a faithful Mormon), whose minds are proven to function well in contexts away from religion, have such a clearly demonstrable inability to deal in what outsiders to their faith would likely consider a rational manner with matters concerning their religious beliefs.

Another way to frame this issue is to wonder how different groups of intelligent, honest, well-intentioned people could consider the same body of data and come to radically different conclusions, and why those within a faith tradition have a predictable tendency to put much less weight on evidence that convincingly disconfirms their faith than do almost all outsiders, whether interested in religious matters or not. It is the nature of this insider – outsider dichotomy that has held my interest for some time. In this essay, I will attempt to shed some light on this and other topics related to Dr. Wright's article.

I note that when I say, "Mormons do" this or that, or "Mormons believe" this or that I am speaking about my perception of trends, and in particular those trends that are encouraged by the Mormon leadership. And I don't mean to imply that all Mormons believe the same thing or act the same way. Mormonism is not one religious belief system that affects everyone at all times in the same way. Mormonism in Joseph Smith or Brigham Young's day was radically different than it is now in terms of belief, community behaviour. And Mormonism today in a small town in Africa or South America is radically different in some ways from what it is in Utah, and in NYC it is different again. And, even within a single Mormon community you will find many different types. Some are ultra faithful and others might disbelieve much of Mormon orthodoxy while continuing to actively participate nonetheless. But, there is in my view much less variation of belief and behaviour within Mormonism than most other mainstream faiths.

I thank a variety of my Internet based colleagues (in particular those on the rather rough and tumble www.exmormon.org discussion board) who helped me to tighten my reasoning by providing ideas, as well as reading and critiquing early drafts of parts of this essay.

The Use of Logic and Reason Relative to Religious Issues

As a preliminary issue, one might say with some justification that the kind of reasoning contained in this essay is irrelevant to questions of faith – that faith is beyond reason. And, some religious people with whom I deal make this very point. But I note that even they seem to only be prepared to go so far in that regard. That is, for example, they are comfortable ignoring the language in the Bible that clearly indicates those who wrote it believed the Earth to be at the centre of the Universe because science long ago trumped faith on that point. It is only regarding the issues of this nature that are still disputed within their religious community, such as attitudes respecting homosexuality for example, that they say that science, reason etc. are irrelevant.

In any event, most of us do use reason to defend faith, and this has been the case since "mythos" was brought into conflict with "logos" as science became our primary way of "knowing" things.

As Karen Armstrong puts it:

We tend to assume that people in the past were (more or less) like us, but in fact their spiritual lives were rather different. In particular, they evolved two ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called mythos and logos. Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth, and each had its special area of competence. Myth was regarded as primary; it was concerned with what was thought to be timeless and constant in our existence. Myth looks back to the origins of life, to the foundations of culture, and to the deepest levels of the human mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters, but with meaning. Unless we find some significance in our lives, we mortal men and

women fall very easily into despair. The mythos of society provided people with a context that made sense of their day-to-day lives; it directed their attention to the eternal and the universal. (Armstrong, "The Battle for God", page xv)

She then summarized how myth was tied into the Jungian world of dreams and the unconscious; how it was not rational but rather was intuitive; and how it related to religious ritual, cultic practises and meditative disciplines. She concludes her preliminary definition of myth by bringing out an important point respecting history. In pre-modern society history was not the science of finding the truth about what happened in the past. Rather, it was about meaning; it was mythic, and it was controlled by the powers that controlled the rest of society. It was tool used to keep the herd together, for better or for worse. As Armstrong puts it:

Historical events were not seen as unique occurrences, set in far-off time, but were thought to be external manifestations of constant, timeless realities. Hence history would tend to repeat itself, because there was nothing new under the sun. Historical narratives tried to bring out this eternal dimension. Thus, we do not know what really occurred when the ancient Israelites escaped from Egypt and passed through the Sea of Reeds. The story has been deliberately written as myth, and linked with other stories about rites of passage, immersion in the deep, and gods spitting a sea in two to create a new reality. ... One could say that unless an historical event is mythologized in this way, and liberated from the past in an inspiring cult, it cannot be religious. To ask whether the Exodus from Egypt took place exactly as recounted in the Bible or to demand historical and scientific evidence to prove that it is factually true is to mistake the nature and purpose of this story. It is to confuse mythos with logos. (Armstrong, "The Battle for God", page xvi)

Armstrong defines logos as follows:

Logos was the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function well in the world. ... Unlike myth, logos must relate exactly to facts and correspond to external realities if it is to be effective. ... We use this logical, discursive reasoning when we have to make things happen, get something done, or persuade other people to adopt a particular course of action. Logos is practical. Unlike myth, which looks back to the beginnings and to the foundations, logos forges ahead and tries to find something new: to elaborate on old insights, achieve a greater control over our environment, discover something fresh, and invent something novel. (Armstrong, "The Battle for God", pages xvi, xvii)

She continues to note how in pre-modern society mythos and logos were complementary. Mythos provided the meaning and context within which logos provided the nuts and bolts of daily life. She mentioned the First Crusade as a classic of example of mythos and logos both in operation. This Crusade started out as pure logos. In the twelfth century C.E. Pope Urban II wanted the knights of

Europe to stop tearing their society apart by fighting each other, and to instead expend their energies in the Near East to extend the Church and Europe's power. As long as the Crusade proceeded on this basis, it was militarily successful. However, Armstrong notes:

When ... Crusaders started making a mythical or mystical vision the basis of their policies, they were usually defeated and committed terrible atrocities. (Armstrong, "The Battle for God", page xvii)

For example, think about the following mythic ideas in the context of that Crusade:

- The Biblical lands were sanctified by Christ during his time on earth.
- It was God's will that they be returned to Christian hands.
- God was all powerful.
- God would deliver the Holy Land from the Infidels into the Crusaders' hands if they had the faith to go take it.

Any battle plan based on this kind of reasoning in the absence of intelligence about the strength of the opposing force, etc. would be foolishness. Armstrong notes this as an illustration of the principle that mythology taken literally is a poor guide to many of the practical aspects of life.

Mythology can be used to provide meaning and context, and hence help us to make better decisions, but is almost always disastrous when mistaken for logos. The meanings that can be drawn from any one myth can range from the sublimely inspired to the ridiculous and evil. A myth is little more than a window that we can use to look wisely, or not, into our souls. And sometimes when we go back to the root of the myth we find spurious cause and effect relationships that have been codified as myth, and are in fact poor guides to behaviour in any context. Once these are rooted out, however, the myth may still be useful. Many biblical metaphors fall into this camp. The Book of Mormon, in its entirety, is likely the same. It is highly unlikely to be real history. Hence, it would only be accurate in a literal sense by coincidence. But nonetheless it contains some useful mythology.

The Christian Crusaders simply appropriated the Holy Land myth for themselves. That myth in my view was, and is, bad for the Jews when taken literally, and it was even less suited to the European Crusaders. Hence, the consequences of their use of this myth were predictably bad. The Machiavellian side of me says that Pope Urban could have done much more with his Crusade had he recognized the motivating power of this myth, and then made sure that it did not influence any strategic planning related to what he wanted to achieve, which was the conquest of new territory. This was a military manoeuvre, not a spiritual matter. To confuse the spiritual with the practical is, in my experience, to court disaster.

Armstrong notes that by the eighteenth century logos was causing mankind to make such progress, and the weaknesses of mythology as a practical guide to decision making were becoming so apparent that logos became the primary lens

through which many people saw life. In particular, the logos approach to history when applied to mythic history was exposing what appeared to be outright falsehood. The Bible, for example, was not what it had been purported to be. It was not written by whom it was purported to have been written. Many of the stories it contained did not appear to accord with "real" history. The actions on which it was based were inconsistent with the newly discovered laws of nature (the flood and Noah's ark; the creation; the virgin birth; the resurrection; the ascension into heaven; etc.). In short, the myths that had given form and meaning to Christian and other types of religious life were subjected to the rational tests that are at the core of the scientific method, and were "falsified". Many of those who understood and agreed with the falsification process accordingly rejected those myths.

But logos did not provide the "whys" mythology had been designed to provide. This left many people struggling with existential despair. Largely as a reaction to the primacy of logos and this lack of meaning in life, some religious bodies adopted a logos orientated interpretation of their mythology in an attempt resuscitate the old meanings. This is the literalism that today characterizes fundamentalists of all religious stripes within Christianity (including the Mormons), Islam, Judaism and elsewhere. That is, the logos paradigm is accepted, as are the old myths. This means that the Bible must be an historically accurate record, that the miraculous things it describes literally happened as they were described, etc. This is a difficult position to hold in light of the evidence. Hence, a great deal of organizational effort is expended to first suppress information that runs counter to this theory, and to find any information that might support it. Hence, we have scientists trying to explain why carbon 14 dating does not work and how the earth is only 6,000 years old, where the dinosaurs fit into that picture, etc. Michael Shermer in "Why People Believe Weird Things" devotes an entire chapter to young Earth creationism and its loony arguments, and explains from a psychological point of view why some humans need to, and do, believe such things. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that mankind needs to find meaning in life, and the ascendancy of logos over mythos was so threatening to some that fundamentalist religious movements were strengthened. These movements are based in fear, and in their extreme forms are dangerous, evil things.

Some religions, such as Mormonism, mix mythology with literalism and so seem at least at first blush to be more palatable than the hardest core fundamentalist groups. For example, Joseph Smith's theology accommodated much of the science of his day. Therefore, it made sense to the people of Smith's time and place. It answered important questions many of them had about what happened to children who died innocently, but unbaptized, and how the earth was created over a long period of time and through some kind of process instead of as a miraculous event. It made a kind of sense out of seemingly senseless arguments about the nature of god. However, Mormonism remained literalistic at its base. Hence, as logos continued to advance it soon began to falsify certain of Smith's dogmatic claims, such as those about how he "translated" ancient records and so produced the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham, and the Mormon church went on the defensive and became just another fundamentalist organization dissembling, obfuscating and

suppressing logos based theories and evidence to the extent that it conflicted with Mormon dogma, and using pseudoscience (a misguided form of logos) to defend its dogma and other faith based claims.

From the dysfunctional nature of fundamentalist organizations and their adherents, we glean solid evidence that just as mythology applied in the sphere of logos produces disaster as it did in the case of the first Crusade, so does logos when applied to the realm of mythology. This leads, for example, to the "science of creationism", as well as the Mormon (and other conservative Christian) attitudes towards the role of women, race, and sexual orientation. It also causes the Mormon authoritarian induced tendencies toward the suppression of information and poor scholarship in any area that might "threaten testimonies". Much worse, it resurrects "whys" that were created in different times and places, were of questionable value during their own time and are completely out of step with modern life. For example, the idea that God prefers any race or type of people over the others, or has "given" any land to a particular group and justifies the use of force to take it away from others, causes humans to continue to act inhumanely. Karen Armstrong concluded "The Battle for God" by observing that:

Fundamentalists have turned the mythos of their religion into logos, either by insisting that their dogmas are scientifically true, or by transforming their complex mythology into a streamlined ideology. They have thus conflated two complementary sources and styles of knowledge which the people in the pre-modern world had usually decided it was wise to keep separate. ... By insisting that the truths of Christianity are factual and scientifically demonstrable, American Protestant fundamentalists have created a caricature of both religion and science. (Armstrong, "The Battle for God", page 366)

My knee jerk reaction upon becoming familiar with the ideas Karen Armstrong articulates so well was that the atheists had it right – there is no god, religion is a massive fraud perpetuated by those in control to make sure that their power is not diminished, and that I should distance myself from it as quickly as possible. However, as I became familiar with the writings of Joseph Campbell ("The Hero of a Thousand Faces", "The Power of Myth" and many others), I found other more constructive ways to approach mythology in general, and the mythologies that have framed my life in particular.

I then went back to re-read Armstrong, and found that near the end of "The Battle for God" that she notes that the worst of fundamentalism seems to have been a reaction to a form of logos based secularism that tried to wring spirituality out of life entirely. She wonders whether the leaders of that secular movement, who so decry religious fundamentalism of all types, might not have been wise to use the fundamentalist movement to diagnose a real human problem: many people need the meaning provided by mythology, and are not being provided with that by secularism and its logos.

I see in Dr. Wright's defence of Mormonism the tension between mythos and logos being played out. He defends Mormonism against the advancing tide of logos in ways that look silly now, and will become more so as the evidence continues to mount. And by so doing, he misses opportunities to plumb the depths of many Mormon ideas that are genuinely useful as mythos. That is, by taking a logos approach to Mormonism, he misses what I believe is its only feature of enduring value. And he will lose playing the logos game in any event. I scratch the surface of the use of Mormon mythos in an essay on my website titled "The Metaphor Game and Depression". I don't suggest that Mormon teachings are great mythos. They are tepid compared to much that I have found elsewhere. But for those within the Mormon tradition, they have a special place and can be put to good use.

Mythos is still very important to me. It helps me find the "whys" of life that are of foundational importance to me. Science and the logos it employs can only show me the "hows" and give hints as to possible "whys". I doubt that this will change within my lifetime.

Mormon mythos is still a large part of me. This mythos emphasizes the importance of education and knowledge; and the importance of relationships, family and community. It has given me a certain mystic bent no matter how hard I try to rein it in. That is me. However, my Mormon leanings are now supplemented by the mythos of many other cultures and times. Science, to a point, is simply another form of mythos. And now I walk by faith, acknowledging uncertainty at each step, more than at any other time in my life.

In any event, Dr. Wright made ample use of logic, reason etc. in his article, and so I will respond in kind.

What Dr. Wright Did Not Say

Dr. Wright's article is noteworthy both for what it said, and what it did not. It typifies in this regard not only the Mormon apologetic response, but the apology made in favour of many types of ideology, and for that reason this aspect of it is worthy, in my view, of consideration. In particular, I note the manner in which Dr. Wright argues that I am wrong on many fronts without admitting the many things that support my position, of which I am virtually certain he is aware and with which he likely agrees at least to an extent. Hence, Dr. Wright emulates the deceptive manner of the Mormon Church's religious leaders by making statements that will have the likely effect of preserving false belief. In this, he violates one of the rules of scholarly conduct laid down by Albert Einstein who said:

The search for truth implies a duty. One must not conceal any part of what one has recognized to be true.

I believe that Einstein was directing this comment toward those who subtly dissemble in precisely the way Dr. Wright did in his article, and Mormon leaders in general do in their carefully edited and highly misleading accounts of LDS history.

A common justification for the Mormon suppression of information is "milk before meat". The study of cult behaviour is largely about how mental walls are created that keep information out and allow the cult members to be happy with a situation that would repulse most people on the outside. One of the many fascinating things about cults is how, step by step, a person who would be repulsed by something while on the outside can be brought inside and come to not only accept it, but be happy with it and try to sell it to others. This is why "milk before meat", which in other circumstances is a sound pedagogical principle, is so important in the cult environment, and so abused.

In legitimate educational settings, "milk before meat" means that a building block process should be used to allow the eventual understanding of complex concepts that could not be understood at the beginning of the process. In the cult environment, milk before meat often means that novices must be misled to get them in and committed to the cult before the real story can be told. In my view, the dividing line between these two ways teaching people is whether at each step of the process the information provided to the students expands, or contracts, their perspective and opportunity for personal choice. This might not be important with children, but it is critical with adults.

The Mormon missionary discussions and Sunday School lessons about its history are in my view a classic example of distorted information that narrows the chance for personal choice. They allow social and individual dependencies to be created – the "hook to be set" – and only after that has been done will the "hard doctrines" be disclosed, and then only if disclosure can't be avoided. It is clear that in this regard Mormonism is cult-like although in my view it is a "soft" cult – that is, something like a 6 or 7 on a scale of ten in a world where there are lots of 9s and tens.

Regarding Dr. Wright's dissembling in this regard, I note that he did not mention the well-established consensus among reputable scholars respecting the facts I mentioned in my interview with Mr. Hedley related to Smith's lying about this sexual activities and those activities themselves, and many other facts that are generally unknown to faithful Mormons and would be deeply disturbing to most of them. He also waxed eloquent about the diversity of academic views and accomplishment at BYU without saying a word about the clear cut instructions that have been issued to the academic staff there and elsewhere in the Mormon Church's educational system about only teaching versions of Mormon history that are "faith promoting" – that is, uncritical of Mormon orthodoxy as it may change from time to time. I have yet to encounter a single non-Mormon who is familiar with the differing versions of Mormon history told by the Mormon Church and the scholarly community who does not think the "official" or "faith promoting" version of Mormon history is grossly misleading and hence unethical.

There are a variety of other things of a similarly clarifying nature that Dr. Wright should, in my view, have said to reduce the very high, as it now stands, probability that faithful Mormons will misunderstand him and as a result continue to feel comfortable with beliefs Dr. Wright himself would perhaps agree are misleading.

The defence for this position that Mormonism's leaders likely use is that since they know what is right, a little information suppression is OK since those who follow them will get to the best place for all in any event. Human history is full of people who have felt this way, and the record of those who have followed them has often been regrettable. Those among the powerful (and Mormons leaders exercise huge power in the lives of faithful Mormons) and who seek to control and distort information on the scale Mormon leaders have are in my view a dangerous influence that should be eliminated wherever possible.

However, this review is overlong already, and so I will leave this point where it is and move on to a consideration of Dr. Wright's positions, which can be boiled down to a few well-worn arguments. I will state, and then respond to, each of them in the order of my perception of their frequency of use within the Mormon community.

"You can never really know what happened in history, so we are entitled to continue to believe what we wish about the Mormon Church and Joseph Smith."

This is, by far, the most well used line of Mormon apologetic defence, and it shows up in Dr. Wright's assertion that there is more than one way to write, and read, religious history. His implication is that I have chosen one way, and that there are other ways to interpret Mormon history that are equally legitimate and that justify the Mormon position.

I suggest that Dr. Wright the scholar and Dr. Wright the faithful Mormon live in different, conflicting worlds, and that he would never in his approach to history condone the scholarship that he seems to have advocated in his newspaper article with regard to Mormonism. He alluded to this bifurcated world in his several references to the privileged category in which he believes religious history and religious leaders reside.

I reject the notion that religious history should be treated differently than any other kind of history, and can point to numerous instances in which this extension of privilege has been abused by those who control information. The effect if not the design of this abuse was to preserve or enhance their authority. Mormon leaders, and those such as Dr. Wright who help them, tread a clearly marked path in this regard on which ahead of them have walked the likes of Sun Myung Moon, Jim Jones, David Koresh, Hitler, Stalin, Mao and others who were so certain that they were right that they justified using deceptive means to manipulate the behaviour of other human beings. In the democratic world this kind of leadership behaviour is anathema, and our federalist system of democracy is designed to include many counter balance to the exercise of power in an attempt to restrain this dysfunctional human tendency. See my essay "The Mormon Conception of Freedom" at the website noted above for some context related to this issue.

Mormonism and other religious organizations occupy and often abuse an unregulated, privileged niche in our society. It is my view that if this abuse continues, governments will eventually step in to more strictly regulate religious

organizations. I am not expert in US law and so cannot comment as to the situation there. However, I know enough about Canadian law to indicate that the constitutional rights granted with respect to religious belief do not put institutions such as the Mormon Church beyond the reach of governmental regulation if it can be shown that religious institutions are abusing the trust of their memberships, and hence require regulation. I believe that the Mormon Church has more or less since its inception been on the wrong side of this line, and as a result should be more heavily regulated.

The law related to the selling of stocks and bonds requires a special standard of disclosure to protect innocent consumers against consciously or unconsciously dishonest salesman. These rules were created in response to precisely the kind of abuse of trust we see in the religious community. In my view, similarly sharp-toothed disclosure rules are appropriate for the sales oriented aspect of religion. See the essay "Should the Mormon Church Come Clean" on my web site for an exploration of my thoughts in this regard. I also note there that in Canada at least, I think it may be possible to bring legal action against the Mormon Church on the basis that it has breached its "fiduciary" (trustee-like) duties to its membership.

The Distinction Between Facts and Conclusions

One of my most serious criticisms of Dr. Wright's article is that it does not distinguish between what we can know about facts, and how those facts are interpreted. He is right to point out that there is a great deal of uncertainty with respect to all history. However, there are some facts about which we know much more, and hence can be much more confident, than others. For example, because of all of the witnesses to certain events (the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima; the storming of the beaches of Normandy on D-day; that man has on a few occasions walked on the Moon; etc.) we can be relatively certain as to what in general occurred at certain times and in certain places. Other events are much less certain from an historical point of view. And in particular, there is great uncertainty respecting how we should interpret even the facts of which we are relatively certain.

As is virtually always the case when a Mormon apologist speaks to a broad audience, Dr. Wright did not admit the scholarly near-consensus with respect to certain facts relative to Joseph Smith, while emphasizing the idea that it is hard to know what really happened. This is likely to leave those who are not well informed, which includes close to 100% of both the Mormon and non-Mormon audience to which he wrote, with the impression that both the facts and the conclusions to be drawn from them are in serious dispute. That is not the case. In my interview with Mr. Hedley, I purposefully restricted myself to some of the many facts relative to Joseph Smith's life that are not disputed by the credible academic community, including many scholars who are faithful Mormons. For example, Smith sent men on missions for the Mormon Church, and then told their wives that he was commanded by God to polygamously "marry" them ("marry" is within quotes because these were illegal unions), and that this was to be kept secret from everyone, including their husbands. He then commenced to have clandestine sex

with at least some of these women, and likely all of them. And, he lied about these and many other things for over a decade countless time in the press, over the pulpit, and in private.

I am not aware of any credible scholar who disputes most of these facts, or many others of similar ilk. However, only a tiny percentage of those who attend the Mormon Church each week have heard about these events. Most Mormons flatly deny them as "impossible" if they hear of them. Regrettably, articles like Dr. Wright's facilitate this continued denial of reality. Since Smith's trustworthiness is the central pillar of the entire Mormon system, these are issues of crucial importance.

Dr. Carmon Hardy, a history professor at Cal State Fullerton who left BYU as a result of the road blocks that were put in his way there from a scholarly point of view as he attempted to study the history of Mormon polygamy, has written extensively about the tendency of the Mormon leadership to misrepresent both history and current reality in order to preserve their influence. Two easily accessible essays in this regard can be found at <http://www.mormonalliance.org/casereports/volume3/part4/v3p4c21.htm> and http://www.mormonismi.net/pdf/lying_for_the_lord.pdf. They also note the scholarly consensus with respect to some of the most damning facts, from my point of view, with respect to Smith and the Mormon leadership's deceptive ways. Michael Quinn's two books respecting the development of the Mormon Hierarchy ("The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power"; and "The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power") are among the best scholarly sources of information in this regard.

If Dr. Wright is a man of integrity, he will do what he can to correct the record respecting the degree to which there is a scholarly consensus regarding the facts noted in my interview. I made the same point to my father, a professional historian, after he circulated to our family something that said in substance the same thing Dr. Wright's article said about the writing of Mormon history. To his credit, Dad did send out an "addendum" to our family (and to as many of those to whom his comments had been circulated by email as he could track down) that made the correction. He noted the difficulty of catching up to "feathers scattered by the wind" in that regard. As I suspect is the case with Dr. Wright, Dad did not think through the manner in which his statement that history can be written, and read, in many ways would be interpreted by those who are not familiar with the facts in question, and hence do not understand the degree to which they are not in dispute.

I recently spoke with one of my friends who continues to attend the Mormon Church in Calgary and is recognized within his niche in the Mormon community as relatively knowledgeable with regard to Mormon history. He indicated to me that since my interview was published he has had numerous shell-shocked Mormons come to him and ask if the facts I noted respecting Joseph Smith's sexual behaviour, and his lying about it, were accurate. He has confirmed to those who asked him about this that the facts are in his view as I stated them, and explained

how the Mormon Church itself collected and preserved the evidence required to reach this conclusion with a high degree of certainty. I believe that it is healthy for faithful Mormons to come to grips with the reality of Smith's behaviour in this regard.

And, I note, just as there are a few who still do not believe that man has walked on the Moon or that the Holocaust occurred, there are a few who having reviewed all of the evidence relevant to Smith dispute the actions that I above attributed to him. I am as comfortable ignoring these people as I am the Holocaust and Moon-walk deniers, even through I acknowledge that strictly speaking we cannot prove with 100% certainty that man has been on the Moon, or that the Holocaust occurred. On these issues, as all others that relate to history, we are left with evidence, probabilities and uncertainty, and must make our decisions in that context. I now proceed regarding religious matters to the best of my ability using the same rules for them as for all others.

This reminds me of an interview with the great physicist Freeman Dyson I listened to a short time ago (See <http://www.meaningoflife.tv/>). He was asked if he felt empty when he gave up his faith in God. And I presume as a result of other things he said that he had in mind the kind of personal god before whom I was raised to bow. He said he did not, but rather felt free. He said that as long as he believed in that kind of God, he regularly ran into mental barriers that impeded his progress. But he did not know that was happening.

I would add that in my case (as I assume was the case in his) there was a vague, uncomfortable feeling that can only be understood with the benefit of hindsight because until one has experienced something different, there is no context for understanding. Again, context creates understanding in this and so many other cases. I can't over emphasize the importance of expanding our context for understanding life; our perspective.

So, when Dyson finally made the frightening leap and let go of his belief in his religion of origin, he found himself in a wonderful new world where he no longer feared to ask questions. Reality would be what it was. It did not have to be what God or any of His self appointed agents said it was. And so he did not have to shy away from any question. As a result, he felt a wonderful sense of freedom.

My experience was the same, and I am trying to convey that excitement to those I love the most.

The Extreme Fringe of Post Modern Theory Justifies Hiding Facts

Since Dr. Wright's reference to history smacked somewhat of post modern theory – another favourite tool of the faithful and intellectual Mormon – I also note that there is a school of thought within the scholarly historian community that attempts to justify the reading and writing of history in almost any way as being as good as any other. This is connected to certain currents at the extreme edge of postmodern theory that most scholars do not find helpful. See the philosopher Susan Haack's

ideas in this regard summarized at
<http://www.csicop.org/si/9711/preposterism.html>
and
<http://cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/reviews/haack-manifesto/>.

The aspect of postmodern theory of which Haack and others are so critical has been used by religious people of all stripes as a weapon to resist the advancing tide of logos. That is, some post modern thought is a retreat from logos toward mythos. This pendulum has swung back and forth for decades if not centuries, and no doubt will continue to swing. So it should come as a surprise that ideas from the "silly side" of postmodern theory are used by some Mormons to justify what Mormon leaders refer to as the "faithful history" policy which says that only those aspects of Mormon history that will support the faith of Mormons in the orthodox interpretation of their beliefs should be talked or written about by Mormons. For an example of how this debate has been conducted, see David E. Bohn, "Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations: A Critique of New Mormon History", and Malcolm R. Thorp, "Some Reflections on New Mormon History and the Possibilities of a "New" Traditional History". Both are found in "Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History", edited by George D. Smith. Thorp is replying to Bohn who attempts to use postmodern theory to defend Mormonism.

Among other things, Bohn invokes Heidegger, Derrida, Gadamer and others from the phenomenology and postmodern streams of thought to defend his thesis that Mormon history should not be read in an "objectivist" fashion. To this Thorp replies, among other things, that if we take what those thinkers have said seriously, we end up questioning Mormonism from the ground up using tools and seeking answers to questions that go far beyond anything the New Mormon Historians have sought to do. That is, Bohn and other similarly inclined Mormon scholars unsheathe and put into use for all a sharp, multiple edged sword in defence of Mormonism without seeming to realize what it might be used to do against them.

It is my view that Derrida, Gadamer et al had social constructs precisely such as Mormonism in mind when they developed their analytical "deconstructive" tools. And if anything is antithetical to a postmodern theory of history, it would be the use by an elite leadership group of something like Mormonism's "faithful history" to maintain control of the group they lead by suppressing information.

Here are a few of the many words Mormon leaders have spoken on the subject of information control in the context of "faithful history":

My duty as a member of the Council of the Twelve is to protect what is most unique about the LDS church, namely the authority of priesthood, testimony regarding the restoration of the gospel, and the divine mission of the Saviour. Everything may be sacrificed in order to maintain the integrity of those essential facts. Thus, if Mormon Enigma reveals information that is detrimental to the reputation of Joseph Smith, then it is necessary to try to limit its influence and that of its authors. (Apostle Dallin Oaks, footnote 28, Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon, Introduction, page xlili)

And from Apostle Boyd Packer:

Church history can be so interesting and so inspiring as to be a very powerful tool indeed for building faith. If not properly written or properly taught, it may be a faith destroyer.

There is a temptation for the writer or the teacher of Church history to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not.

Some things that are true are not very useful.

That historian or scholar who delights in pointing out the weaknesses and frailties of present or past leaders destroys faith. A destroyer of faith — particularly one within the Church, and more particularly one who is employed specifically to build faith — places himself in great spiritual jeopardy. He is serving the wrong master, and unless he repents, he will not be among the faithful in the eternities. ... Do not spread disease germs! ("The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect", 1981, BYU Studies, Vol. 21, No. 3, pages 259-271)

These views are, thankfully, more moderate than what some early Mormon leaders believed. For example, Sidney Rigdon indicated in 1838 that the role of certain Mormon enforcers in removing dissenting members such as Oliver Cowdery from the faithful flock was a result of:

... the imperative duty of the Church to obey the word of Joseph Smith, or the presidency, without question or inquiry, and that if there were any that would not, they should have their throats cut from ear [to] ear." (D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power", page 94)

A variety of similar quotes can be accessed at http://www.i4m.com/think/intro/mormon_leaders.htm, http://www.i4m.com/think/leaders/mormon_loyalty.htm, and the essay on my website titled "Religious Faith: Enlightening or Blinding?", starting at page 9.

As noted above, the "faithful history" policy amounts to an instruction to all knowledgeable Mormons, and particularly those who are charged with the responsibility of teaching other Mormons, not to mention any facts that might challenge the faith of believing Mormons and cause them to question the divine connection of current or former Mormon leaders. This has resulted, among other bad things, in the formation of personality cults respecting Smith and the current Mormon prophet Gordon Hinckley. Dr. Wright's oblique reference to Mormon history fits within this genre.

The faithful history policy is problematic on a number of fronts from my point of view. My thoughts in this regard can be found in two essays titled "Should the Mormon Church Come Clean", and "Christ's Moral System ..." on my website. For

the moment, I will mention the most obvious point from an historian's point of view.

It is one thing to interpret facts differently than do most other well-informed people, but only the most extreme post modernists would argue that highly material facts can be deleted from the historical account entirely, thus avoiding the need to explain to one's audience how accepted facts square with the historian's express or implied theory of interpretation. For example, few would regard a history of the bombing of Hiroshima to be reasonable if it simply indicated that the Americans dropped out of the sky one day after minor provocation of one kind or another, and destroyed Hiroshima. The story cannot be understood without an understanding of Pearl Harbour, the atrocities of war that preceded both Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima, and many other relevant events.

Let me be clear that I do not attempt to draw a conclusion respecting Hiroshima for purposes of this essay, but only wish to point out that it is not possible to leave out huge chunks of the story that almost all listeners would regard as relevant, and to be considered to have treated your audience to a reasonable chance of understanding the event in question. And, I do not suggest that history can be understood in some kind of complete, objective sense. But, just as is the case with science where "truth" is ever pursued and never captured, some versions of history are more complete and well explained than others. I like what Joseph Freeman said in this regard:

Everyone falsifies history even if it is only his own personal history. Sometimes the falsification is deliberate, sometimes unconscious; but always the past is altered to suit the needs of the present. The best we can say of any account is not that it is the real truth at last, but that this is how the story appears now.

I suggest that the falsification of Mormon history is deliberate, and as noted below, have ample evidence in this regard from the mouths of Mormon leaders.

The Hiroshima example just indicated exemplifies the difference between versions of history that are better or worse told and hence are more or less misleading, as does the distinction between Mormon history as the Mormon Church tells it and the version told by the most credible non-Mormon and Mormon scholars. The versions told by the Mormon Church itself and the most rabid of its "anti-Mormon" critics are, in my view, similarly unhelpful. Both tend to be incomplete, and over the top in their interpretations.

I do not believe that I exaggerate when I say that the accounts of the most foundational aspects of Mormon history, as taught to faithful Mormons, are as unreasonable as would be an account of Hiroshima that omits all material reference to the prior events of World War II.

Let's use Smith's martyrdom as a case in point. Mormons are taught that a bloodthirsty mob hated Smith because he was God's prophet, and in a drunken,

devilish frenzy, without provocation of any legitimate or even material kind, killed him in cold blood. The "rest of the story" includes things like Smith's sexual activities and lying about them for over a decade and the rumours of this that increasingly circulated; his attempts (some successful and others not) to seduce women; his then recent ordination as King of all the Earth by a secret council he had formed for that and other purposes, called the Council of Fifty; his destruction of a newspaper that tried to expose both his sexual practices and political ambitions; his sometimes questionable actions as the Commander in Chief of the largest private militia in the US during an extended conflict with the people surrounding the Mormon city of Nauvoo, Illinois, of which he was also Mayor; etc. (See the relevant portions of the time line in Appendix 7 to Michael D. Quinn's "The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power"). In short, without condoning what was an act of murder, it is fair to say that the story of Smith's death makes much more sense after the background facts have been summarized in a reasonable fashion.

Emma Smith, Joseph's wife, said that "it is secret things that cost Joseph and Hyrum their lives" (See B. Carmon Hardy, "Lying for the Lord", footnote 41, at http://www.mormonismi.net/pdf/lying_for_the_lord.pdf). Hyrum, Joseph's brother, was murdered with him. The "secret things" to which Emma referred were those respecting which Smith lied, such as his sexual activities. The Mormon leadership tendency toward keeping secrets that would dilute their authority, and hence control over the Mormon people, has continued from that day to this.

It is also fair to say that the average person's perception of other foundational Mormon events such as the appearance of Christ and God the Father to Smith; the translation of the Book of Mormon; the ordination of Smith and his associate Oliver Cowdery by Peter, James and John; and numerous other alleged miraculous events change radically once the "rest of the story" is added. That is, the Mormon Church's faithful history policy grotesquely distorts the perception that the average faithful Mormon has of the history of his religious group and its foundational events – the events that are alleged to confer upon its leaders their special and exclusive authority to act for God. And as has been noted by many, the history of Mormonism is much more important than the history of most religious groups, in part because it is so recent and hence accessible, and in part because the foundations of Mormonism are so novel.

As just noted, Mormons claim to have God's exclusive authority – to be his "one and only true church" – on the basis that God himself gave that authority to Smith. This is an historical point of monumental importance from a Mormon point of view. It does not take a rocket scientist to see why Mormon leaders would shy away from anything that might question the legitimacy or reasonableness of their position in this regard. And likewise one does not have to think too hard to appreciate why Mormon leaders would institute something like the "faithful history" policy, particularly if they did not like the reaction they saw when faithful members happened upon information that realistically describes Smith's history. This is, quite simply, a good old-fashioned power struggle. Mormon leaders are fighting to retain their influence. Many others, such as me, who were duped for decades and

will smart for the rest of our lives as result of what we have lost in that regard, are sounding the alarm.

Propaganda and Abuse of Trust

It is simply not defensible on any reasonable basis to omit all reference to facts such as those just noted, which is what the Mormon Church does in the "history" it teaches to its members at church meetings each Sunday, to Mormon teenagers at "Seminary" five days a week during the school year, and in university level, for credit courses, taught in various Mormon Church sponsored venues around the world, including BYU. This is nothing short of a propaganda campaign designed to maintain the power and influence of Mormon leaders over faithful, trusting members of the Mormon Church. Hitler, Stalin and many other notorious ideologues (including two Dr. Wright as an student of Asia should know particularly well - Chairman Mao and Pol Pot) have used similar "information control" techniques to shape a cultural reality that would allow them to maintain control over large groups of people.

It is my view that the Mormon faithful history policy is an abuse of trust perpetrated by the Mormon leadership against the faithful Mormons who gave the trust for which their leaders have not only asked, but demanded, based on the assertion of misleading facts. I certainly trusted them in this fashion, and in my view they should be called to account. I was completely ignorant of the facts noted above, and many others critically relevant to my religious faith, up to age 44 after three university degrees, a lifetime of leadership service within the Mormon community, while owning (and having read) an extensive library of Mormon leadership approved books, and while being recognized as one of the more knowledgeable members of the local Mormon community with respect to Mormon matters in general. If there is a more clear case of the blind leading the blind than what I see when innocent local Mormon leaders like me lead the congregations of faithful Mormons, I am not aware of it. But, the top of the Mormon hierarchy is not blind. It is them I call to account for their deceptive actions.

However, it is important to note that Mormonism's highest leaders are in my view well-intended for the most part at least. They are a modern incarnation of Plato's "philosopher kings" - the wise few who he felt were justified in deceiving the masses when it was necessary to do so, since the masses were incapable of understanding what was in their best interest. This concept is closely related to Nietzsche's notion of the "pious" or "holy" lie, which he said is the foundation of all priesthoods and describes behaviour in the religious sphere that is consistent with the philosopher king concept. Nietzsche condemned the pious lie, as do I, as did Joseph Smith. In the so-called "Plan of Salvation" (the Mormon idea of how we lived prior to this life with God; were sent to this earth to be tested; and if we pass the test, will return to live with God and will become like Him), Satan beautifully articulated the philosopher king and pious lie approach, and was vilified for it.

It is clear, in my view, that Joseph Smith behaved in classic philosopher king fashion, and that the Mormon "faithful history" policy (the policy of only teaching

versions of Mormon history, particularly with respect to Mormonism's foundational events, that will encourage the members to be more obedient to current Mormon leaders) discloses a group of modern philosopher kings who feel justified in telling pious lies.

I trace part of the development of the philosopher king idea in an essay on my website titled "The Mormon Conception of Freedom".

A common justification for the Mormon suppression of information is the "milk before meat" idea that is referred to above. Another favourite is that "the information has always been there; it is your fault if you did not look at it." That is what I was told during a meeting I had with a General Authority as I was working my way through issues such as those outlined above. Once again, if something did not work in my life that related to the Mormon Church, then I must be at fault because it is impossible that Church was. No wonder Utah leads North America in Prozac consumption.

The fact of the matter is that the Mormon Church regularly discourages its members from considering faith-threatening materials as the quotes indicated above show, and as my experience also indicates. Not all Mormons in all places and times experience these things in the same way of course. But for those who listen to the talks Mormon leaders give twice year at General Conference, the message is clear enough. And those Mormons who have run across the non-orthodox position are prohibited by the covenants they made in Mormon temples from discussing these matters in a way that would be critical of Mormon leaders, past or present. And, it is practically speaking difficult to discuss these matters in any way without violating that rule. That is likely the primary reason for which information that questions Mormon orthodoxy circulates so slowly within the Mormon community. Mormon temple covenants interrupt the normal human tendency to share significant news when it comes to anything that would question Mormon belief.

And once again, why would we expect an ordinary Mormon to question their religious leaders when they say that the members should avoid faith-threatening materials? The imbalance of power between the religious leader and the faithful member makes questioning this kind of advice extremely improbable.

A friend recently suggested to me that the Church's conditioning works a lot like the "invisible" electric fences used to keep dogs in yards. The fence is more imagined than real, and only works as long as the dog thinks it works. The same is true of physical fences used to contain other livestock. When a dog learns to run through the invisible fence's electrical field, it will pass through it quickly enough that the fence cannot contain the dog. The same is true with "fence jumping" cattle. They can get out, and once they know that there is no keeping them in. However, without this knowledge and the power it brings, the fence contains the livestock.

The invisible fence analogy is a good one respecting much of the conditioning used by the Mormon Church. Mormons are conditioned to believe that outside of its safe

confines the world is full of danger, and that they hence must stay within the fence. This conditioning is so strong that the first few times a Mormon inadvertently bumps into the fence, she would receive a hard jolt as a result of her conditioning alone. Eventually, however, some acquire enough knowledge that they ignore the fence and pass through.

The Mormon Church's communications with its members respecting the matters outlined above reminds me of the advice Lewis Carroll had Humpty Dumpty give to Alice.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it must mean just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that is all."

This delightful passage raises a question in the context of Mormon leadership and membership that it is shocking to acknowledge must be addressed in a group of well-educated, intelligent people. The Mormon Church uses words we think we understand when it tells us that Joseph Smith "translated" the Book of Mormon; "saw" God the Eternal Father and his Son Jesus Christ; received the priesthoods "under the hands of Peter, James and John and John the Baptist"; that we should not read or otherwise consider any information that questions Mormon leaders or their interpretation of history or theology, etc. These words clearly imply that Smith engaged in a process like that of translation which involves reading in one language and writing the message just read in another; that he had actual, physical experiences of the nature described; and "don't read" and words to that effect are well understood terms.

And then we find out that the historical record does not support the orthodox Mormon version of events. Smith's translations occurred without the golden plates he was allegedly translating being with him for most of the time. This was more a revelation than a translation. His experiences with angels etc. were most likely visionary in nature. But the topper is this: we are told that the fault is ours for not reading the material that questioned the orthodox Mormon position, even though we were being obedient to the Mormon edict that we not read. We trusted. We were obedient. And now it is our fault that we were ignorant as a result of our trust and obedience?

I reject the Humpty Dumpty school of linguistics from which Mormon leaders seem to get their ideas. When the Mormon Church uses language that has a clearly understood, common meaning ("don't read material that questions us because it is dangerous to your spiritual health") and as a result induces people to remain ignorant, it bears responsibility for that ignorance. And if harm results from that ignorance, the fault lies with those who, like Humpty Dumpty, think they can twist language for their own purposes.

The Mormon Church should come clean on its history. It should conform its missionary and other lessons to what reasonable academics indicate is an accurate summary of historical events. And it should make available truly scholarly works respecting its history for the purpose of teaching university level courses and to satisfy the intellectual leanings of some of its members. The Mormon Church has earned nothing but the scorn it deserves in academic circles with respect to its performance in the history department thus far. This scorn is in the same league as that heaped by scientists on those who call themselves scientists while defending young earth creationism and arguing that Darwinian evolution does not hold water.

I am embarrassed by the fact that I was ever supportive (albeit in a state of ignorance induced innocence) with the Mormon enterprise in this regard, and that I used my influence for the purpose of spreading the blatant falsehoods on which most Mormon belief is based.

Once Facts Are Agreed Upon, the Question Becomes: Should A Proven Deceiver Be Believed When Speaking About His Personal Visits With God and other Similar Experiences?

I suggest that what Dr. Wright said about differences in academic opinion respecting Mormon history should be restricted to the conclusions that are drawn from facts that are not in the main under dispute.

Most faithful Mormons believe Smith when he said that God appeared to him and gave him special religious authority, and believe that while Smith did many outrageous things that call his credibility into question, they are still justified in believing what he said about his divine mandate. Many others, including me and a large majority (if not virtually all) of those who have studied Smith from the point of view of the non-believer, have concluded that it is highly unlikely that Smith had the personal relationship with God he claimed to have, and so it is highly unlikely that Smith received from God the exclusive authority to act in His name on which the Mormon Church is founded.

I see in Smith the same pattern of deceptive behaviour that I have seen in many religious leaders throughout history. I accepted that those other religious leaders were motivated (consciously or not) by considerations of power and so (unconsciously or not) misrepresented many things. Until I had access to a reasonable summary of the evidence, I thought Smith was uniquely different. This is what I, and other faithful Mormons, were and are taught to believe. Now, I think Smith was just one among many religious leaders who may or may not have started out with reasonable intentions, and ended up misleading many people so that they could retain or expand their influence.

Reappraisal of Faith and Growth v. Remaining Comfortably Numb

As noted above, Dr. Wright's stature as a scholar in the Mormon community and his implicit acceptance of the Mormon leadership's account of Mormon history will be

used by many faithful Mormons to remain comfortably numb – in a state of denial – respecting the reality of their faith's foundations. This takes the Mormon leadership too easily off the hook. This is regrettable in my view. And hence, it is in my view shameful that a scholar such as Dr. Wright would implicitly support what can only be described as deceptive behaviour on behalf of the Mormon leadership hierarchy.

Once a faithful Mormon understands the nature of Smith's history, he is likely required to reappraise what it means to be a "prophet of God" if he wishes to preserve his faith. That is, a prophet of God must be able to regularly deceive and do many other things of a nature and on a scale that most Mormons would not accept as being part of what comprises a divinely inspired religious leader, while still retaining his prophetic calling and connection to the divine. This casts doubt on the wisdom of trusting and obeying any religious leader in the manner toward which Mormons tend. In my view, this reappraisal is healthy since it leads believing Mormons to begin to exercise more of the individual agency that Mormon theology and most studies of human psychology indicate is important to mental health, and that some past Mormon leaders have encouraged.

Such a reappraisal of Mormon faith does not necessarily mean that a person will do as I have done – leave Mormonism. I know many who have come to the conclusions I have and remained more or less fully participating Mormons. One, with whom I correspond weekly, is currently serving as a Mormon Bishop. However, these people are not under the control of Mormon authority in the fashion I was. They use their faith, instead of being used by it. That, in my view, is the key question: who is in control? Who is using whom?

However, the path of reappraisal is hard. Those who take it run the risk of losing friends, impairing family relationships, perhaps going through divorce, etc. But in my experience the difficulties appear much worse than they are, and the benefits to be gained are much greater than can be understood until they are experienced. This is discussed in the second to last section of this essay.

Mormon History for Mormons is Far More Than an Academic Exercise

One of the differences between the academic study of history (in most cases at least) and the consideration of Mormon history from the point of view of a believing Mormon is that important day-to-day decisions do not depend on most historical questions, but do depend on the conclusions we draw respecting certain aspects of Mormon history.

For example, if Smith received God's divine mandate as he claims, I should give most of my free time (not to mention a lot of money – the time is far more important to me than the money) to the Mormon Church. I should plan to spend much of my retirement in full time volunteer missionary service for the Mormon Church. I should plan to go back to using what little time I have to read and write to re-read the scriptures (I have read the Book of Mormon from cover to cover in excess of twenty times, and read my favourite parts of it countless times). Etc. And, I should plan to encourage my children to do the same.

On the other hand, if Smith was a conscious or unconscious deceiver, as I believe he was, I have a world of choices to make about how to live my life. I have discovered that this is a wonderful way to live. I have never been as excited about the prospects of each day, or what the middle or long range future holds for me and my family, or life in general, as I am now.

And, if I follow the advice of some Mormons that unless I am certain, I should not change my beliefs, I could never change since I will never be certain. And, if the same advice applied to everyone else, no one would respond to Mormonism's extensive missionary and marketing efforts by converting to Mormonism. This apologetic approach has been around for centuries at least (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.apologetic%20mind.pdf>).

The fact of the matter is that we each make decisions all day every day in the face of uncertainty, and our most important decisions are made this way as well. So, making a decision with respect to a religious matter on the basis of imperfect information is nothing new. And, once the evidence is finally considered, it is nowhere near as uncertain as most Mormons would like to believe.

Because of the importance of the choices I need to make that depend upon conclusions I reach as to Smith's nature and what he did or did not do, I decided that I should to the extent possible put myself in the position of a judge who would listen to all of the most credible evidence he could find, and then decide what likely happened. I did this recognizing, as noted above, that I could never be certain. And because of the investment I had in Mormonism in terms of many years of faithful service, family and community relationships, I was inclined to resolve any doubt in its favour.

I note as an aside that Dallin Oaks, in a 1985 address to Mormon educators, indicated that he assumed that all Mormons do what I am about to describe doing. That is, he assumed that Mormons listen to both the "anti-Mormons" and the Mormons with care, and then make up their minds as to what is likely most correct. He used this assumption to justify his instruction to Mormon educators that they were to only tell "one side" of the Mormon story, because the other side was told by others (See http://www.i4m.com/think/intro/mormon_leaders.htm for this and other similar quotes). I still shake my head at the fact that a respected former judge and university president could utter such nonsense. Reading those words (ironically sent to me by a BYU professor who thought I would find Oaks persuasive because he was a lawyer) was one the turning points for me on my way out of Mormonism. I do not accuse Oaks of dishonesty, but rather see him as eloquent, walking testimony of the power of cognitive dissonance, which I describe in some detail below.

For several months after I began to read "real" Mormon history (including all of the types to which Dr. Wright referred) I struggled to find ways to continue to believe what my religious leaders had taught me. In the end, I was not successful. That still saddens me. But, just as the most fervent belief imaginable that I can fly

would not help me if I jumped off a cliff and in fact it would be dangerous for me to live my life possessed by such a belief, I decided that it was best for me to make the painful adjustment to believing something that more closely resembled reality than what I had been taught as a faithful Mormon.

I intend for the rest of my life to try to sharpen my grasp of what is real around me, and gradually root out the misimpressions to which we are all subject. And I recognize that it is possible that I am mistaken in my current beliefs respecting Mormonism. I continue to be willing to consider any evidence or reasoning my family or friends wish to present to me in that regard.

"Look how many smart, well educated Mormons there are! How can you reasonably say they are all wrong?"

This argument is apparent in Dr. Wright's cataloguing of the accomplishments and diverse attitudes of many Mormons with whom he has dealt. It shows up again in his express rejection of cognitive dissonance theory as an explanation for the belief of Mormons in the divine calling of Joseph Smith in the face of what is in my view damning evidence with respect to his credibility.

The short answer to this point is that there are many smart, well-educated Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, atheists, etc. and that is not accepted by Mormons as proof of the claims those religious (or irreligious) communities make. Indeed, there are smart and well-educated young earth creationists, holocaust deniers and people who fervently believe in UFOs or do not believe man has walked on the Moon. And what about all of those smart, well-educated Mormons who have left Mormonism? I am not very well plugged in, but correspond with several former BYU professors and a variety of other PhD types at other universities and in industry who are more or less in the same position as me. And, I have never heard of such a person joining Mormonism, although I am sure the odd one has. So, why should the existence of smart, well-educated Mormons be proof of Mormon claims? In fact, this is not such proof unless you are a Mormon looking for any thin excuse you can find to continue believing as you already do. As I noted above, the provision of that kind of excuse is the primary result, if not goal, of apologetic writing such as that proffered by Dr. Wright.

What I observe is that most religious and irreligious communities use the presence in their midst of smart, well-educated people as proof of their claims. So, perhaps we should look for ways to explain why the Mormons and each of these other groups include smart, well-educated people and yet come to such conflicting conclusions. That is the approach I have taken, and am grateful for the many others who are far more educated and insightful than I am who ploughed the ground ahead of me. All I had to do was follow along behind them, pick up pearls of understanding as I went, and then apply them to my Mormon experience as they have been applied in many other contexts. The following is a summary of some of the most useful ideas I have found with respect to this critically important point.

Testable Premises and Reasoned Conclusions

I would like to frame this discussion in the context of the kind of theory testing that occurs in the scientific world. And I do this knowing that many of my Mormon friends will respond that this is inappropriate because we are dealing with a matter of faith, not science. However, if they will indulge me, I believe that through the use of a few of the various thinking tools that scientists and others who take seriously the challenge of winnowing truth from error use, I can demonstrate that is it difficult from an outsider's point of view to distinguish between what often passes for faith based "knowledge" on the one hand, and ignorance that has been sanctified by tradition on the other. I also note that this sanctification is facilitated by leaders in whose interest it is that such sanctification occurs. I finally note that the kind of analysis I propose cannot give us a certain conclusion, but at a minimum it is safe to say that it will help us to better understand both the strengths and weaknesses of any position we eventually decide to adopt. In this regard, I think that the use of this kind of reasoning is consistent with what many Mormon leaders have said in the past, such as J. Rueben Clark who said,

If we have the truth, [it] cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed. (Michael Quinn, "J. Rueben Clark: The Church Years", page 24)

Scientists develop theories about how things work, and then test them in various ways. This testing, broadly speaking, does two things. First, and most important, it tests how well a theory predicts future events. For example, if my theory is that the oldest child in a family will tend to have certain behavioural characteristics that his other siblings do not have, I can go out to a population of children, test them, and find out if the predicted personality trait pattern exists. Second, the theory may be explanatory of things already observed – of history. This is not testable in the way that current experience is by way of repeatable experiment, but if a theory is consistent with past experience, that provides at least some support for it.

Logic is used extensively in the development and testing of scientific and other theories. It is one of the "thinking tools" I mentioned above. Hence, I find it helpful to break theories of the sort we are talking about here down into premises and conclusions drawn from them so that they can be more easily analyzed. Reformatting arguments or theories in this way makes it clear what kind of evidence needs to be produced in order to support an argument, and also exposes the reasoning linkages that must be tested in order to see if each part of the argument is sound. And, the structure of logic itself can be used to isolate, and test in a way, otherwise untestable premises in much the way mathematical equations can be used to test certain things. I also note that what I am about to do could be said to be a somewhat more formal analysis of the same issue I dealt with above in my critique of Dr. Wright's failure to separate facts from conclusions in his historical review.

“Premises” are the assertions that provide the foundation for a theory. Once the premises are understood, a conclusion can be drawn from them. A simple example of this is as follows:

P: All Canadians are humans.

P: All humans are mammals.

C: Therefore, all Canadians are mammals.

A theory expressed in the form of an argument can be shown to be faulty by showing that its premises are incorrect. Evidence might be brought, for example, to show that some Canadians are androids or otherwise subhuman. I am Canadian, and we have often wondered about some of our politicians and lawyers in this regard. An argument might also be shown to be faulty if its conclusion does not logically follow from its premises. For example, maybe there are people who believe that there is a subcategory within what is considered “Canadian” that is not mammalian. If so, we might need to debate the merits of that position.

So, lets first consider the theory Dr. Wright and other faithful Mormons employ, and then an alternative theory. The Mormon theory can be stated as follows by way of premises and a conclusion.

P1: There is one, and only one, God.

P2: God communicates His will to mankind.

P3: God gave Joseph Smith His exclusive authority in modern times.

P4: Smith, at God's command, translated the Book of Mormon.

P5: Anyone who reads the Book of Mormon and prays to God with sincere intent will be told sooner or later by God that the Book of Mormon is His word and that Smith translated it through the gift and power of God.

P6: God communicates with human beings in this regard by way of sometimes powerful, sometimes subtle, emotional or mental impressions and other similar experiences.

P7: Those who are sinful, including those who are inadequately humble or lack faith, cannot hear God’s voice and hence cannot experience, or properly interpret, the impressions or experiences just mentioned.

C: Therefore, anyone who does not, after reading the Book of Mormon and praying about it as indicated above, eventually receive confirmation from God that it is His word etc., either did not have sincere intent when asking for God’s guidance or is subject to sin of some kind that prevents him from hearing God's voice.

What is set up as a conclusion in this theory is not really a conclusion. As my example above involving Canadians, humans and mammals indicates, the nature of a conclusion is to use reasoning based upon known characteristics of the premises to suggest something that is the logical consequence of those premises. The Mormon theory just stated uses no such logic. Rather, the conclusion simply restates one or more of the premises – “The cat is black, therefore, the cat is black”. In the example above, “C” is a repetition of P5 through P7. This is a common logical error and is referred to as a “circular argument” or “tautology” – an argument that draws a conclusion that is merely a repetition of one the assumptions the argument asks us to make. Hence, the argument contains no reasoning. This is often hard to spot because of the way in which assumptions are buried in, or even only implied by, the premises used to create the argument’s foundation. Such is the case with the Mormon theory set out above. At the conclusion of such an argument, and with a flourish, one can say “therefore” and state what sounds like a dramatic conclusion – making it appear like something has just been proven – when all that we have done is restate a premise using different language. When this is understood, the argument collapses. It amounts to nothing more than an invitation to believe in unprovable premises. Such arguments are more persuasive tricks (witting or not) than sincere efforts to find out what “is”.

It is important to note that the testability of premises is not a black and white matter. Some premises are perfectly testable. $2+2=4$ and other mathematical equations are either true, or false, and there is an agreed upon and precise method for definitive testing. The boiling point of water at a particular attitude is similarly testable for practical purposes. However, whether a particular historical event occurred or not will always be open to question. The reliability of any conclusion we may draw in this regard depends upon how solid our evidence is, and this is something of which we can never be certain. But, certain historical events (as noted above) are much easier to assess than others as a result of the number of witnesses to them, and the manner in which the relevant evidence was collected and preserved. Finally, some premises are very difficult, or impossible, to test. Is there life on other planets or in other galaxies? Does God exist? Etc.

It is also important to note that the structure of logic itself sometimes provides the means for testing otherwise untestable premises. Logic attempts to model itself on mathematics. For example, we might have a number of premises that are “known” to be true that yield a logical conclusion, and to them we might add another premise that is “unprovable” and find that logic requires a conclusion that is “known” to be false. This would suggest that the premise added at the end of the process is likely false. I used bracketed words because what is often assumed to be “known” with certainty is not certain, and so the mathematical precision for which logicians reach is not attainable, and can itself be misleading. That having been said, the logic tool I just described (and many others of similar sort) are in my view useful.

Much of the productive work that is done as a result of logic-based argument is a result of finding, and then weighing, evidence related to the establishment of

premises. Let's briefly review in this regard the premises that underlie the above Mormon theory.

P1: There is one, and only one, God.

Consider the difference between this premise, and the premise "Grizzly Bears live in the Banff National Park near Calgary, Alberta". We can't go find God to see if he exists. Nor do we have any way to confirm that there is only one god. Hence, this premise cannot be reliably tested. However, we can look at many societies to see how they conceptualize God. What we find in this regard supports Goethe's wise dictum:

As man is,
So is his God,
And thus is God,
Oft strangely odd.

Durkheim, the great sociologist, said something similar: "God is the deification of society" and religion is "the sacrilisation of society's requirements for human behaviour." (See <http://www.hewett.norfolk.sch.uk/CURRIC/soc/religion/funct3.htm>)

That is, the notion of God appears to be used in a many societies to justify societal practises. While this does not prove that there is more than one God, or that God does not exist, it points out one of the principal risks of belief in God – that we will simply use that belief to justify what may be short-sighted social practises or attitudes. Many former Mormon beliefs now fall into this camp, such as those related to the sinfulness of mixed race marriages, the need to kill people to help them to atone for certain sins, the eternal and unalterable nature of the Mormon practise of plural marriage, etc. I predict that other current Mormon beliefs and practises will go the same route.

P2: God communicates His will to mankind.

Many people tell us that they have received communication from God. However, when we probe the nature of this communication, we find that it could have been caused by any number of much more likely phenomena ranging from indigestion, to normal dreams, to normal emotional experience, to the use of psychotropic drugs. Dreams and visions of a religious sort, for example, have been shown to be producible by stimulating particular parts of the brain. Powerful ideas, or "impressions", come to us all the time as a result of the functioning of our subconscious mind. This premise cannot be reliably tested.

And, consider again the fact that religious beliefs that are thought to be certain as a result of having been communicated from God regularly change. Think of how each of the following has changed over the years: attitudes

respecting the Earth being at the centre of the Universe; attitudes respecting the age and formation of the Earth; attitudes respecting biological evolution; Attitudes respecting race relations; attitudes respecting the need to atone for certain sins by shedding the sinner's own blood; attitudes respecting dietary restrictions; attitudes respecting the causes of mental illness; attitudes respecting the role of women in society and religious communities; attitudes respecting gay people.

Here again we find great support for the wisdom of Goethe's view. Many of these attitudes were at one time perceived to be eternal, unchanging truths communicated by God to his leaders, and are now considered to have been foolish dogma.

My conclusion is that if God communicates with religious leaders, they have a poor track record in the listening department.

P3: God gave Joseph Smith His exclusive authority in modern times.

We must rely in this regard primarily on Smith's testimony as to whether an historical event occurred. As noted in answer to Dr. Wright's first assertion above, and as elaborated in the essay "Should I Join (or Leave) the Mormon Church" on my website, there is a high probability that Smith lied on a regular basis in important ways in order to get people to do what he wanted them to do, and so in my view he should not be believed on this point without significant corroborating evidence. I am not aware of any such evidence. As also noted above, his story with respect to his visit with God appears likely to have changed dramatically over time.

P4: Smith, at God's command, translated the Book of Mormon.

A great deal of evidence as to the historical accuracy and other attributes of the Book of Mormon is available, and can be tested. Scholars faithful to Mormonism now admit that many things Smith and other Mormon prophets have said about the Book of Mormon are likely false, such as that the story told in the Book of Mormon was played out over most of both American hemispheres. The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that this was not the case. Mormon scholars and leaders have responded to this development by redefining the premises to make them as untestable as possible. This is, for example, what the retreat toward the "limited geography" theory does with respect to the Book of Mormon. This theory suggests that the entire Book of Mormon story was played out in such a small area that it is possible that we have not, and may never, find it. Hence, the theory is not testable. Some faithful Mormon scholars admit that this theory is less likely to be correct than the theory that the Book of Mormon is not a real history. For more on this idea, see the now somewhat out of date essay on my website "The Book of Mormon DNA Controversy: A Case Study in How Not to Think". Any testable premises in the Mormon theory that appear likely to be disproven are redefined so as to be untestable.

P5: Anyone who reads the Book of Mormon and prays to God with sincere intent will eventually be told by God that the Book of Mormon is His word and that Smith translated it through the gift and power of God.

Since we can't identify God, and for a variety of other reasons, this premise is not testable. And, the conclusion repeats this premise, thus making the argument circular.

P6: God communicates with human beings in this regard by way of sometimes powerful, sometimes subtle, emotional or mental impressions and other similar experiences.

This is not testable. It infers an unprovable cause for events most humans experience. It is the equivalent of the local witch doctor saying, "When you feel good or good things happen to you, it is the result of my Voodoo. When you feel bad or bad things happen to you, it is the result of your enemies' Voodoo. You should hire me to use my Voodoo to fight your enemies' Voodoo." This kind of approach preys upon basic human fears and desires.

P7: Those who are sinful, including those who are inadequately humble or lack faith, cannot hear God's voice.

This premise asserts that only evidence that supports the argument is valid evidence. Hence, it attempts to mislead those who are trying to decide which evidence does, or does not, support the argument. Premises of this sort are sometimes referred to as being subject to the "No True Scotsman" fallacy. For example, I might say, "No true Scotsman puts honey on his porridge." If I accept that premise, and then find that Scotty McScotsman puts honey on his porridge, I must conclude that Mr. McScotsman is not a true Scotsman. Another way to look at P7 is as a stronger form of P6. P6 attempts to make the theory untestable by saying that it is easy to be mistaken when God speaks to us. P7 says that if we don't hear what Mormon leaders tell us we should hear, it is because we are defective.

C: Therefore, anyone who does not, after reading the Book of Mormon and praying about it as indicated above, eventually receive confirmation from God that it is His word etc., either did not have sincere intent when asking for God's guidance or is subject to sin of some kind that prevents him from hearing God's voice.

As noted above, the conclusion is not really a conclusion. It restates some of the premises. Hence, this argument boils down to an invitation to accept untestable premises based on faith. And, an unwillingness to accept the premises will itself disqualify the seeker of truth as "unfaithful" and hence "unworthy" for the promised divine evidence since the failure to accept the argument's premises evidences inadequate humility.

This theory is constructed so that it cannot be disproven, and at the same time so that any human being who after reading the Book of Mormon has a positive emotional experience should conclude that this is a communication from God that is evidence that the theory is correct. The theory does not allow for the possibility that a positive experience associated with reading the Book of Mormon could have any number of other explanations that are more probably true than the one this theory suggests.

It is important to remember that evidence is only useful to the extent that the premise to which it is related is testable. That is, I have little interest at this point in Earth bound evidence that there may be life in other galaxies. The evidence we have cannot be shown to be sufficiently relevant to that question to take it seriously. I react similarly to evidence as to God's existence. Such evidence cannot prove that God exists, but by focusing my attention on irrelevant alleged relationships to God's existence that happen to be connected to many of my most primal hopes and fears (what happens after death?; why do I exist?; etc.) this exercise has a high probability of misleading me. Hence, I am better off ignoring the entire debate and using my energies to understand matters that are susceptible to human understanding and then using that understanding to accomplish the things that I can do, and that I have decided are important to me.

Here is another famous bit of Mormon illogic. On February 8, 1843 Joseph Smith's journal notes:

This morning, I read German, and visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that "a prophet is always a prophet;" but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such. (B. H. Roberts, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Second Edition, Revised (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1967) Vol. 5, page 265)

On another occasion, Smith received a revelation that he was to sell the copyright to the Book of Mormon. He sent some of his colleagues to Canada for this purpose, and they failed in their effort. Upon their return, they accused Smith of falsely prophesying. He responded:

Some revelations are of God: some revelations are of man: and some revelations are of the devil. (Comprehensive History of the Church, Vol. 1, page 165)

That is, Smith had been deceived. What he thought was a revelation was not a revelation. This and other statements of Joseph Smith form the backbone of the Mormon position that prophets are fallible. Let's break this idea down into premises and a conclusion.

Pl: There is a God.

Pm: God reveals his will to prophets.

Pn: Prophets sometimes make mistakes.

Po: If a prophet makes a mistake, it is because he was not acting as a prophet when he made the mistake or because he was deceived by the devil.

C: Therefore, when a prophet makes a mistake it does not mean that he is not a prophet.

Once again, we have a conclusion that simply repeats its premises. The term "prophet" is defined to fit the facts as Smith found them. Since he made mistakes, and he was a prophet, it was OK for prophets to make mistakes. In fairness to Smith, we are able to point to numerous examples of Biblical prophets who also lied, made mistakes, etc. So, I am not critical of Smith for failing to meet a Biblical standard of some kind. Rather, I am saying that all prophets are of the same ilk – they make mistakes. Hence, they should only be relied upon to the extent they demonstrate predictive power, trustworthiness etc. That is, they are just like all other humans and should earn their respect instead of being placed in a privileged, untouchable category that is designed to produce blind obedience instead of informed choice. Contrast this sensible position with that advocated by Mormon leaders. For example, Dallin Oaks said:

It is one thing to depreciate a person who exercises corporate power or even government power. It is quite another thing to criticize or depreciate a person for the performance of an office to which he or she has been called of God. It does not matter that the criticism is true.

As Elder George F. Richards, President of the Council of the Twelve, said in a conference address in April 1947,

... when we say anything bad about the leaders of the Church, whether true or false, we tend to impair their influence and their usefulness and are thus working against the Lord and his cause.

... The Holy Ghost will not guide or confirm criticism of the Lord's anointed, or of Church leaders, local or general. This reality should be part of the spiritual evaluation that LDS readers and viewers apply to those things written about our history and those who made it. (Dallin Oaks, "Reading Church History," CES Doctrine and Covenants Symposium, Brigham Young University, 16 Aug. 1985, page 25).

Oaks comments are of course consistent with the covenant faithful Mormons make in Mormon temples not to speak critically about Mormon leaders. See http://www.i4m.com/think/leaders/mormon_loyalty.htm for other related quotes.

Since I know how difficult it is for all of us (Mormons included) to recognize the nature of the world in which we live, let me suggest another theory that suffers from precisely the same problems as does the main Mormon theory outlined above.

Pw: There is an Irish fairy that is invisible, and lives in Ottawa, Canada.

Px: The Irish fairy knows all, and rewards those who believe that it exists.

Py: The Irish fairy makes its existence known in many ways, the most common of which are appearing to its followers in dreams or visions, or causing a feeling of great peace when its followers meditate on its existence.

Pz: Those who do not receive the Irish fairy's manifestation in the manner indicated have not developed adequate faith, and should continue to exercise their faith in this regard.

Cw: Therefore, all those who have yet to receive the Irish fairy's manifestation lack faith.

Again, we have untestable premises and a conclusion that merely repeats a few of the premises and hence cannot contradict them. As is the case with the Mormon theory summarized above, this theory is of no practical use unless our purpose is to convince people of the existence of the Irish fairy using the testimony of people who have felt calm while meditating or who after hearing stories about the Irish fairy for many years have dreamt of it, and so believe that the Irish fairy exists. That is, this theory cannot help us to understand the nature of the reality around us. It uses normal human experience (we feel calm while we meditate; we dream of odd things of which we speak, sing, etc.) to convince us that something that cannot be proven to exist, does exist. This, regrettably, is what the foundations of Mormonism boil down to.

However, Mormonism itself is much more than a silly theory. Mormonism is the glue that is used to bind a group of people together. It is a mythology in that sense, and the use of fear, illogic, tricks of mind, social pressure and a host of other forces of this dark type are standard operating procedure for the systems that hold groups of people together. And because it is so important to us that we belong to a group and have a sense of meaning, the insiders of each group are not capable of being as critical of the irrational aspects of the glue that holds their group together as are outsiders. The importance of remaining in the group, and allowing the group to continue to function properly, outweigh logic and reason in this regard. More on this topic will follow.

Let's now consider an alternative theory that might be used to explain the behaviour of people relative to Mormonism and other belief systems. It goes as follows:

Pa: Many humans have powerful emotional experiences related to many things.

Pb: Many humans believe in different types of gods.

Pc: Many humans interpret some of their emotional experiences to indicate that they have an exclusive relationship with god as they perceive him/it to be.

Pd: The experiences that lead to these beliefs in different human groups are very similar.

Pe: The structure of individual human psychology and human group sociology reinforces beliefs of this sort.

Pf: Beliefs of this sort are used for a variety of purposes in the organization and maintenance of human groups.

Pg: Beliefs of this sort are more common in primitive populations that tend to have violent relationships with their neighbours.

Ph: Beliefs of this sort tend to be abandoned as populations become better educated and more secure, and as a result, their relationships with their neighbours tend to improve.

Ca: Therefore, a belief in an exclusive relationship to god is an important aspect of human psychology and sociology within many social groups, but the function this belief performs can be performed by other cultural institutions once the groups in question become aware of alternatives, and this change often improves the well being of both the groups in question and their neighbours.

Each of the premises just stated is testable to a reasonable degree, while the results of such tests would be disputed among many social scientists. The conclusion is derived using principles of logic. It too could be disputed. In the course of arguing about the premises and conclusion in this theory, much data would be collected and many arguments made as to how such data could be interpreted. In the course of this dispute, a lot would be learned about how and why people hold certain religious beliefs, and what consequences these beliefs have. That is, the development and testing of this theory would help us to understand the nature of the reality of which we are a part.

I note that the theory just stated does not conclude that there is no God, or no God of a type in which Mormons believe. This is not something that can be proven using evidence or logic. All it does is offer an explanation of the human experience we see all around us in the religious world, and it therefore suggests that the Mormon experience is part of this whole. Also, by comparing how this theory functions to how the Mormon theory functions we are brought face to face with the reality that the Mormon theory assumes very dubious causal connections between routine emotional experience and the existence of things like a particular kind of God.

Those causal connections are not testable, and hence can't be disproven. However, once many people have walked through the exercise of comparing these two theories and realize the nature of the assumptions and leaps of logic they have been making, they are not longer prepared to assume that the premises required by the Mormon theory are correct. This decision is based on a realization that the Mormon assumptions are no more reasonable than those made by believers in Irish fairies or Voodoo.

Of the two examples just noted, the Voodoo example is probably more explanatory since it uses primal hopes and fears to persuade us to hire someone to do things for us that likely do not need to be done. This hiring, of course, transfers assets (money) from one person (the person invited to make the assumption) to another person (the person who makes the invitation and holds himself out as having special power or authority). This precisely parallels the relationship between Mormon leaders and Mormon followers. While Mormon leaders realize modest monetary gains from their "service", the ego investment and the opportunity to manage large capital budgets, build massive and beautiful buildings, and be venerated by rank and file Mormons is more than enough to attract and hold human interest. Anyone who doubts this should spend a few minutes thinking about our political process. The position of many political leaders is a precise analogue to that of Mormon religious leaders, except that the Mormon leaders have the additional power of appointing their colleagues and in some important cases, their successors.

At each step of the discussion that follows I suggest that we consider which of the two primary theories just discussed, the "Mormon theory" or its naturalistic counterpart, is a more reasonable explanation of the experience we see around us in the religious world. This is an application of what is known in the scientific world as the "principle of parsimony". Most of the best decisions humans make conscious or unconscious use this principle (sometimes also called "Occam's Razor" after the Bishop of Occam who in the 14th century was one of its early and best know practitioners) as a criterion for deciding among competing theories or explanations. This principle states that we should always choose the simplest explanation of a phenomenon – the one that requires the fewest leaps of logic.

Another way to think of parsimony when it comes to decision-making is that it makes use of probabilities. That is, it requires us to ask something like, "given all we know about the question "x", what is most likely to be the correct answer?" It recognizes that certainty is not possible in answering most questions. This is how scientists, lawyers, judges and others in the business of decision-making try to think, and I will use that approach in this essay.

Four Main Points

I have four points to make.

First, the experiences many of us are encouraged by our social structure to interpret as "religious" are of a type that have a powerful effect on us. Hence, they

constitute a form of evidence that is beyond the ordinary and so often overpowers our rational processes.

Second, the combination of these experiences and our social reality causes the forces of cognitive dissonance to screen much information that would cause a more objective person to reject our many of our religious beliefs.

Third, two aspects of cognitive dissonance theory called the "principle of insufficient justification" and the "confirmation bias" are particularly helpful to our understanding of Mormon and other religious behaviour.

And fourth, the nature of an individual's personality type is of fundamental importance in how he reacts to things like the Mormon environment and disconfirming evidence that he encounters once fully conditioned as a Mormon.

The Power of Religious Experience

Religious impulses are deeply imbedded in us. There are a number of good reasons for which evolution may have selected humans who favour religious thinking (See Michael Shermer, "How We Believe"; Pascal Boyer, "Religion Explained"). Most of these relate to the importance of human group interaction to our survival and progress, and religious belief as a means of creating and maintaining cohesive groups. And most importantly, recent scientific studies show that spiritual experience is "real" in the sense that while a person perceives herself to be having a spiritual experience the brain does things that are consistent with what neurologists would expect to produce profoundly moving mental states (See Andrew Newberg et al, "Why God Won't Go Away"). For example, when we are faced with a situation like the death of a loved one that causes intense, existential anxiety and are provided with relief in the form of a religious insight, the parts of our nervous system that are responsible for arousal and relaxation are sometimes simultaneously activated in a way similar to that associated with sexual climax. As a result, we experience an intense, rare, mental state. Not surprisingly, the ideas that appear to have triggered that wonder are not easily abandoned.

A similarly powerful emotional state can be produced by anxiety that arises from a dawning realization that one does not believe his dominant group's core teachings, and a subsequent surrender to the group's pressure to adopt its beliefs. In the absence of a perspective broad enough to show the universal nature of this powerful, emotional experience, it would be rational to believe that it was caused by the truth of a particular set of beliefs about god and other aspects of metaphysical reality, which in most cases would be the beliefs of the community in which the experience occurred.

Once an emotional event of the type just noted has been experienced, it provides a source of evidence to support belief that is not questionable through rational means. However, the universal nature of this human experience, when combined with other social forces, explains to my satisfaction the near immovable nature of religious belief in many communities throughout history as well as now. It hence

explains the certainty with which many of the people to whom Dr. Wright refers hold their beliefs.

The intense experience just described influences many, but far from all, Mormons and members of other conservative religious communities. However, both those who do experience it and those who do not are subject to another powerful psychological force known as cognitive dissonance that on its own is more than enough to shape our perception of spiritual reality.

Cognitive Dissonance

Given the importance I attached to cognitive dissonance theory, and Dr. Wright's dismissal of it, I will summarize a here a few of the basics with respect to it. More information on this topic can be found on my website in an essay titled "Religious Faith: Enlightening or Blinding?".

The Human Quest for Certainty

Humans like certainty and dislike uncertainty. Hence, they prefer to perceive many things that are uncertain or changing as certain and/or static.

The same mental and social forces that I am about to try to explain and that cause Mormons to misunderstand things about themselves apply in similar fashion to most other people. In particular, I am still subject to these forces. I have not found an inerrant path to truth. And since I believe that I was misled as to the "reality" or "truth" of Mormonism, I am much more cautious than I have ever been about accepting something as "true". I expect to be wrong in much of what I do and think, and to have to revise my opinions as I go through life. The best I can do is say, "This is how it appears to me now after having done my best to collect and understand the relevant evidence." So, I press along trying to expand my perspective and test my opinions so that I can have reason to hope that I will make fewer, or at least different, mistakes in the future than I made while Mormon.

Nothing in history or even science can be known with 100% certainty. Only things like mathematics can produce certain results, and that is because math is something we made and can make do, within limits, what we want it to do. Since Mormonism is not governed by principles of mathematics or anything like that, it is not reasonable for anyone on either side of the Mormon debate to claim that he is certain that the other side is wrong.

So, I acknowledge that it is possible that Joseph Smith saw God, translated the Book of Mormon etc. as he said he did. However, on the basis of all of the evidence I have reviewed, it is my assessment that it is highly unlikely that he did any of the supernatural things he told people he did.

My purpose in this part of this essay is not to discuss the evidence on the basis of which I have formed the conclusion just stated, but to discuss why intelligent, well-

informed, well-intentioned, honest people can disagree after having painstakingly reviewed the same evidence.

It is important to note that this phenomenon is not limited to religion. Think of politics, global warming, the formation of the European Union, how to fight the war against terrorism, etc. The same dynamics are involved in each case. Smart people study the same data and come to unshakeable, emotional and diametrically opposed, conclusions.

It is important to recognize that the forces we are about to discuss operate mostly at the subconscious level. To the extent we drag them into the conscious realm, they largely stop operating.

A question that I suggest we ask ourselves as we go through this analysis, is as follows:

If I accept that these principles operate in many aspects of life other than religion, am I justified in assuming that my religious beliefs are immune from these forces?

The body of information produced by science is the most reliable ever created by man. As noted above, the people who study how well scientists “know” things tell us that the only thing we can know with 100% certainty is what we have created ourselves, like math. The best that can be said of science is that it produces information that is reliable to a degree. Some of the information produced by science is highly reliable, but not certain. For example, Ptolemy’s astronomical system was thought to be certain for over 1,000 years and was accurate enough in some ways to facilitate map making and navigation while holding that the Earth was at the centre of the universe. And, the speed of light is now thought to perhaps not be a constant.

As was the case with Ptolemy’s cosmology, some things that may look to us like they are so small (like the possible variance in the speed of light) that they do not matter may be important in ways that are beyond our comprehension. And despite our understanding that everything around us is uncertain, we must make decisions. It would be foolish to refuse to make up our minds until we could be certain. In that case, we would not decide, or do, much because certainty is so seldom possible. And so it must be with religious issues. In the face of uncertainty we must decide what is most likely to be true, or works best, or whatever. And those who tell us that we should not decide unless we can be certain will surely not allow the same rule to be used on their own belief system.

This was one of the many entertaining aspects of a lengthy interview I had with a General Authority shortly before tendering my resignation from the Mormon Church. This man, who is a capable trial lawyer, went on for some time in a condescending manner about how foolish I was to put any weight on the information about Mormonism I found on the Internet (“Internet gossip” he called it), without any reference to the tremendous range in terms of the quality of

information sources I can access over the Internet. And he cautioned me to avoid "hearsay" evidence (evidence provided by one person on the basis of what someone else told them instead of related to their own experience) of any kind when assessing the character of Joseph Smith and other persons or events critical to the formation of an opinion regarding whether Mormonism is on balance good or bad, as I define those terms. I add that he is both Internet savvy and very familiar with the hearsay rule.

I pointed out to him that if hearsay evidence is excluded, we should not believe most of what we know about Joseph Smith's story (his reporting of what he was instructed to do by angels, God the Father etc. is hearsay after all), and the entire foundation of Christianity collapses. And does the Mormon Church not put a lot of information up on the Internet these days too? As is so often the case, he made rules to aid his defence of Mormonism that he would not be prepared to apply to the establishment of the foundations of his faith. That is, his instinct was to adopt a double standard that protected his position.

This reminds me of a conversation I had with a friend who asked my permission to bear his Mormon testimony to one of my daughters. I told him that would be fine as long as I could bear my agnostic testimony to his daughter. This bright man – also a lawyer – said, "Good point". And that was the end of that. No testimonies were born. It had not occurred to him that it might be appropriate for me to express my beliefs to his daughter, while thinking that I would probably not mind if he expressed his beliefs to my daughter. That is, he assumed without analysis his testimony was different and should be treated differently than my beliefs. To his credit, as soon as this lack of symmetry was pointed out, he dropped his request.

These anecdotes illustrate a basic human reasoning problem. We often assume unconsciously defend our beliefs using weapons that can be turned against us because we are blind to the nature of our own position. This tendency is part of what is known in psychological circles as the "confirmation bias" and is discussed in some detail below. But the larger point I was trying to make by telling the last two stories is that matters of faith are riddled with mental blind spots because they are so foundational to our lives, and hence are not questioned as they should be. As we become more self aware, we begin to question these things more frequently, and are likely to be continually surprised by what we learn about ourselves in this regard.

I read somewhere that science is like a relatively small garden in the middle of a huge, dark forest. Within that garden, we understand much about what is going on, and things are relatively speaking under our control. However, the forest is unknown to us. All we can do is guess what is going on there. We send exploration parties into the fringes of the forest, and as a result occasionally cut paths out from our garden into the unknown and feel that we have learned something as a result. And sometimes we cut down trees around the edge of our garden, and hence expand the area that is relatively speaking under our control.

But, it seems that each bit of knowledge we glean about the forest raises many more questions than it answers. So, the unknown seems to expand faster than the known.

The important part of religion deals with what science has not yet touched. As already noted, humans like certainty and dislike uncertainty. Hence, religion over the ages has tended to explain the unknown to people; to give meaning and hence comfort and certainty to that which is frightening precisely because it defies (or at some time defied) understanding – death; disease; war; love; joy; etc. The “God of the gaps” idea describes this process. This conception of God says that as we know more, God becomes less – he is required to fit into an ever-smaller space. But as noted above, those who understand science the best do not see that space as shrinking.

Religious leaders have been in control of the meaning and certainty creation process until recently, and have derived enormous amounts of power from it. But science came along and provided answers that in many cases conflict with those given by religion. Many diseases are caused by germs, not sin. Some odd behaviours are caused by mental illness of genetic or other origin, not the possession by devils. Races can be mixed without horrifying results. In fact, the results enrich us culturally, genetically, aesthetically and otherwise. Etc.

The apparent collapse to religion before science is upsetting to people who like certainty, and have perceived their religious beliefs to provide certainty. I suggest that this is because they have focussed on the wrong aspect of their religious belief, or perhaps have not understood it.

Virtually all religions that have stood the test of time, are useful maps to the soul. They are packed with meaning and metaphor. They are wonderful storehouses of “whys” from which we can choose while creating a foundation in our lives on which sciences’ “hows” can operate. Science cannot provide the whys. Religion is one of many sources of understand that can work well in this regard. However, history teaches us that any religion that is taken literally and hence set up in competition with science has a high probability of losing. The real question is when, not if, in that regard.

The process just described is upsetting to religious leaders for quite different reasons than it upsets their followers. If people begin to look to science for advice instead of to religious leaders, the power of the religious leaders will decline. And worse than that, if it becomes apparent that the forest is uncertain and that what religious leaders tell us about the forest is misleading, then even if science cannot tell us about most of the forest we will not go to religious leaders for advice in that regard. We will go elsewhere to people who recognize and acknowledge uncertainty, and counsel us in that context. Hence, religious leaders are increasingly respectful of science and prepared to acknowledge the uncertainty of many things. Mormon leaders , regrettably, lag in this regard.

So, for quite a while now religious leaders have been trying hard to only say things that science cannot contradict. But, they are stuck with a lot of the things that have already been said, and some are backtracking on at least some of those. See the current dispute in the Mormon community regarding the Book of Mormon and the "limited geography" theory in that regard. See the essay on my website "The Book of Mormon – DNA Debate ..." in that regard. That theory contradicts the words of Mormon prophets from Joseph Smith forward, and has the virtue of not being testable from a scientific point of view.

Each generation has dealt with its own disappointments as the conflict between science and religion has played out. As noted above attitudes respecting things like the Earth being at the centre of the Universe, the age and formation of the earth, biological evolution and many other things of fundamental importance have changed.

Until recently people were not historically conscious. That is, the recollection of the past was controlled by those who controlled the present and had little to do with what really happened. As more information began to circulate as a result of the printing press, an historical consciousness began to form as did a greater understanding of the body of knowledge produced by science, and more and more people began to insist that they be dealt with by societal leaders (including religious leaders) in a way that made sense in light of their understanding both of the present in scientific terms, and the past. This reduced the power of society's leaders, and increased the power of the people.

This also put religious leaders in a box. The past was no longer as flexible, nor was the perception of the present. So, standards of truth and accuracy that were not applied to religious concepts historically began to be applied. And, the results have been hard on institutional religion.

While more information in circulation about "reality" means more choice and more power in the hands of common people, it does not mean more certainty. In fact, it means the opposite. More and more regular folk are now wrestling with the inherent uncertainty of reality. And the results are promising. With each increment of information comes more choice, more power, and more uncertainty. Think of the current debates over stem cell research and issues related to cloning and genetic engineering. Some of the issues that are raised in this regard are terrifying for many of us, as were issues related to birth control, abortion and homosexuality for our parents. We are feeling our way along. What will concern our grandchildren is at least as far from us as genetic engineering was from our grandparents.

In any event, it seems that at each of these junctures there is a collective balking, and then first tentative and finally confident steps are taken. Some of these turn out badly, and it is not clear whether things are getting "better" or not. That will always depend on one's definition of what is "better" – that is, what one values. However, it is clear that knowledge is increasing rapidly and in fundamentally important ways, and that the people are on average becoming both more knowledgeable and better off in most places and on average around the world. Life

expectancy is going up in most of the poorest places on earth, and infant mortality is coming down. Etc.

Two contemporary and primary phenomena derive from the process just described. First, people are becoming increasingly aware that certain religious leaders still try to tamper with history. Such people often become disillusioned, and withdraw or scale back their participation in their religious communities. Second, religious leaders fear the very kind of information that may lead to what I just indicated, and try to build information controlling walls of various kinds around their communities. This has led to the recent increase in fundamentalism within each of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths, and is responsible in part at least for the rise in international terrorism (See Karen Armstrong, "The Battle for God", and "The History of God").

Much of what follows is about the walls in our minds and social groups that are designed to keep out disconfirming, discomfiting information.

Fear

One of Buddhism's central and enlightening notions is that most of mankind's ills are caused by the manner in which fear or desire cause us to make unwise decisions. This ancient insight is remarkably in accord with recent psychological research, including that related to cognitive dissonance. Buddha's "middle way" was the path that lay between fear and desire and so was out of both their reaches. And since a good portion of desire is fear that we will not obtain that which we most desire, fear is the most primal and effective of emotions.

Psychologists explain the connection between things that cause fear and poor reasoning by reference to the functioning of different parts of our brains. Fear comes from mechanisms found in the parts of the brain that evolved first, and that we share with many animals. They are located near the brain stem (top of the spinal column), and are referred to as the "reptilian core" of our brains due to the similarity they bear to the brains of reptiles. The more advanced reasoning that we display when we speak, do math, create art etc. occurs mostly in our cerebral cortex, the wrinkly grey matter that wraps around the outside of our brains. When the reptilian core is fired up as a result of fear or some other primal force, it interferes with the operation of our cerebral cortex. Hence, a medical doctor who can diagnose cancer in his patients with great accuracy may not see obvious symptoms in his child or spouse. Likewise, a brilliant professor of biology or history may be able to clinically take apart the religious beliefs of his neighbours, while being oblivious to the same kind of illogic within his own belief system.

In some cases, the fear generated by the reptilian core can be overcome as information is processed by the cerebral cortex. For example, if I am out in the mountains at night where I know bears and cougars to sometimes be, and hear a big animal noise in the bushes, my instinct will be to either run or hide. I will likely feel a surge of adrenalin. Were the same thing to happen during the day and I

could look and see a deer, I would immediately be relieved. That information would assuage my fear.

Likewise, I was terrified of the consequences that I was likely to experience within my family and social relationships as a result of publicly acknowledging my new belief (or lack of belief) with respect to Mormonism. However, as I connected over the Internet with a community of people who had already gone through what I was about to experience and learned from them, I gradually regained control over my emotions and was able to devise a course of action with which I felt comfortable. But, this took months of time and required the ingestion of massive amounts of information. Many people have told me that their experience was similar to mine.

Various Types of Cognitions

Fear is at the root of many of the important insights cognitive dissonance theory has provided to us. Cognitive dissonance theory is concerned with the relationships among cognitions. A cognition is a piece of knowledge about an attitude, an emotion, a behaviour, a value, etc. People hold a multitude of cognitions simultaneously, and these cognitions form irrelevant, consonant or dissonant relationships with one another. (See <http://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/stephens/cdback.html>):

Cognitive irrelevance describes the bulk of the relationships among a person's cognitions. Irrelevance means that the two cognitions are not related. Two cognitions are consonant if one cognition follows from, or fits with, the other. People like consonance among their cognitions. We do not know whether this stems from the nature of the human organism or whether it is learned during the process of socialization, but people appear to prefer cognitions that fit together to those that do not, and so struggle to create consonance between their cognitions.

This human preference for cognitive consonance may be an outgrowth of one of our most important skills – pattern recognition. We use pattern recognition to infer cause and effect relationships. This is what has allowed us as a species to gain the mastery over our environment that we have achieved to this point in our evolution.

Two cognitions are said to be dissonant if one cognition conflicts with another. For example, I like my friend, and trust him. Various cognitions relate to this. If I then find out that he has lied to me, other cognitions form that are dissonant with those I already hold. Cognitive dissonance is the term used to describe the resulting mental state.

Dissonant cognitions are a signal that a pattern we have previously detected is perhaps incorrect. Given the importance of many such patterns to our ability to survive and prosper, our attention is attracted to the task of determining which of the competing patterns that is relevant to the dissonant cognitions in question is most likely correct. However, as what follows will illustrate, we are not nearly as objective or rational in how we approach this task as we like to think we are, and the social scientists who study these matters have provided us with cogent

explanations as to why this is the case. The “book” on this topic is far from written. In fact, the branches of neuroscience that are most relevant to our understanding of this aspect of our lives seem to be just getting nicely started. We can look forward to a rapidly increasing understanding of how and why we make the often odd decisions we do with respect to the matters that are in many ways most important to us, such as those concerning religion and intimate relationships. It is often with respect to matters such as these that human decision making behaviour is at its most dysfunctional.

What happens to people when they discover dissonant cognitions? Cognitive dissonance is experienced as a state of unpleasant psychological tension. This tension state has drive-like properties that are similar to those of hunger and thirst. That is, when a person has been deprived of food for several hours, she experiences unpleasant tension and is driven to reduce it. Cognitive dissonance produces similarly driven behaviour to find consonance. However, finding the means to reduce this dissonance is not as simple as eating or drinking.

How does dissonance work? First, dissonance increases as the degree of discrepancy between cognitions increases. That is, how serious was my friend's lie, and how often has he lied? Second, dissonance increases as the number of discrepant cognitions increases. That is, how strong is the evidence of the lying behaviour? How many different cognitions support the dissonant conclusion that I can no longer trust my friend? Third, dissonance decreases as the number of consonant cognitions increases. That is, if my friend only lied once and on a multitude of occasions was trustworthy, I would be less concerned. Fourth, dissonance is affected by the relative importance of the various consonant and dissonant cognitions in play. Perhaps in the case of this friend, lying is not that important because I do not depend on him in a significant fashion. In such cases my dissonance would be lower than it would if the friend in question was also the mother of my children or my wife.

How can dissonance be reduced? If two cognitions are dissonant, we can change one to make it consonant with the other, change each cognition in the direction of the other, find more offsetting consonant cognitions, or we can re-evaluate the importance of either the dissonant or consonant cognitions. These strategies often result in what is sometimes called denial – the suppression or unrealistic appraisal of evidence in an effort to reduce dissonance. As William Safire in a New York Times op-ed piece (December 29, 2003), put it:

To end ... cognitive dissonance ... we [often] change the weak cognition to conform to the stronger one. Take Aesop's fox, who could not reach a lofty bunch of grapes no matter how high he jumped. One foxy cognition was that grapes were delicious; the other was that he couldn't get them. To resolve that cognitive dissonance, the fox persuaded himself that the grapes were sour - and trotted off, his mind at ease.

The Abused Spouse

A classic illustration of cognitive dissonance that is helpful when explaining the behaviour of Mormons is that of the abused spouse. Assume a woman is married to a man who does not treat her well, and is seeing other women on the side. A pattern most of us have seen has the woman being among the last to recognize her husband's abusive behaviour. Her friends and family members may tell her to leave the scum bag, but she will insist that they do not understand him; that she does not interpret his late nights at the office and regular weekend business trips as they do; and that the rumours that swirl around him are from her point of view simply evidence of other people's jealousy; etc.

Cognitive dissonance theory explains the woman's inability to see what is obvious to her friends as the result of dissonant cognitions, and the difference between their importance to her and her friends. Both she and her friends have two cognitions – her husband is a married man who in many ways seems dedicated to his family; and her husband is unfaithful, and is often cruel in other ways to his wife. However, the wife and the friends interpret the evidence that gives rise to these competing cognitions in vastly different ways. Why is that?

If the husband is cheating and otherwise abusing his wife, for her this means that their marriage is likely to end, and that probability will likely go up if she takes the bull by the horns. If the marriage ends, she will likely be alone and will have to find a way to support herself and her children both financially and emotionally. Hence, she subconsciously fears acknowledging the reality of the information before her with respect to her husband's behaviour. It is of critical importance that we recognize that the fear she feels is subconscious – were you to ask her about it, she would deny that she felt it. Ignorance – even if produced by our subconscious – is, as they say, bliss. Her friends, who are not similarly burdened with fear, are able to assess the information in question more accurately.

One of my Internet friends provided me with the following well-worn joke that makes the same point in a different way:

A man suspects his wife of cheating on him. He hires a private detective to follow her. The detective reports that he followed her to a restaurant where she met a man. Then after dinner she and the man drove to a motel and checked in. The detective watched through the window as they undressed and then they turned out the lights and the detective couldn't see anything after that.

The husband clenches his jaw, pounds his fist on the desk and replies, "It's just never knowing for sure that's so hard!"

The situation I just described has a close analogue in the Mormon community. First, consider the difference between "insider" and "outsider" perspectives. The friends are outsiders who are not affected by the truth of the evidence as would be the spouse, who is an insider. Mormons are insiders whose lives would be turned

literally and metaphorically upside down if Mormonism is not "true". Scholars and others who observe them are sometimes outsiders. The more objective and less psychologically or physically threatened by a piece of evidence a person is, the more accurate her analysis of that evidence is likely to be, all other things being equal.

How are Mormons subject to cognitive dissonance in a way analogous to an abused spouse? Mormonism is constructed so that those who disbelieve have a great deal to lose. Mormon marriages are expressly conditioned on the obedience of both spouses to Mormon authority (See the essay on my website titled "The Effect of Mormon Temple Ritual"). If one spouse stops obeying, the marriage often ends and/or family relationships suffer enormously. This produces a powerful subconscious fear, and so cognitive dissonance, that is very similar to that described above with regard to the abused spouse. The situation for a potentially disbelieving Mormon is worsened by the fact that the social and business life of most Mormons is dominated by Mormon relationships. When a Mormon openly expresses disbelief, many of those relationships end or are impaired. Because the life of a typical Mormon is so focused on events within the Mormon community, the loss of that social network often means that one must start over from a social point of view. This produces more subconscious fear.

The Principle of Insufficient Justification

Leon Festinger is the father of cognitive dissonance theory. In his seminal experiments (Leon Festinger, *Conflict, Decision, and Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1964) he illustrates nicely another important aspect of cognitive dissonance that is relevant to the Mormon experience. This is known as the principle of "insufficient justification" and has been used to explain a wide variety of odd human behaviours.

The "Saying Is Believing " Principle

One of Festinger's key experiments was designed as follows. Three groups of subjects were asked to perform a tedious task for an hour. The task involved putting knobs on pegs, turning them a quarter turn, and then taking them off again. After this had been completed, subjects in the control group rated how interesting the experiment was. The members of the two comparison groups were treated differently. Each of these was told that the experimenter's assistant had not shown up yet so he needed them to help him by telling the next subject that the experiment was interesting. The subjects in one of these two groups were given \$1 to perform this additional task, while subjects in the other were given \$20. After telling the next subject that the experiment was fun, each of the subjects who had been paid was asked to rate how interesting the experiment was.

Both comparison groups rated the task as being more enjoyable than the control group. However, the group that was paid \$20 rated it only slightly higher than the control group, whereas the group that was paid only \$1 rated it much higher than the control group. This result is explained by cognitive dissonance theory as

follows: We assume that the subjects came into the experiment with the belief that they do not lie without a good reason. Then, they are induced to lie. Those who were paid \$20 (remember, we are talking about college students about 40 years ago) felt they had a good reason to lie, so that lie did not influence their perception of the experiment. The subjects who were only paid \$1 did not find in that payment sufficient justification for lying, so the fact that they lied without good reason was inconsistent with the belief that they do not lie unless they are justified in doing so. To reduce the cognitive dissonance created by these inconsistent beliefs, the subjects had to change one of them. The "I do not lie without good reason" belief is important to most people's self-perception, so it would be hard to change that belief. It is easier to change other cognition. The subjects could not deny saying that the experiment was fun, so they subconsciously increased their perception of how interesting the experiment was.

Other experiments have been conducted with respect to what has become known as the "saying is believing" principle which is an application of the principle of insufficient justification that is particularly important to the understanding of Mormon testimony bearing influences belief and hence behaviour. These experiments are summarized in Aronson, "The Social Animal" 9th ed., a text used in many college psychology courses. Regarding the saying is believing principle, Aronson notes:

If all I want you to do is recite a speech favouring Fidel Castro, the Marx Brothers, socialized medicine or anything else, the most efficient thing for me to do would be to give you the largest possible reward. This would increase the probability of your complying by making that speech. But suppose I have a more ambitious goal: suppose I want to effect a lasting change in your attitudes and beliefs. In that case, just the reverse is true. The smaller the external reward I give to induce the recite the speech, the more likely it is you will be forced seek additional justification for delivering it by convincing yourself that the things that you said were actually true. This would result in an actual change in attitude rather than mere compliance. The importance of this technique cannot be overstated. If we change our attitudes because we have made a public statement for minimal external justification, our attitude change will be relatively permanent; we are not changing our attitudes because of reward (compliance) but because of the influence of an attractive person (identification). We are changing our attitudes because we have succeeded in convincing ourselves that our previous attitudes were incorrect. This is a very powerful form of attitude change.

Aronson later added:

... lying produces greater attitude change when the liar is under compensated for lying especially when the lie is likely to invoke a change in the audience's belief or behaviour. A great deal of subsequent research supports this reasoning and allows us to state a general principle about dissonance and the self-concept: dissonance effects us greatest when

- (1) people feel personally responsible for their actions and
- (2) their actions have serious consequences.

That is, the greater the consequence and the greater our responsibility for it, the greater the dissonance; the greater the dissonance the greater our own attitude change.

So, there are three important principles to bear in mind. First, if we say something we don't believe without receiving some kind of external reward for doing so, our attitudes are likely to shift in the direction of what we have said. Second, the more important the consequences for which we might be responsible as a result of saying what we did, the more likely it is that our attitudes will shift and the stronger that shift is likely to be. And third, I think that it is fair to assume that the more often a statement is repeated, the stronger its effect will be.

Experiments regarding the saying is believing principle were conducted with regard to certain student riots at Yale University. Various students had witnessed the riots. Students who strongly believed the police behaved badly with respect to those riots were asked to write an essay in support of the police actions. Before writing the essays, the students were paid a sum of money. After writing the essay, each student was asked to indicate his own private attitudes respecting the police actions. The results showed that the smaller the payment for writing the essay, the greater the attitude was affected. It is important to note that this attitude change occurred as a result of the students writing an essay that they were told to make up. They were told to pretend that their position was what they wrote, but not asked to believe anything that they had written.

In another similar experiment, a group of white college students were asked to write an essay endorsing a proposal at their university to double the amount of money available for African American student scholarships. Precisely the same phenomenon was observed as noted above respecting police brutality.

Experiments have also been conducted with regarding to cheating behaviour. People who are induced to cheat for a reward, which would be a form of external justification, do not show long-term changes in their attitudes respecting cheating. However, students induced to cheat for a small or negligible reward show a significant attitudinal change in that regard.

Mormon Testimony Bearing

Nowhere is the "saying is believing" paradigm more visible in Mormon culture than in the Mormon custom of "bearing testimony". Young people who were raised as Mormons but do not "have a testimony" are encouraged to "bear their testimony" until they find it. That is, they should publicly state that they believe Mormonism to be God's one and only true religion, etc., or that they want to believe this, even if they do not. This is the one of the primary techniques used by missionaries and members of the Mormon Church to "strengthen the faith" of prospective members

and young Mormons, including Mormon missionaries who do not yet believe. A large percentage of the Mormon missionaries who started their missionary service with me in 1977 fell into this category.

Mormon Apostle Russell Ballard referred to this practise by telling a story that dates to Brigham Young, near the beginning of Mormonism, that is fair to assume has been told many times since then. He told this story at a Mormon General Conference on October 3, 2004. It is important to note that anything said by a Mormon Apostle at a General Conference is more important than scripture from a Mormon point of view. That is, to the extent that it does not contradict scripture it is on par with it, and to the extent that it contradicts or "clarifies" scripture, the scripture is overridden. Ballard's remarks were as follows:

My experience throughout the Church leads me to worry that too many of our members' testimonies linger on "I am thankful" and "I love," and too few are able to say with humble but sincere clarity, "I know." As a result, our meetings sometimes lack the testimony-rich, spiritual underpinnings that stir the soul and have meaningful, positive impact on the lives of all those who hear them. ...

Many years ago Brigham Young told of an early missionary in the Church who was asked to share his testimony with a large group of people. According to President Young, this particular elder "never had been able to say that he knew Joseph [Smith] was a Prophet." He would have preferred to just say a prayer and leave, but the circumstances made that impossible. So he started to speak, and "as soon as he got out 'Joseph is a Prophet,' ... his tongue was loosened, and he continued talking until near sun-down."

President Young used this experience to teach that "the Lord pours out His Spirit upon a man, when he testifies that [which] the Lord gives him to testify of" (Millennial Star, supplement, 1853, 30). ...

The lesson, I believe, is clear: having a testimony alone is not enough. In fact, when we are truly converted, we cannot be restrained from testifying. And as it was with Apostles and faithful members of old, so is it also our privilege, our duty, and our solemn obligation to "declare the things which [we] know to be true" (D&C 80:4). ...

Brothers and sisters, join together with the missionaries in sharing your precious testimony every day, witnessing at every opportunity the glorious message of the Restoration. The fire of your testimony is all that you need in order to introduce the gospel to many more of our Father's children. Trust in the Lord, and never underestimate the impact your testimony can have upon the lives of others as you bear it with the power of the Spirit. Doubt and fear are tools of Satan. The time has come for all of us to overcome any fear and boldly take every opportunity to share our testimonies of the gospel. ...

So, Ballard is saying several things. First, Mormons have a duty to say they "know" the Mormon Church is true more often. Second, they should say that even if they don't believe it is true. Third, they should ignore the feelings of fear and doubt that indicate they do not know the Mormon Church is what it claims to be. And fourth, the act of saying something is true will cause them to "know" that they did not previously know.

And most of all, Ballard is saying that the basic premises of Mormonism are sacred, and hence unquestionable, as far as Mormon leaders are concerned.

I recall being told that story, and others like it, when I was a young person and did not believe that Mormonism was "true". However, my testimony did not spring from saying things I did not believe. Rather, the dynamics described by the short story "The Missionary" (see <http://home.mccue.cc:10000/bob/documents/rs.the%20missionary.pdf>) are closer to what I experienced. And so, I was never a fan of the "say it even though you don't believe it" philosophy that is prevalent within Mormonism.

As noted above, when I served my mission a large percentage of the missionaries who entered Mormon missionary service do not have a "testimony". It is commonly believed within the Mormon community that young men are sent into the mission field first and foremost for their own good – that is, to get their own testimony and become firm in the faith. And, they are encouraged to find their testimony by bearing it. That Ballard would say this at a Mormon General conference is not surprising since he has been a key player in the formation of Mormon missionary strategies for decades and has consistently taught this principle in that context at least since I was a missionary in the late 1970s.

Think of how the principles Aronson outlined above would be likely to apply to one of the many Mormon missionaries who starts his missionary service without a testimony. He doesn't yet have a testimony of his own, and many times each week for two years he stands in public wearing an authoritative looking suit and bears solemn testimony in God's name with regard to the truthfulness of the Mormon Church. He is not paid to do this. In fact, he knows that he is sacrificing his and his family's money and time in order to have the privilege of bearing this testimony. So, either what he says is true, or he is a liar (or fool) to have said it. Since few people like to admit that they have been fooled or are a liar, the easiest conclusion to reach is that the statements made must be true. He also knows he is encouraging the people who hear him to make a commitment that will absorb a huge percentage of their lives and will change the course of their lives in dramatic fashion. This situation is calculated to produce the maximum attitudinal change in those young missionaries.

Something similar happens when regular Mormon members bear testimony to their friends and neighbours, and it is intensified if any of those friends become Mormons as well. This is why Mormon leaders like Ballard are constantly after the members to do missionary work with the friends, and to bear their testimonies. That is not to say this is a conscious strategy on the part of Mormon leaders. Rather, there is a

strong correlation between members who bear regular testimony and members who remain faithful, hence testimony bearing is encouraged. Cognitive dissonance theory and the principle of insufficient justification in particular provide a cogent explanation as to why this is the case, and it has nothing to do with the truth of Mormonism's claims. Not surprisingly, a similar strategy works well for the Jehovah's Witnesses and many other religious groups.

Mormon leaders justify the practise of encouraging people to say things that they don't believe on the basis that those things are certain to be true, so even if the person saying them does not believe them to be true, she is still telling the truth.

So, testimony bearing is a fundamental part of the Mormon culture. Each meeting, class, Mormon activity, etc., is opened with prayer. Most Mormon prayers are an implicit bearing of testimony; a certification that the Mormon Church is the Mormon Church's God's true Church. From the time they are able to speak their first words, little children are encouraged to utter such prayers. They do so at their meetings on Sunday, and at home on a daily basis with their families. Those occurs both in private, with Mom and Dad initially saying the words for the child, and in public before family members in the home each day and later in larger groups at Church.

Formal testimony bearing is part of every lesson presented at Mormon Church or activity, and every speech (talks by Mormons) presented in Church services. Young people, again, begin to give these talks on a regular basis starting at age three or four. They are encouraged to bear their testimony each time they stand up and give a talk. Most adults have teaching responsibilities within the Mormon Church. They also bear their testimony each time they stand before the congregation to teach.

Mormon hymns are another form of testimony bearing. Starting at age 18 months, Mormon children are taught to mouth the words to songs that testify to the truth of the Mormon message. Each week these songs are sung at Mormon worship services for children, teenagers and adults. Mormon are encouraged to sing these songs in their homes during weekly Family Home Evenings and to have them playing in the background at other times.

Once a month, each Mormon congregation has a "fast and testimony" meeting. This is a meeting held at the end of a Sunday on which food and water are abstained from for a period of 24 hours by faithful Mormons. Toward the end of that period, the testimony meeting occurs. Going without food weakens body and the intellect, making it more susceptible to emotional experiences. These meetings are intended to provoke emotional experience. Feelings are shared with regard to the importance of family, community and a part of every testimony is a formula which has been laid down by Church leaders respecting belief that Joseph Smith was a prophet, that the current prophet (whoever he may be) is also God's only prophet on Earth and that the Mormon Church is the one and only true Church of God on the Earth. No dissenting opinion is permitted. And a steady stream of members approach the pulpit to express their faith in public. It is thought "cute" to have small children to stand up before the congregation to utter the words "I know the Church is true; I

know the Book of Mormon is true; etc." Special, and highly charged testimony meetings are held for teenagers at "Youth Conferences" and other special youth meetings which for many young Mormons is where the first visible glimmers of testimony are felt, and magnified. The short story "The Missionary" explores this process (see <http://home.mccue.cc:10000/bob/documents/rs.the%20missionary.pdf>).

A variety of other similar examples from within Mormon culture could be described. I do not accuse Mormons of consciously planning to brainwash their children and those who investigate the merits of the Mormon Church; however, the system just described could hardly be better designed for that purpose. Again, I do not accuse Mormons of dishonesty or deceit. There may be a few at the top that are guilty of this, but the vast majority are certainly not.

Other Mormon Behaviours Related to the Principle of Insufficient Justification

Mormon culture includes many other behaviours that are likely to bring the principle of insufficient justification to bear on the creation of belief in the key tenets of the Mormon Church. For example, Mormons go through odd temple rituals that require promises of faithfulness and obedience to be made in front of other members of the community of faith; Mormons act as lay leaders of their congregations and commit enormous amounts of time and effort to Mormonism in this way; Mormons spend two years as fulltime missionaries while bearing testimony daily and baptizing new members who look up to the missionaries as their literal saviours; Mormons hand out Books of Mormons to their friends and otherwise encourage their friends to join the Mormon Church because it is God's one and only true Church; and Mormons engage in many other behaviours that are part of Mormon culture and that publicly commit them to the Mormon Church. In each of these cases, the principle of insufficient justification will kick in to make Mormons feel that the Church must be "true" and otherwise more valuable than it should objectively or rationally seem in their lives. Were this not the case, they were either liars or fools to do and say the things they did, and it is hard for most humans to consider that as a viable alternative.

I engaged in many of the behaviours just indicted while I was a faithful Mormon. The principle of insufficient justification would predict that this behaviour on my part would have created a powerful cognitive dissonance barrier to any information that indicates that the Mormon Church is not "true". This is because if the Church is not true, I have been either dishonest or foolish by virtue of having done what I did, and I "know" that I am neither dishonest nor foolish! And, as noted in greater detail below, the more important to me is my image as a smart person, the more effective that cognitive dissonance barrier will be.

The Smart Mormon and Insufficient Justification

It is ironic that the person least likely in some ways to acknowledge the error of the Mormon way is a scholar such as Dr. Wright. It is reasonable to assume that he

has been fully conditioned by a life of faithful activity in the Mormon community while telling people on countless occasions that he knows the Mormon Church is true. At the same time, he would have developed a great deal of confidence in his ability to think rationally in other contexts. Cognitive dissonance theory would predict that it would be very difficult for him to ingest data that suggests that he – acknowledged by his peers to be among the smartest of the smart – has been so fundamentally wrong for so long with respect to something of such importance in his life and the lives of his family members. His subconscious understanding that those family members may reject him if he now indicates that what he has taught them throughout their lives is incorrect would create more fear, which would reinforce the walls designed to filter out all information that might disconfirm his Mormon belief. Mormonism has people like Dr. Wright in a particularly tight spot. I was in the same spot until about two years ago, and hence know it intimately.

The Confirmation Bias

The "confirmation bias" is another, and particularly powerful, illustration of how cognitive dissonance works. It suggests that the first idea of a particular type of which we become convinced is correct is hard shake. The psychologist Raymond Nickerson, in a comprehensive review of the literature on this bias, concluded:

If one were to attempt to identify a single problematic aspect of human reasoning that deserves attention above all others, the confirmation bias would have to be among the candidates for consideration. It appears to be sufficiently strong and pervasive that one is led to wonder whether the bias, by itself, might account for a significant fraction of the disputes, altercations and misunderstandings that occur among individuals, groups, and nations." (quoted in Michael Shermer, "Why People Believe Weird Things", page 299)

Many tests have been conducted that confirm the existence of this bias, and hence the fact that the idea first lodged in a human head and accepted as "right" causes terrible distortions in how subsequently received data is perceived. This idea is widely accepted among those most expert in the relevant fields. The extent to which it applies to explain Mormon and other ideological based behaviour is, of course, open to dispute.

The confirmation bias suggests that, as a rule, we should be much more suspicious of the positions we have inherited than those we have reached on our own after a thorough and open minded review of available data. We should also be wary of our ability to assess new data that contradicts any position we have taken prior to receipt of that data.

The research respecting the confirmation bias shows that the smarter a person is, the less likely she is to change her mind once it has been made up. That is, the smarter and better-educated people are, the stronger their confirmation bias is likely to be. This is the result of their greater than average ability to find patterns in whatever data they encounter to confirm their already held conclusions, and their ability to sway those around them to their view. This will confirm what my friends

and family members have long suspected – the fact that I have changed my mind about some of my fundamental religious beliefs is proof that I am not among the sharpest knives in the drawer. And I am happy to acknowledge that this may mean that Dr. Wright is smarter than I am, since he is obviously more resistant than I am to evidence suggesting that Mormonism is not what it represents itself to be.

Religion harnesses and makes heavy use of the confirmation bias. This is done through the concept of the “sacred”. Many sociologists and others who study the concept of the sacred describe it as, among other things, that which cannot be questioned; those most fundamental and important aspects of a society. Echoing the sentiments of religious and social leaders throughout history in this regard, we have “The Encyclical - Testem Benevolentiae Nostra” given by His Holiness Pope Leo XIII on January 22, 1899. It reads in part as follows:

It is alleged that now the Vatican decree concerning the infallible teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff having been proclaimed that nothing further on that score can give any solicitude, and accordingly, since that has been safeguarded and put beyond question a wider and freer field both for thought and action lies open to each one. But such reasoning is evidently faulty, since, if we are to come to any conclusion from the infallible teaching authority of the Church, it should rather be that no one should wish to depart from it, and moreover that the minds of all being leavened and directed thereby, greater security from private error would be enjoyed by all. And further, those who avail themselves of such a way of reasoning seem to depart seriously from the over-ruling wisdom of the Most High—which wisdom, since it was pleased to set forth by most solemn decision the authority and supreme teaching rights of this Apostolic See—willed that decision precisely in order to safeguard the minds of the Church's children from the dangers of these present times. (See <http://www.kensmen.com/catholic/testembenevolentiaenostra.html>)

In other words, don't question, and remember how not questioning will make you freer. The roots of this odd sounding idea are traced in the essay on my website titled “The Mormon Conception of Freedom”. As noted above, Mormon leaders have more subtle means of getting to the same point. They put more emphasis on our right to question and make up our own minds. But, the sledding get rough when we actually do that and disagree with them. Then, they say, just trust us. We have your best interests at heart and are inspired by God in ways you are not. And if you cannot do that, keep your mouth shut so that you do not disturb those who are inclined not to question us.

So, in the religious realm we add to the already powerful confirmation bias that operates at the unconscious level, the concept that certain ideas are so important and certain that they must not be questioned in any way. In fact, it is evil to question them. One runs the risk of incurring God's wrath if he questions these sacred ideas. This increases our fear while making something that is most uncertain appear as certain as possible. Any time we see a shell game like this

being played in real life, we wonder what kind of weakness people are trying to hide from us. It is wise to ask the same question about what our religious leaders are up to, even if they are so far into the game themselves that they do not recognize what is doing on. As noted above, it is my view that Mormon leaders are either as oblivious as the members as to what is going on (typically the case at lower levels of the Mormon lay leadership system), or are philosopher king who believe it is their duty to protect the members from themselves.

And If All Else Fails, Change the Theory

For example, if the data makes it seem clear that the Book of Mormon could not have been played out across both hemispheres, invent a theory that will kind of fit the data and which can't be tested. Hence, we have the "limited geography" theory of the Book of Mormon (See "The Book of Mormon – DNA Debate ..." on my website). And for Pete's sake, don't have the prophet go out on any limb, even one as solid looking as that. Have some academics do it so if they are wrong, they can admit they were wrong without making it seem like the prophets were wrong again.

Or, if the prophet has a few of his prophecies come in wrong, change the definition of prophet to cover that. And if gets caught having sex with women other than his wife, have God tell him that is OK too. It is sure handy to speak for God. This makes what is sometimes called the Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy easier to pull off. The sharpshooter first fires at his barn wall, and then draws the target around the bullet holes. He hits the bulls-eye every time. Amazing!

The renowned physicist Richard Feynman taught something similar when he said that a good scientist does not use the same data that made him think of a hypothesis to test the hypothesis. That is, science is about recurring patterns, and any random event we might experience is not evidence of a recurring pattern or miracle that is consistent with the random event. He said, after making that point and as if drifting into an irrelevant reverie, that he had seen a particular license plate number on a car as he walked through the parking lot that morning, and wondered at that amazing coincidence – all of those licence plates out there, and he had seen that particular number. What were the odds of that! His point, of course, was the license plate he saw was a random event and not evidence on its own of anything more than that. If he had wanted to test that hypothesis, he would have walked out into other parking lots full of cars and kept track of how often he saw the same numbers.

Importance, Uncertainty, Groupthink and Authority

And finally, the academic literature indicates that things like cognitive dissonance, the principle of insufficient justification and the confirmation bias have a more powerful effect where the matter under consideration is most uncertain, and creates the most fear. Think of politics. Think of global warming. Think of whether George Bush acted properly when he invaded Iraq. Think of how old the Earth is. The same dynamics are involved in each case. Smart people study the same data and come to unshakeable, and contradictory, conclusions. And most often with

regard to issues such as these, we tend to side with the dominant force in our family, community etc. That is, when the issue is hard to analyze in clear terms, and is important to group cohesion and our place in the group, we tend to go with what our group thinks while of course feeling that we are making up our own minds in our usual rational way.

Religious beliefs that are important to family and personal relationships are very similar to the other debates just mentioned. That is, they are uncertain, and inspire fear as a result of threatening important relationships. This is used to explain the well-established fact that relatively few people change religious belief in a fundamental way during their lives.

Now, we come to an important point. We can predict how influenced we are likely to be by the forces I have just outlined by determining how unclear the decision making criteria is in a particular case, and how important it is to us in the manner just described. It is fair to say that the higher an issue rates in this regard, the more inclined we should be toward following the advice of counsellors, adviser etc. who are not subject to the same forces we are. And of course, the Mormon Church does all it can to limit its members access to precisely this kind of information. I note the following in this regard:

Mormons who went to marriage counsellors and psychologists who were not Mormon tended to be told that many of their problems were related to Mormon belief and culture, and so tended to discard or water down their Mormon beliefs. So, the Mormon Church trained and deployed an entire core of counsellors and psychologists to service its members.

- Mormons started to talk about faith threatening things in private study groups, so such groups were banned and replaced by adult institute classes that were controlled by the Church.
- As noted above, Mormons are regularly told that they should not question, or read or listen to material that questions Mormon leadership. I was like many Mormons who understood it to be a sin to look at material that is critical of the leadership of the Mormon Church.
- The covenants Mormons make in Mormon temples effectively prohibit dissent.
- As noted above, the involvement of most Mormons within the Mormon community ranges from extensive to all encompassing, and so the fear of serious disruption or rupture of family and social relationships in the event of a profession of disbelief is much higher within Mormonism than within many other faith based communities. Mormons are not as bad as the Old Order Amish or Hutterites in this regard, but are much worse than most mainstream Christian leaning faiths.

In the absence of evidence to assess the reasonableness of what Mormon leaders tell Mormons to do, the forces described above should be expected to be more

influential within the Mormon community that would be the case if Mormons had more access to other points of view, and connections to other communities.

In conclusion on this point, I note that the research respecting cognitive dissonance, fear, the confirmation bias etc. points to one of the central ironies of human life – we seem to be worst equipped to make the decisions that are of the greatest personal importance to us. This means that we are all well advised to consult with and accept the advice of trusted friends or counsellors who are not subject to the fears and personal biases that distort our ability to see the evidence by which we are surrounded, and that relates to the things that we are most likely not to wish to question. The business community has long recognized this, and has made use of things like "360 degree" assessments of executives, and independent committees on corporate boards to deal with compensation issues in this regard. And while these mechanisms are far from perfect, they at least acknowledge the importance of issues of the type I am trying to point out in the religious context, and attempt to address them.

Examples of Large Scale Cognitive Dissonance Related to Religious Belief

Several of the most important cognitive dissonance studies have related to religious or quasi-religious phenomena, since this is a part of our society that is rife with cognitive dissonance.

Festinger's theory arose from his observations of a Wisconsin-based flying saucer cult of the 1950s whose prophecy of universal destruction failed to come true. The cult prophesied a vast flood would kill everyone on Earth except for the members of the cult, who would be carried away by flying saucers. The flood, of course, did not materialize. But the faith of the cult members, while stressed, was not broken. In fact, they responded to this failure by increasing their proselytizing activity.

The cult in question explained the failed prophesy by the fact that on the critical night their prayers "had spread so much light that God saved the world from destruction". And the cult became fervently evangelistic. Festinger suggests that the only way for them to reverse their humiliation was to convert other people to their beliefs. If everyone believed, no one would laugh. However, this did not work: after such a spectacular failure, the cult predictably failed to convert many if any. But this did not destroy the faith of many of the cult's members.

Other similar failed prophecy scenarios have received a great deal of attention. One, also chronicled by Festinger, is referred to as "The Great Disappointment" – an event in the early history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Between 1831 and 1844, William Miller, a Baptist preacher, launched what he called the "great second advent awakening", also known as the Millerite Movement. Based on his study of the prophecy of Daniel 8:14, Miller calculated that Jesus would return to earth sometime between 1843 and 1844. Others within the movement calculated a specific date of October 22, 1844. When Jesus did not appear, Miller's followers experienced what came to be called "the Great Disappointment". Thousands of followers left the movement. A few, however, went back to their Bibles to find why

they had been disappointed. They concluded that the prophecy predicted not that Jesus would return to earth in 1844, but that a special ministry in heaven would be formed on that date. From this started the 7th Day Adventist Church.

(See http://en2.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Disappointment)

Of even more interest are the numerous, and failed, similar predictions made by the Jehovah's Witnesses. This has been described as follows:

No major Christian sectarian movement has been so insistent on prophesying the end of the present world in such definite ways or on such specific dates as have Jehovah's Witnesses, at least since the Millerites and Second Adventists of the nineteenth century who were the Witnesses' direct millenarian forbears. During the early years of their history, they consistently looked to specific dates - 1874, 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1920, 1925, and others - as having definite eschatological significance... When these prophecies failed, they had to be reinterpreted, spiritualized, or, in some cases, ultimately abandoned. This did not deter Russell [the JW leader] or his followers from setting new dates, however, or from simply proclaiming that the end of this world or system of things was no more than a few years or perhaps even months away. (M. James Penton, "Apocalypse Delayed" (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), page 34)

Later dates of 1944 and 1975 were also prophesied.

The experience of the JW community respecting the 1925 "second coming" was typical. As noted by Randall Watters (See "When Prophecies Fail: A Sociological Perspective on Failed Expectation in the Watchtower Society" <http://www.freeminds.org/psych/propfail.htm>):

At the death of C.T. Russell in 1916, J.F. Rutherford took over the role of the "prophet", proclaiming in 1920 that Millions Now Living Will Never Die in a booklet and lecture by the same name. Rutherford set a new date for the end for 1925, also claiming that it would bring the resurrection of the ancient men of God to the earth, such as Abraham, Isaac, David, etc. So sure was Rutherford of this that he made the following statements:

Therefore we may confidently expect that 1925 will mark the return of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the faithful prophets of old, particularly those named by the apostle in Hebrews chapter 11, to the condition of human perfection.

The date 1925 is even more distinctly indicated by the scriptures than 1914.

Our thought is, that 1925 is definitely settled by the scriptures. As to Noah, the Christian now has much more upon which to base his faith than Noah had upon which to base his faith in a coming deluge.

Rutherford even had a house built in San Diego for these ancients, and it was deeded to them when it was built! Bearing witness to the ability of the Witnesses to ride out this period of disconfirmation, the house and the prophecy wasn't abandoned until 1943, when it was promptly sold. The Witnesses were later told that it was "built for Brother Rutherford's use.

Tremendous disappointment and disillusionment followed this failure. Watters continues:

The disappointment didn't last long, however. The outbreak of World War II was seen as the beginning of Armageddon. An in-house publication of the Watchtower stated in 1940:

The Kingdom is here, the King is enthroned. Armageddon is just ahead. The glorious reign of Christ that shall bring blessings to the world will immediately follow. Therefore the great climax has been reached. Tribulation has fallen upon those who stand by the Lord.

The Watchtower of September 15, 1941 (p. 288) even stated that we are "in the remaining months before Armageddon." Armageddon fever was at an all-time high. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, former member of the Watchtower's Bethel family, gives us a glimpse of the air of expectancy:

So firmly did Jehovah's Witnesses believe this to be true that there were those who, in 1944, refused to get their teeth filled, postponing all care of their bodies until God saw to their regeneration in His New World. (One zealous Witness I knew carried a supply of cloves to alleviate the pain of an aching molar which she did not wish to have treated by her dentist, since the time was so short till Jehovah would provide a new and perfect one. To this day, I associate the fragrance of cloves with the imminence of disaster.)

Amazingly, new leadership while initially cautious of making further predictions eventually fell prey to their predecessors' habit and set out another date. Watters notes:

... the prediction of 1975 that first appeared in Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God (1966). Exercising caution in stating that this new date would definitely be the end, Franz (through his public lectures and Watchtower articles) made statements such as "according to this trustworthy Bible chronology six thousand years from man's creation will end in 1975, and the seventh period of a thousand years of human history will begin in the fall of 1975 C.E." Any Jehovah's Witnesses knew that the end of 6000 years meant the beginning of the millennium of Christ's reign. The Awake! magazine of October 8, 1968 (p. 14) stated, "How fitting it would be for God, following this pattern, to end man's misery after six thousand years of human rule and follow it with his glorious Kingdom rule for a thousand years!"

In lectures given to the members of the headquarters staff in New York, Franz stated (regarding the end) that "we don't know now if it will be weeks or months," before a crowd of 2000 Witnesses. Many other statements were made in print. One traveling JW "overseer" even gave a public talk indicating it would be a total lack of faith to doubt that 1975 would be the end! Franz became the fourth president of the Watchtower a year later.

Unlike the flying saucer cult and the Millerites, the Watchtower was at first unwilling to accept blame for the disconfirmation, shifting it to "over-zealous brothers." Many Witnesses, however, were outraged and the Watchtower finally accepted much of the blame publicly.

Friends of those who were Jehovah's Witnesses often noted the changes in their lives as 1975 approached. Janice Godlove relates this regarding her JW brother and sister-in-law:

As 1975 approached, the signs of tension increased. Strange bits and pieces of the family atmosphere came to our attention. There was an almost morbid fascination with flocks of birds gathering in the fall. We were given all of their canned goods since they wouldn't need them anymore. An access panel had been cut in the wall behind their washing machine and the boys (who were 5 and 3 at the time) were told to run to the kitchen and hide if they heard screams. Bill was so disappointed by the failure of 1975 that he attempted suicide. But the tract we left by his hospital bed went unread and the family remained in the organization.

Today, each of the above failures is played down, and no reason is officially given for them. Many recent JW converts are not even aware of the relevant history. There are close parallels here to the faithful Mormon community's ignorance of many important aspects of Mormon history, including Joseph Smith's prophecy that Christ's second coming was imminent. It appears highly probable that he preached a sermon and otherwise told people in which he said that the second coming would occur within 56 years, or perhaps a shorter period of time. See http://www.shields-research.org/General/LDS_Leaders/1stPres/Joseph_Smith/56_Year.htm for the Mormon position on this issue put in its best light. This article is an entertaining read for anyone who understands the extent to which the Mormon Church itself does many of the same information distorting things of which "anti-Mormon" writers are accused.

The fact of the matter is that it is well known that religious leaders of many persuasions use the idea that the end of times is approaching to up the devotion of their followers. That Smith did this is not surprising. Whether he prefaced his statements with "thus saith the Lord" or not is unimportant from my perspective. I am not interested in whether he was prophesying in some strict sense, and failed in some way which might entitled us to say he is not a "true" prophet. That line of analysis misses the point, in my view. The point is that Smith was a leader who

was regarded by his followers as having prophetic ability. If he said he thought something like Christ second coming was going to happen within a particular, relatively short, period of time, that would have a predictable effect on his followers willingness to pay attention to things related to the religious spectrum of life. And particularly, it would have predictable effect on his followers' willingness to obey him.

This is where the rubber meets the road for the JWs, Adventists, and Mormons. When the predicted events do not occur, faith is challenged precisely because the faithful have invested time, money, effort etc. on the assumption that the leaders were predicting reality. When reality plays out differently than predicted, that is hard to take. And amazingly, those who follow time after time swallow hard and continue to believe. This in my view is testimony to the importance of our social group status, and how malleable our perception of reality is when caught between what we need to believe to remain part of our social group and disconfirming evidence in that regard.

Watters agrees with me. He concludes as follows respecting the resilience of the JW organization:

A pattern emerges when we examine the growth figures before and after each disconfirmation [failed prophesy]. Typically, there was a rapid growth in numbers at least two years before the prophetic date, followed by a falling away of some (viewed as a "cleansing" of the organization of the unfaithful), then another growth spurt as a new emphasis on evangelism was put forward.

It may seem incomprehensible how the Witnesses could ignore the implications of each disconfirmation. Outsiders view the Witnesses as lacking common sense for not leaving the organization after numerous failures. They fail to understand the dynamics of mind control as used by cults. Even many ex-JWs fail to understand that the further disconfirmation of the importance of 1914 and "this generation" will not seriously affect the numbers of those swelling the ranks of the Watchtower. The results of mind control and unquestioning obedience will have the same effect today as it did in Russell's day. His view was, "Where else can we go?" Harrison writes regarding this attitude,

That, of course, is one of the keys to survival of the organization Russell founded on soft mysticism, glorious visions and worldly disaffection. The Witnesses had nowhere else to go. Their investment in their religion was total; to leave it would have meant spiritual and emotional bankruptcy. They were not equipped to function in a world without certainty. It was their life. To leave it would be a death.

This same dependency-onto-death phenomenon is at work in thousands of cults all over the world. People wondered at Jonestown: "Why didn't they leave when they saw what Jim Jones was becoming?" The people of

Jonestown answered by their actions, "Where else would we go?" They had burned their bridges to follow their Messiah unto death.

Over 110 years and several failed prophecies later, the Watchtower movement is testimony enough that failed predictions do not mean the dissolution of a cult following. The failure of 1975 resulted in a decrease of less than 2%. The Watchtower will always be able to develop clever rationalizations regarding their changing dates, as their history documents. Today, the Watchtower grows at a rate of about 5% per year worldwide, with over 3.7 million door knockers and over 9 million sympathizers!

The behaviour of the JW faithful in the face of the kind of incontrovertibly disconfirming evidence just described is hard to understand without the assistance of cognitive dissonance research and an appreciation for the strength of the conditioning systems that exist inside the JW community. The evidence from these and many other cases seems clear to the effect that the ties that bind a religious group together may become so strong that in the short term at least, it is virtually impossible to shake the religious faith of many believers using evidence that would be persuasive to virtually all outside the community. In fact, it is in my view consistent with the evidence to suggest that the more potentially disruptive a piece of information is to one's comfortable existence, the more likely it is to be suppressed or otherwise misrecognized. While evidence of this is everywhere around us, including in the summaries of human reaction to failed prophecy above, none is more disturbing than that found in the holocaust autobiographical classic "Night", by Elie Wiesel. Here we find graphic evidence of cognitive dissonance's power to shape our perception of reality.

Wiesel tells the story of how he lived as a 14-year-old Jewish boy in a small Hungarian town called Sighet during World War II. As the Nazis gradually closed their net around this town, rumours began to circulate. However, the residents found reasons to believe that their comfortable little world would not collapse, and so few if any of them escaped while they had the chance. At some point, all of the foreign Jews in Sighet were expelled. One of them was Wiesel's religious mentor, Moshe Beadle, a joyful, deeply spiritual man. Months passed, and life in Sighet continued mostly at its comfortable pace.

Then Moshe returned. He told a chilling story. The buses in which the deportees left Sighet had crossed the border into Poland and been handed over to the Gestapo. The Jews were forced to get off and dig huge pits. Then they were all – men, women and children – machine gunned and pushed into what became their mass grave. Some babies were tossed into the air and used as human skeet to entertain the soldiers. Moshe was wounded and left for dead. It had taken him months to make his way back to warn his friends. Wiesel notes:

Through long days and nights, [Moshe] went from one Jewish house to another, telling the story of Malka, the young girl who had taken three days to die, and of Tobias, the tailor, who had begged to be killed before his sons...

Moshe had changed. There was no longer any joy in his eyes. He no longer sang. He no longer talked to me of God or of the cabbala, but only of what he had seen. People refused not only to believe his stories, but even to listen to them.

'He's just trying to make us pity him. What an imagination he has!" they said. Or even, "Poor fellow. He's gone mad.'

And as for Moshe, he wept.

No one would believe him. Not even his protégé Wiesel. This was toward the end of 1942. There was still plenty of time to escape.

Wiesel goes on to tell of how more news of the war, Hitler's atrocities in general and his plans for the extermination of all Jews gradually infiltrated his town. They heard of what the Germans were doing to the Jews in other parts of Europe. Still lots of time to escape, but no one put what Moshe had said together with these reports and acted. Finally the Germans arrived. They began to remove Jewish liberties – still time to escape and few if any acted. Then they created Jewish ghettos, and finally prepared the Jews for mass deportation. All along the way, it would have been possible for many to escape. But at every juncture along this path, the good Jewish people of Sighet rationalized in different ways that things were not so bad; that their lives were not going to change too much; that their God would watch over them. This rationalization ended only as they watched their family members being led into the gas chambers and furnace of Auschwitz, or entered there themselves.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that they should have been able to see the signs all around them as to what was happening. Why could they not see the obvious? This is the most eloquent testimony I have encountered to the power of cognitive dissonance.

Who Tends to "Get Out"? – The Personality Type Effect

It has been noted that the more reluctant to experience new things, or closed minded, a person is, the more likely it is that he will have strong religious beliefs. As Michael Shermer wrote:

In the study on religiosity and belief in God that Frank Sulloway and I conducted, we found openness to experience to be the most significant predictor [of declining religious belief], with higher levels of openness related to lower levels of religiosity and belief in God. (Why People Believe Weird Things, p. 293).

The conditioning process of the Mormon faith tends to produce closed minds through the operation of the confirmation bias and other conditioning and

socialization processes. This would itself increase the probability of continued religious belief.

To flesh out the idea that personality type is connected to religious behaviour, I thought it might have to do with other personality traits as well, and so conducted a simple study of 80 self selected volunteers from some of the on-line discussion groups in which I participate. I used a simple Myers Briggs (MB) personality test, and supplemented it with about thirty questions of my own.

The MB testing system uses four categories to assess personality. Each is set up like a spectrum. For example, the first is Introverted (I) to Extroverted (E). You are scored on a scale from 1 to 100 on that basis with 1 being completely introverted and 100 being completely extroverted, for example. About 90% of those who responded to my survey and who no longer believe the tenets of Mormonism are introverts. This makes some sense because extroverts are more connected to their dominant social group and so social activities are more important for them than for introverts. Hence, extroverts are likely more fearful of being expelled from the group and so cognitive dissonance would create more information distortion for them than for the less fearful introverts.

The second letter in the four letter MB set is either N or S. The N stands for Intuition, and the S for Sensing. Sensors tend to be more present oriented than Intuiters. Intuiters tend to think in broader terms than Sensors. They are more interested in why things came to be as they are, and what the long term consequences of different actions will be. My survey indicated that Intuiters are much more likely to have left Mormonism than Sensors. I suspect that this is due to the fact that Intuiters are more likely to question the "whys" of what they see around them instead of simply accepting them.

The third MB category is Thinkers v. Feelers. Thinkers are more oriented toward objective approaches, analysis, long term consequences, the use of "principles" to make decisions, etc. Feelers are more oriented toward the present, subjective experience and what they would express as "values" to make decisions. My survey showed that Thinkers are far more likely to leave Mormonism than Feelers.

And, Introverted, Intuitive, Thinkers are the most likely of all to leave. That is the kind of person who would likely gather enough information to allow his cerebral cortex to overcome the fear generated by his reptilian core at the thought of being separated from his "herd".

Another interesting category showed up in the data I collected. People who are Extroverted, and either strongly Intuitive or Thinkers, tend to remain connected to Mormonism by continuing to attend meetings and pretending to believe to an extent, while secretly participating in on-line discussion groups that allow them to give voice to their real beliefs. This is likely due to the fact that they attach a high importance to group participation, and hence are more fearful than introverted persons with regard to the prospect of being separated from the group. And yet their tendencies toward Intuiting and Thinking has caused them to unweave the

Mormon rainbow. This leaves them in a tough spot – one that requires much more pretence than most people wish to have in their lives.

In any event, my little survey, while interesting, falls far short of proving the theories noted above. For example, all of the survey participants are on-line community types. My guess is that these people tend to be more introverted than the average person in any event. I plan to eventually redo the survey in a more scientific way, and see if I can persuade people who are not on-line communities members, as well as a larger number of people who continue to both participate in the Mormon Church and believe its teachings, to participate.

Conclusion

So, what do we learn from these bits of theory, speculation, data and history? Is it as simple as implied by the statement wrongly attributed to P.T. Barnum – That there is another sucker born every minute? (See <http://www.historybuff.com/library/refbarnum.html>). Hardly, although since Barnum was allegedly equating "suckers" with those whose buttons he could push so as to cause them to buy his wares, the statement attributed to him was right.

The clear message of religious history relative to cognitive dissonance is that the social and psychological forces that are the subject of this essay are formidable enemies and powerful allies. While the reaction of individuals or groups of humans to information that should cast serious doubt on their religious beliefs cannot be predicted, the clear and universal pattern is one of denial and stubborn resistance to any evidence that may disconfirm beliefs on which a person's worldview as well as social and familial relationships are based. This denial is followed in some cases by painful acceptance and adjustment, usually within "the faith".

In light of the evidence above, I suggest that Dr. Wright dramatically underestimates the power of cognitive dissonance and its confreres. It explains for me not only the behaviour of faithful Mormons like Dr. Wright, but of educated young earth creationists, Holocaust deniers, UFO believers, Jews, etc. This is the theory that explains the big picture as well as the phenomenon of well-educated and faithful Mormons. The theory Dr. Wright proposes – that Mormonism is what it purports to be and that the existence of well-educated Mormons proves that theory – does not explain any of the other well-educated populations who disagree with the Mormons as well espousing the own brand of oddball belief.

I should make special mention of one of my former heroes, Hugh Nibley. He is a scholar famous in Mormon circles for his vigorous defence of the Mormon faith. Now that I have critically reviewed his writings instead of grasping at them as straws to save my Mormon beliefs, I see him as a classic example of the extremely bright person who is adept at finding spurious patterns in the available data to support which ever point of view he happens to hold, and then writing about them in a fashion adequate to convince at least those inclined to believe what he believes. Other scholars who have great respect for Nibley's academic work have

said as much with respect to his writings in defence of Mormonism – that they stain an otherwise brilliant academic record.

I should also mention Thomas Kuhn's theory that even scientists are trapped by their own perspectives. He famously said that science progresses "one funeral at a time" as the old guys, and their theories, die and so make way for the younger generation and a better set of theories. The old guys – even if they are the world's leading scientists – are often not capable of recognizing when a cherished theory has been eclipsed.

So, my question for Dr. Wright is, why are we surprised that many human beings who have invested most of their lives in Mormonism would be highly resistant to information that questions their beliefs and therefore the value of that investment? After all, he only points toward those who have chosen to continue to participate as faithful Mormons, and cannot even speak to what these people really believe. I am familiar with many, including several former BYU professors, who have left Mormonism for precisely the reasons I have. I am familiar with many more who believe as I do, but continue to participate in the Mormon community and hence appear for all intents and purposes to be believers, because the social cost of expressing disbelief is so high for faithful Mormons. I am not familiar with any well-educated people who studied Mormonism carefully, and then joined it despite the problems I have here described. I am sure that some have done this. But their numbers are, I am confident, a small fraction of the well informed who have left Mormonism or who no longer believe but participate for social reasons.

On the basis of the data I have reviewed relative to the Mormon community as well as many other religious and secular communities, it is in my view reasonable to conclude that the kind of denial I have just described is normal behaviour. We should expect it. It appears in almost all religious and non-religious communities that have ever been studied in this regard. It would be miraculous if it did not appear in the Mormon community.

I suggest that those who wish to use this behaviour as evidence that the beliefs held by faithful Mormons are "true" or superior to other beliefs, are not justified. And I say this regardless of the impeccable academic credentials of some who hold these beliefs. The inference of truth from the belief of a group of people is precisely as reliable in the Mormon community as believing Mormons would acknowledge it to be in the Jehovah's Witness or Muslim communities – that is, not reliable at all. Such belief is nothing more than an indication of the importance of religious experience and community participation in the lives of those who believe.

And after all of that I am required to ask "Does Cognitive Dissonance Theory Apply to Mormons?" I suggest that the strength of cognitive dissonance within the Mormon community is evidenced by the fact that a prominent Mormon apologist read almost all of the foregoing, and after telling me how poorly written, illogical, unfocussed etc. this essay is in general, challenged me to set out by way of premises and conclusion why I believed that cognitive dissonance has any effect on

Mormons. He indicated that he had seen nothing in this essay to support that conclusion. Specifically, he said:

Could you provide me , in a basic syllogistic [that is, logical] outline (i.e. key premises, lines of reasoning, and conclusions) your overall argument and several of your major sub-arguments—including your argument about cognitive dissonance? (I ask because even using compassionate reconstruction, I wasn't able to put anything together that even remotely resemble an intelligible argument—fallacious or otherwise. Rather, it appeared that you were simply rambling wherever your thoughts took you, and firing off assertions in shotgun style in hope of hitting something. Absent any, or sufficient, intelligible syllogisms, can an article rightly be considered a "reasoned" response, as opposed to baseless opining or emotional appeals?)

Once you have those syllogisms in hand (assuming they can even be constructed), check through your article to see which, if any, of the premises are supported by credible evidence and logical reasoning (according to the conventions of critical thought, personal opinions of the interlocutor do not count as evidence.) (I ask because I found little if any credible evidence or sound reasoning for most of your assertions.)

Here is what I sent to him regarding the cognitive dissonance piece, which was the key point he wanted to discuss with me:

P1: Cognitive dissonance is one of the most well established principles of psychology.

P2: It has been shown to a high degree of probability that cognitive dissonance interferes with the ability of human beings to accurately perceive evidence relative to their surroundings.

P3: The seminal research in the cognitive dissonance field was related to religious belief and the manner in which it interfered with believers ability to perceive evidence that was inconsistent with their beliefs, and a large body of subsequent data confirms this probable cause and effect connection.

P4: Mormon beliefs are religious beliefs.

P5: Mormon beliefs are not qualitatively different from a psychological point of view from the religious beliefs respecting which cognitive dissonance has been studied and has been shown to interfere with the perception of evidence that contradicts religious beliefs.

P6: There is significant evidence that faithful Mormons do not interpret evidence related to the founding and early history of Mormonism as do non-Mormons. For example, faithful Mormons are relatively unaffected by evidence indicating that Joseph Smith deceived both his followers and the public with regard to his sexual activities for many years, while non-Mormons

tend to perceive the same evidence to indicate the untrustworthy nature of Joseph Smith and are less inclined to believe other things he said as a result.

C: Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Mormon beliefs probably interfere with the ability of faithful Mormons to perceive evidence that contradicts their beliefs.

I will leave other readers to judge the reasonableness of his assertion in light of the logic chain I have just provided and the information that preceded it.

The message that booms through the evidence summarized above, in my view, is that the denial inducing nature of cognitive dissonance makes it difficult to self-diagnose with regard to many of the most important aspects of our lives. Our religious beliefs fall squarely into this category. This highlights the importance of getting outside of one's self or community paradigm when making certain types of decisions.

By definition, we cannot see our own blind spots. We must either have others point them out for us, or we may eventually feel them through the cognitive dissonance process which is usually lengthy and painful. However, both history and the research that has been conducted relative to cognitive dissonance related to religion indicate that most of those who come to hold a fervent religious belief will not be shaken from it, regardless of the nature of the disconfirming evidence that is presented to them.

"The Mormon Church does not stifle freedom of speech or intellectual pursuits."

Dr. Wright provided evidence to support his point in this regard in the form of his summary of how many Mormons hold differing views on theological points; and the fact that people he worked with at Brigham Young University – owned and operated by the Mormon Church – taught things like the theory of evolution in the classroom and have achieved noteworthy accomplishments in academia.

I agree with Dr. Wright that many Mormons have accomplished admirable things from an academic point of view, and that there is a wide range of beliefs within the Mormon community relative to certain issues. However, he did not respond to my experience of being told that I could either resign my membership or agree not to talk about the things like those outlined in the interview I gave to Mr. Hedley. Nor did he address the reality that Mormons are woefully uninformed with respect to the "real" history of their faith in the sense I described it above. If he doubts me, I suggest he conduct a simple poll among the members of his congregation with respect to some of the issues that he knows to be contentious. One of the reasons for which he is unlikely do to this is that it could land him in front of a Mormon disciplinary council (euphemistically known as a "Court of Love" – see Orwell's "1984" for a fascinating parallel in this and many other regards) to answer for his faith destroying actions.

I also note that Dr. Wright indicated that he was not in agreement with everything that occurred he was at BYU. That is consistent with two notes I received shortly after his article was published from people who said that they taught with Dr. Wright at BYU, and expressed astonishment that he would have written the article he did given how he appeared to labour under the strictures that teaching at that institution required. Another note I received from a former BYU professor in response to Dr. Wright's article reads in part as follows:

Well, having recently been denied full professor [status at BYU] because of suspicions that I have a less than stalwart testimony, not because I said anything directly against the church, but because I expressed skepticism about certain beliefs, questioned authority, and challenged my students to question their own beliefs, I can say that Wright gratuitously mischaracterizes the extent of intellectual freedom at BYU. His reference to organic evolution is a Red Herring, since church doctrine does not rule it out, apostles have acknowledged its probability, and it is openly taught in all biological sciences on campus. The bit about the history of Tokugawa in Japan is irrelevant. It has nothing to do with questioning Mormonism's core beliefs. Most certainly, behaviour or speech that is viewed by some as threatening to the church's mission, or insufficiently respectful of doctrine or authority is repressed. Most of the repression is self-repression, because faculty understand well the risks. The Ecclesiastical Endorsement of faculty exists precisely to weed out subversives and potential subversives from the faculty.

Based on my understanding of life at BYU as it has been described to me by both students and former professors, my understanding of the manner in which gay people continue to be persecuted by that institution, and the number of academics who I know have left the teaching ranks there as a result of their perception that they were not permitted the freedom to ethically perform their scholarly functions, I think it fair to suggest that Dr. Wright understated the nature of the problems with free speech and intellectual freedom at BYU.

Dr. Wright also did not comment respecting certain statements I referenced above made by Mormon apostles to the effect that Mormon educators are required to only tell the parts of Mormon history that are "faith promoting"; that some things that are true are not helpful; and that the Mormon Church has no obligation to tell any more than the side of its story most favourable to it. These statements comprise Mormonism's "faithful history" policy to which I referred above. Since Dr. Wright was a member of the community of Mormon educators while he taught at BYU, I am sure he is well aware of these statements.

I am familiar with people who have left the employ of BYU and other branches of the Mormon educational system because they were not permitted to teach Mormon history in what they regarded as an ethical manner. Dr. Wright is also familiar with a number of Mormon academics who have been excommunicated as a result of their refusal to toe the line drawn for them by their religious leaders. Ironically,

one of the best known of these is a religious studies scholar also named David Wright. I understand that he is not related to Dr. Wright.

The Mormon interference with freedom of speech and intellectual inquiry is severe, but restricted to matters that challenge the authority of current Mormon leaders. And the leaders do not seem to care what the members believe. It is the communication of beliefs that have the potential to question their authority that is of concern to them. As my interview with David Hedley indicated, I was told by my Stake President, John Swendsen, who the last time we golfed together appeared to still be my friend (it is my turn to invite him out, and I intend to do that shortly) that I could believe pretty much what I wanted, I just could not discuss my heterodox beliefs with anyone outside of my immediate family.

"The Mormon Church does not micro-manage its members."

I must confess to almost falling out of my chair when I read this. In fairness to Dr. Wright, I should note that the idea of Mormon micro-management can only be understood relative to something else. And, it is clear to me that Mormonism does not micro-manage the lives of its people more than do the Taliban, or the Old Order Amish, for example. But, when compared to most of North American society, there can be no doubt that Mormonism micro-manages its people.

Let me provide just a few examples.

Mormons who have been through a Mormon temple and made the covenants required there are told what kind of underwear they must wear. Because of its leg and arm length, that underwear restricts the kind of clothes they can wear. They are told that this underwear must be worn "night and day", which is often interpreted by those in authority (as it was in the Mormon temple at Cardston, Alberta for my wife and my benefit when we married there) to mean that this underwear must be put back on after spouses make love, and before they go to sleep. Some believe that it must be worn while making love, although the newer versions of this underwear make this unfeasible. I hence suspect that this belief will die out.

Mormons have from time to time been specifically counselled as to what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate sexual conduct between spouses. Oral sex, mutual masturbation, and other "unnatural" sexual practises, for example, have been labelled inappropriate.

Mormons are counselled to get married early. This is the practical result of the Mormon rule that there shall be no legitimate sex before marriage. I say "legitimate" because some studies have indicated a rate of premarital sex in the Mormon population that is not far off that of the regular population. Regrettably, the statistics show that early marriages are more likely to result in divorce than later ones.

Mormons are counselled to have as many children as they are able to support. This would have the effect, as many commentators such as Harold Bloom have noted ("The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian" – for a review, see <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,962070,00.html>) of causing the Mormon faith to dominate North America within several generations. Hence, this strategy works well for the Mormon Church if not for individual members of the Mormon Church as they struggle to cope with the demands of a large family in a society that for good reason is downsizing in that regard. If the entire world followed the family planning advice of Mormon leaders, within 50 years we would likely have a population crisis on our hands that would resolve itself as these things tend to do through war and famine (See Paul Erlich, "Human Natures", pages 277, 278). The Nobel Prize winning biologist Edward O. Wilson has said that mankind may well look back on one counterintuitive fact as the saviour of our race: That as women become better educated and richer, they choose to have fewer children and to lavish more care on each child. This improves the probability of survival and overall quality of life of each child, and the women ("The Bottleneck", The Best American Science and Nature Writing – 2003, pages 303, 304). That is, women when given the chance prefer quality to quantity. This trend is visible in the Mormon community where family size is coming down, but here as in so many other ways, Mormons lag the rest of the North American population (which in turn lags the European population) by a generation or more.

Mormons at one time were counselled not to use birth control. There is now silence on this point in the face of near universal use. However, Mormons continue to be counselled strongly against the use of surgical sterilization. The last time I looked this advice was in the "Handbook of Instructions" used by Bishops and other Mormon leaders to counsel members and run congregations. I was counselled on this basis by my Stake President to not have the vasectomy I was considering after my wife had struggled even more than usual after the birth of our sixth child, which occurred after 12 years of marriage.

Mormons are supposed to give 10% of their income as a minimum offering, and more if they are able.

Each year near the end of December each active participant in a Mormon congregation is encouraged to attend "tithing settlement" during which (preferably in the presence of his or her spouse and family) the member tells the Bishop whether he or she has paid a "full tithe".

The full slate of Mormon meetings, daily, weekly and monthly rituals, required reading for Sunday meetings etc. absorbs a large percentage of discretionary time. This, coupled with the demands of the typically large Mormon family, produce the odd situation in which the supposedly family oriented Mormon couples actually spend very little time together. The higher the Mormon husband or wife is in the Mormon leadership hierarchy, the worse this situation tends to be.

Mormons are not supposed to drink even moderate amounts of tea, coffee or alcoholic beverages of any kind. The recent indications from the medical

community that things such as green tea and red wine in moderation are good for human health are not considered persuasive by Mormons.

Mormons are not supposed to watch R rated movies (no account is taken of how that standard varies from country to country, and how it varies in terms of sexual context, violence, etc., or how it varies as time passes).

It is defined as "apostasy" and is an excommunicable offence for a Mormon to criticize the leaders of the Mormon Church or to communicate with other members respecting beliefs that are contrary to those endorsed by the Mormon leaders. As Dr. Wright indicated, that leaves Mormons free to talk about lots of things. But, a clear line is drawn with respect to anything that would cause other members to question the wisdom or authority of the current Mormon leadership.

Mormons who wish to attend Mormon temples must pass a two-stage worthiness interview with male, local leaders that involves acknowledging the authority of local and general Mormon leaders, and answering personal questions related to matters of belief and behaviour. Here are a few of the questions:

- Do you have a testimony of the restoration of the gospel in these the latter days?
- Do you sustain the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator and as the only person on the earth who possesses and is authorized to exercise all priesthood keys?
- Do you sustain members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators?
- Do you sustain the other General Authorities and local authorities of the Church?
- Do you live the law of chastity?
- Do you support, affiliate with, or agree with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?
- Do you strive to keep the covenants you have made, to attend your sacrament and other meetings, and to keep your life in harmony with the laws and commandments of the gospel?
- Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowmen?
- Are you a full-tithe payer?
- Do you keep the Word of Wisdom?
- Do you wear the garment [underwear mandated for use by Mormons who have been through the Mormon temple system] both night and day as instructed in the endowment and in accordance with the covenant you made in the temple?

A "temple recommend" or permit to enter the temple will only be issued if these questions, which must be asked verbatim, are answered to the satisfaction of the Mormon leaders who conduct the two separate interviews required in this regard. As I write this, I recall for the first time in many years the "Alice down the rabbit hole" experience it initially was for me to be asked these questions, and then to ask them myself of the adult members of the Mormon congregation over which I presided as Bishop. But, it is amazing what we can come to regard as "normal" after we have done it for a while.

To keep a continuous temple recommend this process must be repeated at least ever other year. Similarly invasive interviews are conducted every six months with teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18 for the purpose of monitoring their "worthiness". Parents are encouraged to conduct the same kind of interviews with the children. The effect of such regular acknowledgment of the one's personal submission to Mormon authority is in my view a large part of what makes Mormons as uncritically submissive to authority of many types as they are.

Joseph Smith wrote a creed for the Mormon faith that is called "The Articles of Faith". There are thirteen of these "articles", which amount to brief statements of belief. Young Mormons memorize these, and throughout the life of an average Mormon they are a touchstone. They are regularly referred to in Mormon lessons and leadership meetings when a source of indisputable authority is required to shed light on a difficult to understand scripture or administrative policy. Ironically, one of the most important of these articles (as well as a key point in the temple recommend interview) relates to the importance of honesty. As noted above, the leadership of the Mormon Church uses a very different definition of honesty than that required of the Mormon membership at large. I am certain, for example, that if the kind of dissembling the leaders use with respect to Mormon history were employed by a member to avoid telling his leaders about marital infidelity that this would be an excommunicable offence.

Testimony bearing (in most cases, standing before a group of people and telling them that you believe the Mormon Church is God's one and only true church etc.) is an important part of Mormon culture. The things that are to be said as part of a "real" or "true" testimony have been prescribed by Mormon leaders. Members who depart from the approved script as criticized in subtle and not so subtle ways by other members. The effects of this behaviour from a cognitive dissonance point of view were described above.

Mormons are assigned to visit each other's homes on a monthly basis. The women visit the women, and the men are responsible for entire families. This is kind of an "assigned friend" idea that has merit in some ways. The "gospel messages" are written and assigned by Mormon leaders and appear in the monthly edition of a magazine read by most Mormons. The constant repetition of the words of particular Mormon leaders engrains those within both the Mormon culture, and the mentality of the individuals Mormons who each month hear, and repeat, these messages. A Mormon man, for example, might visit four families and repeat some variation of the monthly message at each visit, and then hear the same message

repeated when his assigned friend comes to visit. The same process works for the Mormon women who visit each other.

Mormonism does not involve a paid clergy at the local level, and so sermons, lessons etc. each week are prepared by congregation members and taught to each other in the various youth and adult classes that occur during the three hour main block of meetings that Mormons attend each Sunday. However, Mormons are strongly discouraged from using any materials to prepare their lessons other than the scriptures (Bible, Book of Mormon etc.) and very thin lesson materials that the Mormon Church provides. The emphasis is to be on bearing testimony and expressing feelings, along with quoting from the scriptures and the statements of Mormon leaders that dominate the lesson materials. In particular, Mormons are discouraged from getting commentaries or going onto the Internet to do research in order to understand the background with respect to what they are teaching. The reason for this is clear – the more Mormons dig into the scriptures and particularly, Mormon history, the more disturbing questions they tend to ask. Hence, it is best to minimize those questions by focussing lessons on the bearing of testimony and a superficial presentation of the materials in question.

Mormon teenagers and youth leaders are provided with a booklet called "For the Strength of Youth", in two formats. The first is purse size, and the second is wallet size. They are encouraged in a variety of ways to master its contents. It describes in summary form the "standards" by which the young people are supposed to live, including things like abstaining from sexually related activities, reading the scriptures daily, dressing in certain ways, the number of earrings women can wear, the importance of avoiding body piercing, tattoos and other "extreme" forms of dress or personal style, etc.

Mormon teenagers and other unmarried Mormons are strongly discouraged from dating non-Mormons, and a significant effort is made to keep their plates so full of Mormon related activities that they simply do not have the time required to foster non-Mormon friendships of a significant sort. They are encouraged, however, to bring non-Mormon friends to Mormon activities and to help to convert them to Mormonism.

Mormons are supposed to engage in numerous daily, weekly and monthly rituals that are designed to remind them of their beliefs and engrain those beliefs in them. These rituals include: various daily personal, family and spousal prayers; daily personal, family and spousal scripture study; weekly meetings of many kinds; five days per week early morning group scripture study for students in grades 9 – 12, usually taught at or near the school the kids attend; weekly "family home evenings"; monthly visits received by, and paid to, other assigned families within the congregation; miscellaneous meetings with missionaries; preparation for lessons that are taught each week at church; and other tasks required to perform a host of other teaching or learning functions with respect to the Mormon cultural milieu.

If after being reminded of what Mormon culture is like by reading my summary here Dr. Wright still wonders about Mormon micromanagement, I suggest that he ask his Bishop for the chance to spend an afternoon reading the Handbook of Instructions and the other raft of handbooks the Bishop has in his possession. He then might refresh his memory as to what is contained in the "Honor Code" by which students at BYU are supposed to live.

I could keep going, but am running out of both time and patience for this task. It would be very difficult to chronicle the length and breadth of Mormon ritual. So, I suggest to Dr. Wright that when the demands that Mormonism makes on its members are compared to most other mainstream North American religions, it is in my view not possible to reasonably conclude that the Mormon Church is doing anything other than micro managing its members.

"If you subject other religions to the same standards of historical analysis to which you do Mormonism, most of them will fail."

Dr. Wright lamented a decision of former Lutheran minister to leave his faith as a result of incongruencies between the results of recent historical and other scholarship and his religious beliefs.

I agree with Dr. Wright to a degree with respect to his assertion that other religions share Mormonism's shaky foundations. However, Joseph Smith's history is much more accessible than Jesus Christ's, for example. And hence, the historical conclusions that can be drawn in Mormonism's case are much stronger than in the case of Christianity in general. But in many other ways, Smith's case is similar to that related to the study of Islam or the Bible. For example, the Book of Mormon purports to be a history of the Americas that is similar to the Bible in many ways. Many of the same techniques are used in the study of the claims made relative to both books. The Bible appears as a result of its study in this context to be part history and part fabrication. This is accepted by a large, liberal thinking, branch of Christianity. The Book of Mormon appears to be 100% fabrication. This is not accepted by the Mormon Church's leadership or the vast majority of its membership.

Another significant difference between the Mormon and other Christian communities as far as critical scholarship is concerned is that the study of Christianity in this regard is well over a century old. Hence, many Christians long ago adopted a metaphoric understanding of their sacred texts, and on that basis have retained what I now consider to be the most important aspects of their faith. The need to reframe religious experience in this way is relatively new in the Mormon community, and is resisted by the Mormon leadership in the same way it was (and to some extent still is) resisted in other parts of the Christian community.

"Joseph Smith is respected by some non-Mormons as a genius who started a significant religious movement."

The noted literary critic Harold Bloom was named as one of those who has labelled Smith a "genius".

I agree with Harold Bloom to a point. Smith was very bright, a great story teller, and perhaps even was a genius. I also agree that he identified a need within a certain, relatively downtrodden segment of the society of his day, and provided what was required to satisfy at least part of that need. And he was highly charismatic. So, many believed and followed him. Does that mean that he actually spoke with God and angels, as he said he did? Does that mean that he received the exclusive authority from God that he claims to have received? Does that mean that God actually said to him, while referring to the other religions of his day, that:

... they were all wrong ... all their creeds were an abomination in [God's] sight ...those professors [pastors] were all corrupt; that 'they draw near to me with the lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.' (Pearl of Great Price, 2:8-19).

I do not think so. And I doubt that Bloom does either. As far as I know, he has not applied for baptism as a Mormon.

I am not sure what to think of Smith, other than that he is unreliable and I should not believe what he said in any case where he was trying to get people to believe and obey him. I do not need to reach any firm conclusion respecting him beyond that in order to decide that I will no longer follow his advice or the advice of anyone whose authority is derived from him, except to the extent that it otherwise passes the tests I use to separate good advice from bad.

Many interesting theories have been floated as to the nature of the disorder and/or genius Smith possessed. One theory that fits remarkably well comes from a book by Harvard Medical School professor John Ratey ("Shadow Syndromes") that does not name Smith. His description of persons who have mild cases of the manic-depressive disorder fits Smith and many other religious and political leaders perfectly. These people are often near genius in terms of intelligence. When in the depressed stage of their disorder, they can cope and few people notice. When in the manic stage, they have incredible amounts of energy and creativity. They tend to conceive grandiose and well-timed projects that attract the support of many other people. They can work tirelessly. They exude a human energy that is highly attractive to other human beings, and gives much of what they do a sense of inevitability. And, that same human energy makes many sexual opportunities available to them, which they have a hard time declining.

"Joseph Smith is respected as a prophet by believing Mormons, and it is inappropriate to question the morals of such a person." Dr. Wright went on to indicate that to compare Smith to a "shady stock promoter" is

offensive, and that Mormons are for some reason singled out for this kind of unfair treatment.

Dr. Wright implicitly raises two issues here. First, the leaders of religious movements are in some kind of privileged category. And second, Mormons are picked on for some unknown reason.

Religious Leaders Should Not Be Criticized

I should first make clear the esteem with which Mormons regard Joseph Smith. They are taught that he has done more for mankind than anyone except Jesus Christ. It is fair to suggest, in my view, that a personality cult is cultivated around Smith and whoever the current prophet of the Mormon Church happens to be. The intent (conscious or otherwise) of this effort is to put them beyond criticism, which is precisely what Dr. Wright indicated should be the case.

The claims Smith made are extraordinary – that he saw God the Father and Jesus Christ; that They gave him exclusive authority to represent Them; that he frequently met with angels; that they gave him a book written on golden plates from which he translated the Book of Mormon; that he saw numerous other visions and received numerous other angelic visitations.

The rule of thumb in rational discourse and science in particular, is that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. However, once the evidence respecting Smith's stories is carefully considered, it indicates much more uncertainty than the Mormon Church likes to admit respecting these events. Hence, from the perspective of those who lead the Mormon Church, it makes a lot of sense to take all the steps they can to minimize questions asked about this aspect of Smith's history. The "religious leaders should not be questioned" stance fits nicely with this.

Here are only a few of the questions that arise after minimal investigation into Smith's extraordinary claims.

Smith told different versions of his stories as time passed to different people. And there was a clear trend in the evolution of what he told. His stories became increasingly less "magical" as time passed and Smith the magical treasure seeker became Smith the prophet and leader of a Christian sect. So, a toad that morphed into an angel in the initial telling of how he was commissioned by God became an angel in a later telling, became Christ and an angel in a still later telling; and finally became God and Christ in the telling the Mormon Church uses for marketing purposes (See <http://www.irr.org/mit/First-Vision-Accounts.html> for a critical account of this process, and <http://www.wasatchnet.net/users/ewatson/1stVIntro.htm> for a pro-Mormon account). Other similar patterns can be identified.

Smith said that the only thing God told him to do was translate the Book of Mormon. But nonetheless, he ended up leading the Mormon Church. When his

leadership was later questioned, for the first time he and his colleague Oliver Cowdery began to tell people that many years previous God sent angels to them to ordain them to the priesthood and give them special leadership keys (See <http://www.lds-mormon.com/mph.shtml> for a summary). One would have thought an event of that significance would have been newsworthy long before it was made public. And the release of this news during a time of leadership crisis was useful in a variety of ways for both Cowdery and Smith.

There were eleven men who allowed their testimonies to be included under the cover of the Book of Mormon to the effect that they either saw the golden plates from which the book was translated, or saw the plates and had certain other experiences. Eight witnesses had a lesser experience in that regard. Three had a greater experience. Upon reading their testimonies, one would think that the experiences of which they speak were real in nature. It appears, however, that many of the witnesses were uncomfortable with the words that were put in their mouths by way of the statement to which they attested, but nonetheless went along with the crowd. And others were clear in their indication that the expedience was not real, but rather was spiritual or visionary in nature (See <http://www.irr.org/mit/bomwit1.html> for a summary). And we should remember the nature of the people in question and the times. Martin Harris, who was one of the three witnesses, and others, later lent their names to additional and contradictory crackpot ventures (See <http://www.xmission.com/~country/chngwrld/chap5a.htm>, at pages 100, 101) And, at about the same time some of the founders of the Shaker faith signed an affidavit that an angel appeared to them in broad daylight to deliver a message from God. Mormons and other believers happily accept the stories of this sort within their own tradition while completely discounting the similar stories told by others.

The Mormon Church makes enormous efforts to keep the kind of evidence I have just summarized out of circulation. It is not mentioned in any of the manuals used to teach adults at church on Sunday or lessons to potential converts, and nor it is included in the materials used to teach university level history courses at BYU and elsewhere. I know people who have resigned their teaching positions at places like BYU as a result of being prevented from teaching Mormon history at what they believed to be the minimum standard required by their profession as educators.

As a scholar, Dr. Wright appreciates the importance of considering all relevant evidence with respect to any reality that is important to us. I did not hear anything from him to indicate why the nature and history of Joseph Smith should be placed in a privileged category in this regard.

I wonder if Dr. Wright would be willing to look critically at the history and ethics of someone like the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. If he says not, I wonder how his answer would change if one of his children fell into the grasp of that organization? I might ask the same respecting the Jehovah's Witnesses, who are growing much faster the Mormon Church? Or how about one of the more radical sects of Islam? My suspicion is that Dr. Wright did not think this one through with adequate care.

And, I believe that Dr. Wright misunderstood the sense in which I used the comparison of Joseph Smith to some of the shady stock promoters I have met in the course of my legal practice. These men are among the most affable, lovable, intelligent men on the planet. That is why they are so good at what they do. And, more often than not they appear to completely believe the fraud they are in the course of perpetrating. Such is the power of cognitive dissonance. It continues to be my view that this comparison is apt, and that Smith is if anything flattered by the comparison.

Why Do So Many Pick on the Mormons and Their Founder, Joseph Smith? Why Can't Those Who Leave the Mormon Church Just Leave it Alone?!

I hope what has preceded this question provides a few clues. Smith's claims are extravagant. The evidence to support them is thin, and has been suppressed for over 150 years. It is still suppressed. And Mormons have the habit of going around to the members of other faiths and telling them that the Mormons are right, and they are wrong. Dr. Wright has perhaps forgotten that one of the most read Mormon books of all time, "Mormon Doctrine" written by the late Mormon Apostle Bruce McKonkie, referred to the Catholic Church as the "whore of all the earth". As missionaries in Peru in the last 1970s, we trashed the Catholic Pope subtly and not so subtly in virtually every lesson we taught to non-Mormons, almost all of whom were Catholics.

And, I suspect that Dr. Wright wonders, as the old Mormon saying goes, why those who have left Mormonism can't "leave it alone". As I noted above, many who have been duped by Mormon leaders (well intentioned or otherwise – it does not matter) for decades will smart for the rest of our lives as result of what we have lost in that regard, and so are sounding an alarm. This is a kind of altruistic behaviour that has been extensively studied in human and other animal populations (See for example David Sloan Wilson, "Darwin's Cathedral").

Evolution seems to have bred into us a desire to warn our social group of danger, and we are often prepared to pay a cost that can only be justified by reference to the benefits that our warning is likely to confer on others. That is, we are prepared to suffer consequences that seem far greater than any benefit we might individually gain as result of issuing our warning. I was relieved when I found the academic studies that described this, because my penchant to "expose" Mormonism seemed extreme. Now that I understand where this comes from, it makes sense to me and I am prepared to go where it takes me. I am similar in this regard to the bird at the edge of the flock who happens to first spot the approaching, predatory hawk, and instinctively calls out a warning, and by so doing attracts the hawk's special attention. Studies within human populations as to how cheaters are punished also show this pattern. That is, the punishment meted out to a cheater will often cost the person who delivers it much more than he can expect to gain, but also warns others of the presence of a cheater which tends to make future cheating less likely and so provides benefits to the group as a whole.

“Mormon belief and practice creates honest, good, happy people. Why should Mormons change what makes them honest, good and happy?”

This question is a prominent subtext to Dr. Wrights’ article, and since I am regularly asked this in various forms, I will deal with it here.

Context creates meaning. This is the case in art, music, math and most other aspects of human experience. See Douglas Hofstadter's Pulitzer Prize winning “Godel, Esher, Bach” for a wonderful, but very long, treatment of this topic. For a much shorter less erudite treatment of the same idea related to the creation of Mormon testimonies, see the essay titled “Perspective and Mormon Testimony” on my website.

Let me provide a few examples of how context and meaning are connected. Some time ago I read James Watson's "DNA: The Secret of Life". It is a fascinating and easily understandable book written for a lay audience. In describing the origins of genetic science, Watson tells the story of Gregor Mendel, a Catholic priest living in the mid-1800s. Mendel was trained as a physicist, and began dabbling in biology. He noticed that peas had different characteristics in terms of the color of their flowers (green or white) and the nature of the skin surface (wrinkled or smooth) and wondered why.

Watson says that biological research up to that point was mostly limited to observation and description. Mendel, with his physicist's quantitative orientation, was inclined to try to measure what he saw and look for causal relationships. So he began planting peas, and keeping track of which seeds produced which peas, and after a number of growing seasons the data he collected showed clear patterns that led him to infer the cause and effect relationship between parental traits and inherited characteristics that eventually gave birth to the modern science of genetics. Ironically, he published a paper that clearly outlined these important insights, and the scientific community ignored him for over thirty years. He is a posthumous hero who lived in obscurity because his use of quantitative research methods in a setting that was traditionally non-quantitative put him so far ahead of his scientific colleagues that he was speaking a foreign language as far as they were concerned.

The important point for me is that prior to Mendel, generations of the world's best biologists had been blind to the patterns he identified because they had not collected sufficient data, and so their perspective was cripplingly limited as far as understanding pea genetics was concerned. That is, the data that is apparent to us as we look at a field of peas, or eat peas, or even remember all of the peas and pea fields we have ever seen, is inadequate to disclose these patterns to us. Similarly, when we look at the night sky, we are incapable of seeing the patterns the Hubble telescope will disclose. It is no more than a data collection device.

As I read about sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, I see the same process at work. Much of Bourdieu's research attempts to explain what he calls the

"misrecognition" of culture. He says that culture dictates much of what we do, think and are, while the reality of its effects upon us are as undetected by those who are subject to it as were Mendel's patterns of pea genealogy. For example, in one of Bourdieu's his studies he collected data respecting the exchange of gifts over periods of time in a culture that did not have a market exchange mechanism, and was able to show that the distribution of goods and services that in most cultures is performed by a barter or some other market function were in this society performed by "free will" gifts. The members of the society assured him that they had no obligation to give anyone anything. However, over time the "statistical regularity" of the gifting behaviour illustrated that something more than free will motivated their behaviour, and that whatever this was, it was shielded from their individual and collective view.

The statistical regularity noted by Bourdieu is nothing more than the kind of pattern in data that enlightened Mendel. And as is so often the case, the key to seeing these patterns was the collection of large volumes of data over a long period of time. Casual human observation cannot perform this task. Hence, the patterns are not noticed until pointed out. Then, they are often easy to verify, and seem "sensible" to most objective observers.

Bourdieu says that unconsciously, for the most part, we participate in an elaborate series of games that have objectives that we are psychologically disinclined to accept. He believes that the only way to get past our continual "misrecognition" of what goes on around us is to review vast amounts of data derived from our experience and look for the explanatory patterns noted above. When I recently read about Mendel and his research, I was reminded of this statement by Bourdieu. It seems clear that Bourdieu is simply applying the same techniques that yielded such fine results to Mendel in an attempt to understand yet another aspect of life. Such is the nature and intent of science. The approach it teaches does not necessarily yield truth, particularly in the social sciences where cause and effect relationships are much more complex and hence hard to understand than they are in the "hard" sciences. But, science can still often help us to see more of the reality of what we do and why we do it than is ordinarily apparent from our limited vantage point buried deep in the forest with our noses pressed against the trees, as we tend to live our lives.

As noted above, I recognize that the scientific point of view is limited, and in particular that we should be careful of the dangers of becoming certain that we "know" the mostly unknowable. Most scientists are acutely aware of this limitation. Many non-scientists, however, who attempt to use science to support their positions respecting things like religion and social policy seem certain of the immutability of scientific "knowledge" on which their arguments rest. Many participants in arguments pro and con Mormonism's positive and harmful attributes and other religious issues suffer from this failing.

Just as context is critical to understanding the things Mendel and Bourdieu study, they are essential to an understanding of the concepts of "honest", "good" and "happy" as used by Mormons to describe themselves.

For example, in the absence of information about Joseph Smith's life of the type that the professional historian community produces, I was being honest when I told my non-Mormon friends what a great, inspired-by-God man Smith was. With more information – more context – I do not believe I would be honest if I said the same things. In a variety of important ways, Mormon honesty in the absence of information leads to the dissemination of misleading information and the inculcation of counterproductive social traits, as I will demonstrate below.

Mormons are pleasant people who generally try to be kind to others, good neighbours, etc. Their actions, however, are highly conditional in many cases. Mormons are instructed to perform service in their communities, have "non-member" friends over for dinner once a month, etc. for the purpose of doing missionary work. The idea is that if the "world" could only get to know a few good Mormons, many people would seek Mormon baptism. I experienced a radical change in my attitudes towards people in general as I left Mormonism. I had unconsciously perceived myself as being on a pedestal above my non-Mormon friends and neighbours. I had all truth (or at least was on the road to all truth), while they had at most partial truth. Hence, their experience was not as relevant to me as the experience of those who were on the same road I was – other Mormons. This, and the highly programmed schedule faithful Mormons lead, is what create the well-known Mormon tendency toward isolationism. Hence discarding Mormon belief left me suddenly much more interested in the experience of all those around me than I had ever been. I was their equal. I was not above them. Hence, their experience was highly relevant to me. So, I began to ask questions, observe more closely, and to become something I had never been – a member of the community in which I lived instead of a Mormon who was "in" but not "of" that community.

As I gathered information about the many, varied people by whom I had always been surrounded, I saw them with new eyes. I became more tolerant of all kinds of behaviours that I had been prevented from understanding by my Mormon beliefs. I felt more love for my fellow man. I engaged in new kinds of service as more time became mine to use as I saw fit.

And the broader my perspective became, the larger the community to which I perceived myself to belong. As Paul Ehrlich points out in his wonderful book "Human Natures" (see the last chapter), arguably the most important human task during the coming decades will be to help as many people as possible to overcome the manner in which evolution has conditioned us to think. In evolutionary terms, we are "small group" animals who naturally form small tribes and think in short time frames. For human life to be indefinitely sustained on this planet, many people need to perceive themselves as part of a global tribe and think in terms of many thousands of years.

I experienced all of this as a wonderful change.

Mormons seem happy. But then, they are told that if they are not happy, something is wrong with them because they have all the truth, and hence are

supposed to be the happiest people on Earth. In my view, this produces an environment in which one's "real" feelings are suppressed. The psychologists tell us is an unhealthy state. And, surprise surprise, Utah (which is 70% Mormon) leads the US in anti-depressant consumption. It also leads or almost leads the US in personal bankruptcies, commercial fraud and multi-level marketing (Amway et al) participation. These statistics suggest a gullible population that makes decisions based on emotion instead of critical analysis, which not coincidentally is how Mormons are taught to discern "truth" in the religious context. Mormons are trained by Mormonism to be gullible. And, Utah leads or almost leads the US in spousal abuse, spousal murder and rape. All in all, the picture of the Mormon community that comes into focus when objective evidence is gathered is that of a group of people under a great deal of stress that is not functioning well. So, why do Mormons think that they are happy?

Once again, context creates meaning, and in this case as well as many other cases, ignorance is bliss. Many of the happiest people on Earth, according to the last studies on this topic I read, live in very poor countries where life expectancy is low due to malnutrition and disease (See <http://wvs.isr.umich.edu/fig.shtml>). But, due to their ignorance of conditions elsewhere and a variety of cultural factors, they are relatively satisfied with life. In other countries that are objectively much better off but where people have access to more information (more context), the people are less happy. Since Mormon culture insulates Mormons from information about how others perceive and relate to life while telling Mormons that they are the happiest people on Earth, they resemble the good people of Nigeria in many ways in terms of the stress they suffer while telling the world how happy they are.

There are a few other aspects of my experience as I left Mormonism that are relevant to this discussion. These are subjective observations on my part, and so potentially suffer from the "context" problem just described. But since these experiences are part of my context expansion experience as I left Mormonism, I think they are worth sharing.

When I declared a change in my religious beliefs, my wife Juli was counselled to leave me by some of her Mormon friends and relatives (including at least one in my immediate family). Our bishop, I should add, was not to my knowledge in this group. This greatly upset her. A master's degree study in anthropology at a Canadian university found an 80% divorce rate in the 70s and 80s for couples who went through what we did (both faithful, then one leaves and the other stays). My guess is that there were other factors in many of those cases, and that as time passes and more information is in circulation, and more leave, that this percentage will come down.

Juli was counselled to leave me by some of her Mormon friends and relatives (including at least one in my immediate family). Our bishop, I should add, was not to my knowledge in this group. This greatly upset her.

Juli and I struggled, and were close to divorce at different times during the first 18 months of my exodus. The essay on my website titled "Cognitive Dissonance and

Fear - A Case Study in Marital Miscommunication” sets out some of the dynamics of this situation, as does “The Parable of the Boy, The Dog and The Bear”.

Juli and I are a classic yin yang combination - opposites in many ways. I found Joseph Campbell's summary of the Eastern idea that the goal of marriage is the reunification of the primordial whole - the reunification and rebalancing of opposite elements - to be quite helpful. I am very open to new experience. Juli is less so. I am aggressive and outspoken while she is quiet and naturally harmonic. She has a higher IQ than I do, but is not interested in exploring a wide terrain. Etc.

I am now rambling but think I may feel the Muses starting to whisper, and so will keep going.

It is my view that the Eastern view of marriage I just articulated comes out of the wider Eastern attitude toward the primacy of harmony, and in a culture of arranged marriages one would have to work harder to overcome individual traits than would otherwise be the case. For a wonderful example of the traditional Eastern orientation toward the sacrifice of individuality for the greater good see the movie "Hero". This tradition has recently come under pressure in the East and hence perhaps the compelling and nostalgic for easterners recreation of an old myth is timely. This would be the equivalent of The Matrix for us Westerners. Our bedrock values of the primacy of choice and individuality are fully displayed there.

Hero is a wonderful flick on many levels. It is epic, aesthetic, tragic. It explores issues in communication, levels of meaning, the relationship of peace to power, etc. I don't think it shows a good model for modern Western relationships (personal or societal), but it is a great, thought provoking movie. An essay on my website titled “The Mormon Conception of Freedom” explores the Western origins of the idea that power is self-justifying and essential to restrain chaos. The Eastern tradition is as old, and much stronger in recent centuries on this point.

It is my view that a healthier overall view for Western marriage than the primordial whole is the partnership of equals where both are different (and hence the eastern ideas are still useful) but the partner is chosen on the basis of shared ideals and complementary values, talents, hopes etc. That is, not opposites in some absolute sense, but complementary in light of a chosen purpose. Juli and I thought we did that. However, during a long life together as Mormons we did little together as I struggled to make a living for our one income, large family and we both gave heavy service to “the Kingdom”. Our lives hardly overlapped. We shared little more than a bed, our children, and our Mormon faith in a better life after death if we “endured to the end”.

As I left the Mormon Church, how little we shared became a stark and painful realization. We committed to spend at least two years trying to make things work. At some point at about the one year mark, I decided that I did not want to proceed through life with the kind of relatively empty relationship we had, and some painful discussions ensued about the kinds of changes we both would need to make. I encouraged (and have for along time encouraged) that we do more together; find

hobbies we can share, etc. Our discussions in this regard produced enough pain in Juli that she overcame her fear of considering new and frightening things, and she began for the first time to read the "reality" of Mormonism. I was well over a year into my growth process at that point. She later admitted that it took a greater fear (of losing our relationship) to overcome the lesser fear (of what she would find when she read the Mormon history etc. that she had been conditioned to fear reading). See "The Parable of the Boy, the Dog and the Bear" on that point.

Juli still attends the Mormon Church on occasion, but intellectually and behaviourally we are at least in the same ballpark regarding most of the important issues. For her, the social group is of greater importance than it is to me. This is, generally speaking, a basic male - female difference. And since she does not have an alternative social group, makes friends slowly and has no desire for a new set of friends, this issue will keep her closer to Mormonism than I am comfortable being. Mormonism is like blackberries. It is not in my view a good idea to plant them in your backyard because the nature of the beast is to take the whole place over. But this is the kind of compromise I am prepared to make to enable our marriage to continue.

Juli is compromising in many ways too. We are now close enough to each other for our marriage to work. Had she continued to refuse to even consider what has become my new worldview, we would almost certainly have divorced. There would not have been enough common ground for our marriage to be worth saving, in my view.

I should also say that the couple of weeks following Juli's breakthrough were among the most exciting of my life. Her breakthrough was sudden, and followed immediately her reading of Grant Palmer's book "An Insider's View of Mormon Origins". I publicly thank Grant for that. I do not agree with some of his most important conclusions about Mormonism, but the measure of truth he spoke was about all Juli could handle at that point in her journey. He was the teacher she could hear, and his message helped her to find the courage to make what was for her a dark, fearful, painful passage.

As for our kids, two are still "faithful". I am close to them, but deal continually with an elephant in the corner that prevents the kid of intimacy I have with other family members. This saddens me immeasurably.

Two are pretty much out of Mormonism. We are closer than ever. And three are young enough that they are a long way from making up their minds. They go to church with their Mom on occasion. They like doing things with me on Sundays, and are accepting of the ideas I share with them. If they end up being active Mormons, they are likely not to be of the ultra faithful variety because it is natural for them to question the authority of leaders of all kinds, with no special exception for Mormon leaders, and not simply assume that they must obey. They are already versed in the basics of Mormon history. I wrote an essay especially for them, and for the 14 year old in particular, that he is reading and we are discussing. It is on my website - "Mormon History in a Nutshell". The younger ones have heard the entire story as

well (parts of it a number of times), but are not yet interested in that kind of reading.

I am trying not to leave my children with a black and white picture. Good comes from bad and bad from good. I took the two younger boys to "Hero" recently, and we had a nice chat about the idea of the intermixture of good and bad on the way home. That is a regular theme in our house – the common, difficult and important nature of "the lesser evil" decisions we are regularly required by life to make. And anyone who tries to use black and white arguments on us (as Gordon Hinckley did during his April 2003 Priesthood Session address at General Conference) is likely trying to deceive us. And often not because he is consciously evil. Humans usually have what seem to them good motives. My guess is that Hinckley and other Mormon leaders are so convinced that the Church is the best thing for us that he feels some deception to protect us from the errors we would otherwise make is acceptable.

I particularly counsel my kids (and anyone else who asks) not to do what I am doing or believe what I believe, but to seek what I am seeking – to understand as much as is possible. As they do this, they will hear the voices I mention below and will cut their own path. I hope they find a path that works as well as possible for them. Nothing more, or less. And this process will be ongoing as their perspective expands, until they are no longer capable of change. At some point, we all pass the torch, and should become comfortable doing that, and accepting the continuing change in the lives of those we love. Their path is unlikely to be both like ours, and well suited to them and their changing circumstances. The permanence for which most people hope is in my view illusory, and productive of more ill than good; more sorrow than joy.

So, we are making out just fine on the whole. We have borne much pain as a family during the past couple of years, but having paid that price are now able to enjoy many things that are outside of the Mormon world.

What impresses our younger kids most of all is the changes they see in me. Our 10 year old counts time from "when Dad was mean". Kind of like the CE - BCE distinction. Not that I was cruel. I just wasn't as much fun as I am now. "Mean" is one of those relative, context-creates-meaning, expressions.

We had a lot of rules. We had to do all kinds of things, and Dad got unpleasant if people did not obey. We have far fewer rules now. There is much more scope for individuality.

And most importantly, I am more excited about each day as I face it, as well as the mid-term and long-term future, than I can ever remember being. All but the "faithful" in my family admit to feeling my enthusiasm, and that it is contagious. This force for the Mormons in our family seems frightening. For the other kids, it is enlivening. They want "some of that", and have been taught to recognize the emotional button pushing at Church that creates a weak counterfeit of the same wonderful, enlivening force I have come to know.

This energy springs from the process of birthing our own souls. As we immerse ourselves in the seeming chaos of human life, history, culture etc. certain voices speak to us in special ways. This is in part due to our genetics, and in part due to our acculturation. But the voices that connect deeply to us are unmistakable. They and we resonate to the same primal rhythms. And as our perspective broadens, we hear, see and feel more of these.

When we hear those voices they reveal us to ourselves; help us grind away the dross that blinds us; stimulate crucially important growth. It is as if we have found nutrients we always needed and never had. We can feel new life begin to pulse through us. This is an ongoing miracle for me.

I listened to an interview with the great physicist Freeman Dyson a short time ago. He was asked if he felt empty when he gave up his faith in God. And I presume as a result of other things he said that he had in mind the kind of personal god before whom I was raised to bow. He said he did not, but rather felt free. He said that as long as he believed in that kind of God, he regularly ran into mental barriers that impeded his progress. But he did not know that was happening.

I would add that in my case (as I assume was the case in his) there was a vague kind of uncomfortable feeling that can only be understood with the benefit of hindsight because until one has experienced something different, there is no context for understanding. Again, context creates understanding in this and so many other cases. I can't over emphasize the importance of expanding our context; our perspective.

So, when Dyson finally made the frightening leap and let go of that belief, he found himself in a wonderful new world where he no longer feared to ask questions. Reality would be what it was. It did not have to be what God or any of His self appointed agents said it was. And so he did not have to shy away from any question. As a result, he felt a wonderful sense of freedom.

My experience was the same, and I am trying to convey that excitement to my children and wife. I am only successful, of course, in small measure.

One the whole, I have no trouble indicating that respecting being "honest", "good" and "happy", most Mormons would benefit from the kind of perspective expanding exercise through which I have gone. That does not mean they will stop attending Mormon meetings, and they likely will still define themselves as Mormon in some way, as I still do. The essay on my website "Out of My Faith" is my attempt to articulate how I felt about that well over a year ago while I was still at my trailhead and trying to figure out where to go.

As I said above, I have never been more excited about each day as I awaken to it, or the future in general. I feel that my family is better off because of what I have done, and when I look out a number of generations, I feel even better about the

last difficult couple of years. All in all, the price I have paid, and caused others to pay, was well worth paying.

Debate?

If Dr. Wright holds his views respecting Joseph Smith's stature as strongly as it sounds like he does, perhaps he would like to debate me in public respecting them. For example, I would be pleased to participate in a public debate with Dr. Wright respecting the question - "Was Joseph Smith trustworthy?".