

# **A Glimpse into the Mormon Apologetic Mind**

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

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Nobody who has invested much time down a blind alley likes the messenger who shines a light at the brick wall up ahead. Fredrick Ross

## Abstract

Michel de Montaigne's role as a Catholic apologist in the 16th century Counter Reformation bears a striking resemblance to that now played by many Mormon apologists. The problem is the same: Certain traditional beliefs have been exposed as likely false as a result of new information of various types. And, the apologetic solution is similar: Allege that we cannot be sure of anything so we should stick with our traditions because they have always "worked" for our social group, and we should not change until God makes it clear that we should. Hence, according to both current Mormon apologia and the Counter Reformationists, the status quo should win by default.

## Introduction

I was listening to a Learning Company tape this morning – Arthur Williamson, "Apocalypse, Now!" – on the apocalyptic nature of western history from its beginning to present. I highly recommend it for a variety of reasons, and was surprised to find when I checked The Learning Company website (<http://www.teach12.com/teach12.asp>) that it is no longer for sale. I am listening to a friend's copy.

The apocalypse is, essentially, the end of the world as we know it, followed by Christ's triumphant return to earth for his millennial reign. Williamson's thesis is that the idea of the apocalypse was for a long time the key to effecting change in society. That is, the idea that change was an integral part of social life was not accepted until recently. In fact, through most of Western history the expectation was the opposite – that reality (including social reality) was based on eternal, unchanging principles and hence would not change. Big changes were, however, anticipated in connection with the apocalypse and the millennial era that would follow it. Hence, the expectation that the apocalypse and millennium were about to commence justified many kinds of change that would otherwise have been unthinkable.

For example, Newton's work was motivated and conceptually framed in large part by his apocalyptic belief, and was resisted by the scientific community on the basis (among other things) that his notion of gravity could only be described instead of explained by reference to a naturalistic cause. This lack of discernible cause supported Newton's position that an all powerful God held reality as we know it in his grasp – that is, God was the unseen, unknowable cause. Since this was Newton's foundation, all of empirical (that is "modern") science was built on an apocalyptic foundation. Many leading thinkers in Newton's day said that he was destroying science by combining it with "magic". Newton's response was to say that there were no final answers available to man (in this he agree with Voltaire) until the millennium at which time all would be made known by God (in this he did not agree with Voltaire).

When asked to explain how a great mind such as Newton's could be so rife with superstition, Voltaire said that Newton's silliness on this point proved him to be human – he had to be wrong about something.

Milton's push for free speech was as well motivated in part by apocalyptic expectations. Cromwell's England was deeply apocalyptic. Columbus' explorations, the American Revolution and many other significant historical events had apocalyptic roots. And, to approach the topic of this essay, the Protestant Reformation was motivated by an apocalyptic vision of the world, with the Pope and Catholicism playing the role of the Anti-Christ and the Whore of all the Earth from the Book of Revelations. This position was based on an increasingly common understanding of what the Bible said, and the perception that the Catholic Church had long since stopped following Biblical principles and had badly abused its authority.

While listening to a Williamson lecture this morning I ran across an interesting tidbit related to the Reformation and the Catholic Church's response (called the "Counter Reformation") that helped me toward understanding something that has long both puzzled and irritated me about Mormon apologists. That is, their use of radical scepticism to justify the rejection of compelling evidence whenever – and only whenever – it contradicts their beliefs. I will describe more of what I mean below, as well as recite the history lesson I received this morning in general terms and then comment with regard to what this means in the context of current LDS apologetics. Those who know me will understand that for me, the journey through an idea is most of what makes it worthwhile, and so I can be counted on to wander a little as I make my way toward the point I want to make.

## **The Comfort of History**

Before getting into the meat of what motivates me to write this morning, let me note that there is something comforting – very comforting – about history. Although my father is an historian and so I had both intellectual and academic influences around me as I grew up, for some reason until I left Mormonism I did not have an inclination to understand history other than the history of Mormonism and world (even cosmic) history as faithful Mormons explained it. I did not take a single history course while in university, for example. Now, history is one of several intellectual genres that I cannot read enough. And as I just noted, I find it immensely satisfying to see how many of the individual and group behavioural patterns that baffled me are simply the current iteration of a dance that has been going on more or less since people began to keep records. What I learned this morning is another of the countless lessons of this kind that have impressed themselves upon me during the past couple of years.

I accept the advice that we must be careful of reading too much into the lessons the past may seem to teach. George Bernard Shaw went so far as to say that, "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history", while Kurt Vonnegut was a little more circumspect. He said, "History is merely a list of surprises. It can only prepare us to be surprised yet again." On a more serious note, I think the noted historian Gerda Lerner is close to the mark when she says,

"We can learn from history how past generations thought and acted, how they responded to the demands of their time and how they solved their problems. We can learn by analogy, not by example, for our circumstances will always be different than theirs were. The main thing history can teach us is that human actions have consequences and that certain choices, once made, cannot be undone. They foreclose the possibility of making other choices and thus they determine future events."

I believe that to be a reasonable statement. I am creating my future, and the future of others, as I make choices. Hence, my choices are important. And, I can learn things that have some predictive value by paying close attention to what others have done in the past and what seems to have resulted from their actions. In this humble and attentive spirit, I consider the past and how it may help me to understand an aspect of LDS apologist behaviour.

## **The Bifurcated Mormon Apologetic Mind**

I have noted elsewhere the odd combination within Mormonism of post modern relativism and dogmatic certainty (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf> starting at page 15). That is, intellectual Mormons seem comfortable with the idea that they can rely upon the history of Mormonism and some quasi-science related to it to conclude with certainty that they belong to God's one and only true church and are justified in attempting to persuade all mankind to change its beliefs to conform to Mormon dogma. The same people, at the same time, argue that science, history and human knowledge in general are so uncertain that they cannot be trusted with regard to anything that questions Mormon dogma. That is, the only thing that is certain in life is Mormon dogma. To maintain this position, they are required to engage in an extreme form of what some psychologists call "compartmentalization", which means that they use radically different mental processes to deal with matters relating to their religious faith than they do most other matters, and is often attributed at least in part of something called "cognitive dissonance".

The cognitive dissonance thought pattern has been studied in many contexts. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf> starting at page 36 for a summary of how it works. This way of thinking requires that the apologist ignore the rules of evidence and probabilities that he uses in virtually all other aspects of life. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.dna%20controversy1004917.pdf> for an example of how this has worked relative to the Book of Mormon and DNA.

## **The Catholic "Counter Reformation"**

Current LDS apologetic behaviour has many ancestors whom I am just getting to know. I only have time this morning to lay out one chapter in that regard. It relates to the manner in which Catholicism responded to the Luther, Calvin and the other Protestant Reformers by way of the Counter Reformation (see <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv4-33> for an overview).

In the early 1500s Luther and others claimed that the Catholic Church had drifted so far from the teachings of the Bible and had become so corrupt that it required reform. The Reformers rejected the authority of the Catholic Church and advocated in various ways a personal path to salvation. The approach the Reformers took as they attempted to justify their position in this regard highlights something that continues to be at the root of debate

with regard to what we can know (see Peter Godfrey Smith, "Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science" for an up-to-date summary in this regard). That is, people who are certain about things can almost always be shown to rely upon an unquestionable but dubious authority of some kind (such as the Catholic Church) so that they don't have to continue to question.

"Is the Earth at the center of the cosmos?" one might ask. The answer for a long time was, "Yes, because the Bible, as interpreted by the Pope, says it is." Full stop. If we asked, "What is God like and how does He want us to worship Him?" the answer would have been, "Again, just read the Bible and if uncertainty persists, ask the Church."

Without justification based on accepted authority to stop questioning, particularly as contradictory evidence begins to show up, we would continue to question *ad infinitum* and we would find that we know nothing with certainty. This might drive us mad, create chaos within society etc., and so an unquestioning appeal to questionable authority was commonly used to order society and so is often found at the foundation of what passes for "knowledge".

As just noted, the Catholic way to knowledge was to have faith that the Church was correct in all that it taught, and so in cases where manmade knowledge (remember Galileo) conflicted with that of the Church, the Church was to be trusted. Luther and other reformers proposed an alternative way of knowing the truth – that one should read the Bible and trust the impressions God put into one's heart in that regard. If those feelings said that the Catholic Church was not of God, then it was not. Unsurprisingly (except perhaps to Luther, Calvin et al), this method of knowing was soon applied to Lutheranism, Calvinism etc. and led to the establishment of countless Protestant churches.

It was also soon pointed out that the Protestant epistemology (or "way of knowing") did not differ much from the Catholic because it simply replaced the questionable authority of the Church with the questionable authority of what one thought God had told him. It was also noted that this had a significant disadvantage in that it led to a great deal of confusion because people had, predictably, a wide range of strongly held opinions and feelings about things such as religious belief. To many it seemed like the Protestant Reformation had unleashed forces that would destroy society by tearing down what had been a single standard of "truth" that was one of a few things (like the authority of the King) that restrained chaos. In fact, societal fears related to fundamental changes in religious belief closely parallel those that still have to be dealt with during mankind's continuing transition away from autocratic control and toward democracy.

Richard Popkin described the "how do we know" issue relative to Protestantism in his groundbreaking book "The History of Skepticism" as follows:

"The fundamental evidence for the original Calvinists of the truth of their views was inner persuasion. But how can one tell if this inner persuasion is authentic, not just a subjective certainty that might be illusory? The importance of being right is so great that, as Theodore Beza, Calvin's aide-de-camp insisted, we need a sure and infallible sign. This sign is 'ful perswasion, [which] doth separate the chosen children of God from the castaways, and is the proper riches of the Saintes.' But the consequence is a circle: the criterion of inner knowledge is inner persuasion, the guarantee of the authenticity of inner persuasion is that it is caused by God, and this we are assured of by our own inner persuasion." (p. 10)

Enter the Catholic apologists, among whom was the great French skeptical philosopher and inventor of the "essay" form of writing, Michel de Montaigne. He wrote influential essays (see for example <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=3600>) on many topics. In some, he used the then recent discovery of the Americas and a variety of other things to call into the question the foundations of western knowledge and the arrogance that in his view unjustifiably went with it. His motto was "What do I know?" and answer to it "Nothing".

For example, in "On Cannibals" (see <http://www.boisestate.edu/courses/hy309/docs/montaigne/montaigne.04.html>), one of his essays that more severely and innovatively challenged the Western social order, he made the following points:

- None of Europe's greatest thinkers (focussing particularly on Plato and Aristotle) had even considered the possibility that America might exist;
- recently discovered tribes in Brazil were in many ways more culturally sophisticated and civilized than were Europeans;
- the Brazilian mode of life from which Europe had so much to learn had not even been conceived of by the best of the European imaginations;
- these highly civilized Brazilians were also cannibals, the high water mark of barbarism as far as the Europeans were concerns;
- when Brazilian cannibalism was carefully considered it was found to pertain to war and to result in relatively humane, painless death for enemies coupled with the ritual eating of their flesh;

- when this form of the treatment of one's enemies is rationally compared to what Europeans do to their enemies in terms of torture, rape etc. Europe looks uncivilized; and
- Europe looks even worse when the torture and abuse they inflict upon each other within the same village or even family for religious reasons is considered.

Montaigne's point was that Europeans were not justified in thinking that they had a monopoly on wisdom, virtue or anything else in light of how much had recently been discovered that had not previously been known.

One would think that Montaigne's extreme form of scepticism would lead in the direction others like Voltaire had taken it – toward a rejection of traditional values. However, Montaigne and many other Catholic apologists used scepticism for the opposite purpose. They argued that there was so much uncertainty as to what could be known that the safest and hence best route to take was to trust in tradition. Montaigne's reasoning in this regard is laid out in his "Apology for Raimond Sebond" (see <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/distance/montaigne/back1.html>).

There, he said in effect:

- Human reason is a demonstrably unreliable means of finding the truth about reality.
- Our judgments are influenced by psychological and cultural factors, and every attempt to know reality turns out to be like trying to "clutch water".
- Our uncertainty is so acute that we are best advised to suspend judgment and live according to nature and custom, and receive and accept whatever it pleases God to reveal to us.
- So, we should not become Protestants, but rather leave our minds free of uncertain beliefs (other than those of our tradition) until God reveals true religious principles to us. Prior to that moment, custom should be followed, including the custom of our traditional religious beliefs.

It should be noted that Montaigne was not making this up. Rather, he was adopting the view of the Greek philosopher Phyrro of Elis (see <http://www.archaeonia.com/philosophy/skepticism/main.htm>) who lived several centuries BCE. Both Phyrro and Montagne were, quite simply, conservatives. It is nearly that simple.

There is delicious irony in Montaigne's approach. He shows, once again, that extreme scepticism is a conservative force. Moderate scepticism that says, "I doubt what you say is true, can prove that it has a high probability of not being true and can put forward evidence that strongly suggests a more probable alternative belief" is a powerfully destabilizing within society. So, just as the martial arts master turns an attacker's force against him by amplifying it and so throwing the attacker off-balance, Montaigne says in effect to the dominant skeptical current of his day,

"I agree with you, so much so that I will show that you cannot determine that anything is true, and so where does that leave us, my friend? On what basis do you justify abandoning Catholicism for Protestantism?"

This was arguably Catholicism's most effective defence against the Reformers. And, as is the case with many apologies of its type, its function was to provide a plausible excuse for those who did not want to change their belief in spite of damning evidence as to the Papacy's corruption, deception and deviance from the Biblical standard. And, the fact that Montaigne was one of the most brilliant thinkers of the day did not hurt.

Anyone passingly familiar with the methods of LDS apologists will not need me to connect the dots between what I have just written about Montaigne's role in the Counter Reformation and Mormon apologia. The problem is the same (traditional belief has been exposed as likely false by new information) and the solution similar (allege that we cannot be sure of anything, so we should stick with our traditions because they have always "worked" for our social group; and we should not change until God makes it clear that we should). Hence, in both current Mormon apologia and the Counter Reformation, the status quo wins by default.

### **The Relationship Between Dogma and Skepticism**

One of the interesting relationships that the Counter Reformation example above illustrates is that between dogma and skepticism. "Dogma", as I understand it, is belief that is unrelated to, or impervious to, or highly resistant to, evidence and/or reason. It is better to think of dogma as a matter of degree instead of something defined by a bright line.

Most apologists since the Enlightenment, and hence most Mormon apologists and many well-educated Mormons, are uncomfortable with dogma. For these people, dogma tends to be associated with people like those who forced Galileo to say (with his fingers crossed) that the Earth was at the center of the Universe. It is interesting to think about how these people express their beliefs, and to watch dogma sneak in the back door.

It may help to bring this point into focus to consider three examples of belief statements that are related to dogma, and to then examine the role skepticism plays in each.

- Belief statement #1: I have certain knowledge, through my faith and powerful feelings of confirmation God has sent to me, that Joseph Smith was God's prophet and that he receive God's exclusive authority to restore His church to the Earth. I will continue to believe that regardless of what academics or others say that Joseph did or did not do because I have experienced manifestations of the spirit that make me certain of my conclusions and trust that God will in His due time answer those who are critical of Joseph Smith, God's prophet. Reason has nothing to do with my knowledge of these things. My knowledge regarding God, Joseph Smith and other like matters is a gift from God granted to as the result of His grace and my exercise of faith.
- Belief statement #2: I believe that that Joseph Smith was God's prophet; that he receive God's exclusive authority to restore His church to the Earth; and I will continue to believe that until I see evidence and reasoning that I regard as sufficient to cause me to change my belief. I am aware of most if not all of the things Joseph Smith's critics say about him, and am skeptical about most of that. It is very hard to know what happened in the past, and there would need to be much more definitive evidence than what I have seen to persuade me to change my religious beliefs. I also note that the very foundations of science and history are questionable, and I do not think that the best of the information they produce is sufficient to overcome the knowledge that I have of Mormonism's goodness, gained by living it for many years. I have some questions and concerns about Mormon history, but trust that God will in His own time and way answer those for me. And I finally note that I am aware that I am more skeptical of things that question my religious beliefs than I am of most if not all other things, and I justify that on the basis that my religious beliefs are so important that I think I should only be prepared to seriously question them on the basis of evidence that makes them almost certain to be wrong.
- Belief statement #3: I used to believe that Joseph Smith was God's prophet and that he receive God's exclusive authority to restore His church to the Earth and lived life as a faithful Mormon for many adult years. Upon reviewing new evidence and reasoning with regard to Joseph Smith's life and the movement he founded, I have painfully come to believe that it is highly improbable that he was God's prophet and or authorized by God in any special way. I have also come to

believe that the submissive-to-authority lifestyle advocated by Mormon leaders does more harm than good on balance for most of those who adopt it. I base my conclusions regarding Joseph Smith on (among other things) evidence that shows that Joseph deceived many people on many occasions, often in God's name, and that he was particularly prone to do this when he was trying to get people to obey him. I am not sure that he was consciously deceptive, although in some cases it seems highly probable that he was. The important point is that his advice was inaccurate regarding important issues, and this advice caused people to change the course of their lives in important ways under false pretences. Many people lost their lives or sacrificed other things of great importance under Joseph Smith's influence and what now appear highly probable to have been false pretences. So, while I no longer believe that Joseph Smith was God's prophet or had His authority, I remain open the possibility that I am wrong and am prepared to consider whatever evidence may come forward in that regard. I recognize how emotionally charged issues related to religion are and how emotion interferes with reason. I am doing my best to use third parties who are as objective as possible to help me filter the emotion out of my reasoning, and so to use the same standards of evidence, reasoning and probability to guide me in with regard to religious matters as I do with regard to the other aspects of my life that I consider to be important.

It seems to me that Belief statement #1 is almost purely dogmatic and is characteristic of those Mormons (and by analogy, other kinds of believers) who do not feel the need to appear rational.

Belief statement #2 is not as dogmatic as #1 and in fact is expressly stated to be subject to evidence and reason. However, the skeptical stance taken in #2 renders reason and evidence largely irrelevant as a result of how high the standard of proof has been set. This is similar to the stance taken by both Catholic and Mormon apologists, as well as many well-educated believers of all types. I believe this position is a reflection of the fact that the many believers live in corners of society where reason and evidence are dominant and dogma is largely considered a relic of the Dark Ages. So, they need to at least dress their dogma up in rational language, and in many cases become highly defensive at the suggestion that they are "dogmatic".

Belief statement #3 is my position. It attempts to be undogmatic and recognizes the difficulty of doing so. It is skeptical while recognizing that like most things, if skepticism is taken to something near its logical extreme it will become quite different than (or even the antithesis of) its moderate form.

I think it wise to recognize that we all have blind spots. If we wish to maximize the probability of avoiding them, we should recognize our fallibility in general and ask others to help us identify our flaws and then correct them. That is one of the reasons for which I make many of my views a matter of public record – it tends to bring those critical of my views out of the woodwork and give me the benefit of their perspectives.

I have learned much from those who disagree with me, sometimes in ways that would surprise them and often in ways that surprise me. I expect that to continue to be the case.

### **Mormon Apologetics and Defensive Strategies**

Mormon apologists have many cards up their sleeves in addition to extreme skepticism. Not surprising, Mormon apologists have learned much (whether they know it or not) from their Christian counterparts. See <http://www.faithmaps.org/apologeticssynthesis.htm> or [http://www.oakhill.ac.uk/resources/lectures/weston\\_apologetics.html](http://www.oakhill.ac.uk/resources/lectures/weston_apologetics.html) for information related to Christian apologetics.

A more waggish friend recently summarized Mormon apologetic strategies for me as follows:

- Deny - until the facts overwhelm.
- Attack - the sources, the critic, anything to change the subject of discussion.
- Use the "Personal Defence" – A clever variation on "Attack" which shifts the focus to the hard-done-by apologist and away from the substance of the debate. The apologist might all but make up an attack against himself, for example, and use attack language toward himself, as if the critic had said it, and then shift into a Personal Defence.
- Accept and Reject - essentially the "so what" defence, regardless of the merit of the evidence rejected.
- Assert Victory - this includes "victory" over the factual information that was never reasonably refuted.
- Refuse Re-engagement - once victory is declared, continued debate can be declared irrelevant.
- Emphasize Feelings – bear testimony based on feelings. This shifts the argument out of the objective into the subjective. Facts become

relative to perspective. There can be no rational argument on this basis.

I think that it is interesting to consider the role of extreme skepticism in each of these strategies.

The same friend noted that while apologists may be impossible to convince of their error, they serve an important function relative to their opponents. The more outlandish their defences of the indefensible, the easier it is for those outside the argument to recognize the cognitive dissonance, and potentially see it within themselves. It was, for example, my reading of things like the debate between Michael Quinn and Boyd Packer following Packer's infamous "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect" and the exchange of views between various FARMS writers and Todd Compton following the publication of Compton's book "In Sacred Loneliness" that brought my own cognitive dissonance into view.

I note, however, that some relatively prominent apologists have come over to the "dark side" as well as many unknown lights (darks?) such as me. For example, I got to know Chris Tolworthy through the Mormon apologetic website WhyProphets.com (see <http://www.whyprophets.com/>) that he created. This occurred while I was in my short, intense questioning mode. He and I thought our way out of Mormonism at about the same time, and while helping each other to a degree. WhyProphets is now run some of Chris' former colleagues.

In any event, a few things are different between Montaigne's day and ours that are relevant to understanding what the Counter Reformation example above has to say about current LDS apologetics. First, there is a much greater acceptance within the Mormon community than there was in 16th century Europe of the value of rational thought in general. We have accepted, for the most part, the idea that nothing is certain and that we are best advised to make our decisions based on the most reliable evidence and understanding of cause and effect relationships that we can gather, based on the probabilities these help us to determine. Compartmentalized thinking of the type noted above is used to maintain beliefs that are not currently justifiable on the basis of the usual rules of evidence and probabilities. This will keep faith intact for the majority of the people who have been effectively conditioned, but will not work for nearly as many as was the case in the 1500s.

Second, and most importantly, there is much more access to information now than then, and new information is being produced at a more rapid rate than ever. Consider what has happened during the past few years regarding DNA research, for example, as it concerns Mormonism. The current

information environment makes the apologists' job exponentially more difficult, and will cause LDS and other formerly isolated cultures to mutate more rapidly than ever as they attempt to retain their grip on each new generation of members who are ingesting loads of information that may not affect their well-conditioned parents but will deeply affect them.

I expect that cultures like Mormonism to respond to the imperative just noted with strategies like the following:

- Young people should spend time exclusively within their own group so that they can be more effectively indoctrinated and conditioned. This will involve attendance at more and/or more professionally run, meetings and events (like "Especially for Youth") where they can "feel the spirit" or as a sceptic might suggest, have their emotional buttons pushed and be conditioned.
- Young people will spend more time learning the distinctive history of their people, and being taught to behave in ways that make them a socially distinct group. A General Authority once told me that that was what the Word of Wisdom was all about. It has nothing necessarily to do with health. It is a social marker. See Pascal Boyer, "Religion Explained" for a review of how social markers help to define and hold together groups of people.
- Young people will be rewarded in various ways for engaging in socially distinguishing behaviour (distinctive dress; distinctive eating or drinking habits; distinctive leisure activities; etc.) and for avoiding things that could challenge their beliefs, such as the Internet and certain other communications tools and forms of entertainment.
- The faithful will be taught to think in metaphoric instead of literal terms. I was recently advised of a Stake Conference in which the members were told that when praying about the Book of Mormon, they should not ask whether its facts and details were literally true, but rather whether the message it teaches about Christ is true. I heard of another Stake Conference at which Joseph Smith's polyandry was discussed, and the members were told that this was Joseph's Abrahamic test – that he went to the beds of the many women who offered themselves sexually to him with the same kind of heavy heart that Abraham mythically bore as he carried Isaac to a presumed sacrifice. That is, Mormon leaders are beginning to assume that the members will know of the troubling aspects of Mormon history, and are beginning to create a narrative that will explain troubling facts in a way that the members may be prepared to accept. I expect to see and hear more of this kind of thing.

However, there are only so many fingers to plug holes in a rapidly expanding dyke that restrains an even more rapidly rising information tide. Thus, for the next while, despite the efforts of apologists, cultural change within Mormonism will occur more rapidly than ever. This will particularly be visible between generations as a result of the way in which children seem designed to reappraise their environment in fundamental ways. In reaction to this, a gradually shrinking percentage of the Mormon population will become ultra-"faithful". They will become the equivalent of the Ultra Orthodox Jews, or Taliban, and will be subject to all of the dangers each of those groups carry with them.

I also note an interesting pattern regarding the Catholic, Protestant and Mormon ways of "knowing". In Montaigne's day, as noted above, Catholic knowledge was based on an appeal to the authority of tradition and the Pope while Protestants relied upon their perception of what the spirit of God communicated to them. Modern Mormons use an odd blend of these two means of coming to "know".

Mormons believe in personal revelation – that God will reveal His will to them through the kind of impressions that Luther described. In fact, Joseph Smith received a revelation similar to that of which Luther spoke and created yet another religion as a result. However, part of Smith's revelation from God was that he (Smith) was God's only authorized representative and that the church he established was hence God's only true church. This created a source of authority similar to that of old Catholicism, and a tension to what the Catholics of Galileo's day experienced between the wisdom of man and God. To the extent that a Mormon prophet has said something, Mormons are very reluctant to admit that he might have been wrong, even though Smith indicated that he was human and made many mistakes.

So, Mormons now struggle as they attempt to defend the Book of Mormon, or other "scripture" Smith claimed to have "translated" from ancient records. Mormons are not free to follow their reason in this regard. The oracle has spoken and their faith, and hence family relationships, friendships and way of life, depends in large measure on his being right. This is why a group of late arriving Protestants ironically resemble Catholics. As the evidence against their position piles up, they continue to use Montaigne's moves to try to slip free, or at least buy a little more time.

From the Mormon point of view, the only message God sends to mankind is that Mormonism is true. When one prays, fasts etc. and receives this message, it is because she has received it from God. When any other message is received (Mormonism is not true; Catholicism is true; no religion is true but all have some good and bad elements etc.) this is the result of something like: sin on the part of the person who received the erroneous

(from a Mormon point of view) message; inadequate faith; not enough effort spent trying to hear God's voice; God providing a test of faith; the deceptive power of Satan; etc.

As an aside, I note similarities between Montaigne and Hugh Nibley. Montaigne was severely critical of European society. In "On Cannibals" he was particularly brutal in that regard, and challenged a number of fundamentally important European ideals. In those days, people were burned at the stake for much less than he wrote. And what did the Pope have to say to Montaigne after "On Cannibals" was published? Something like, "You should write more books about religion". "What an odd response", I thought when I read that. At that point I had not figured out Montaigne's apologetic importance. When that came into focus, the Pope's response and the Inquisition's lack of interest in Montaigne made sense.

Likewise, Nibley was undoubtedly one of the brightest Mormon apologists of his era, and was deeply critical of BYU and the Mormon Church itself in a number of ways. But, he supported the Mormon authority structure, and most importantly, was useful to them. So, while they likely chided him in private to some degree, they gave him much more latitude than many others.

Another fascinating aspect of Montaigne's history that fits well with the Mormon apologetic process is that after the tide had been turned against the Reformers and hence Montaigne and his work was no longer as useful to Catholicism as it had once been, much of his writing was placed on the Catholic Church's list of banned books. That is, during war rogues and ruffians who are useful to the cause are tolerated in spite of the disruption they may cause. But in times of peace, they need to be more carefully controlled.

From a Mormon point of view, think of Orrin Porter Rockwell (see <http://www.onlineutah.com/historyrockwell.shtml>), the Danites, the Council of Seventy (see <http://www.signaturebooks.com/reviews/hier2.htm>), John D. Lee (see [http://www.religioustolerance.org/lds\\_mass.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/lds_mass.htm)) and other unsavoury characters who have been enlisted from time to time to perform tasks the leadership deemed necessary, and then either forgotten or recharacterized. Think of how Brigham Young's theology and social theory has been so de-emphasized as to have been largely forgotten. Consider how once foundational concepts like "As man is God once was; As God is man may become" and the King Follet discourse are currently being de-emphasized and I predict will be forgotten.

Consider how an apologist and the ecclesiastical authority of the stature of B.H. Roberts – once the Mormon lion unleashed to defend the Mormon

Church against all kinds of threats – can fade into oblivion among the faithful once things like his "Studies of the Book of Mormon" became public (see <http://www.lds-mormon.com/sotbom.shtml>).

I predict that the same thing will happen to Hugh Nibley – another once reigning king of Mormon apologetics – who defended the Mormon Church on what now looks like patently silly grounds against the academics who argued that the Book of Abraham was not a translation of anything (see <http://www.lds-mormon.com/bookofabraham.shtml>). Despite how useful Nibley was to Mormonism for so long, as the reality of the Book of Abraham sinks in and it is itself relegated to the forgotten with group-think-like efficiency, Nibley will go along with it. Despite his acknowledged brilliance, he will become an embarrassment to a church that will not longer want to be reminded of anything related to the Book of Abraham, let alone Nibley's strained arguments in favour of it. The fact the Nibley's personal character is under a cloud as a result of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse his daughter Martha alleges he inflicted on her will likely hasten his disappearance from Mormon thought (see <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0609609912/102-6625436-8052104?v=glance>). Martha's allegations of sexual abuse are much more speculative than those related to emotional and physical abuse, which are confirmed by her siblings. Her siblings deny that sexual abuse occurred, and according to Martha suggest that the physical and emotional abuse to which she (and they to an extent) were subjected perhaps caused her to falsely remember sexual abuse. In this, they are repeating a psychological theory that has been used to explain the "false memory syndrome" that the balance of the psychological profession believes is responsible for some allegations of sexual abuse (see [http://www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi\\_mormons.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi_mormons.htm), text at footnote 98). I note that at the April 2005 General Conference of the Mormon Church, Hugh Nibley's then recent death was not mentioned in the segment of conference devoted to the recognition of prominent Mormons who have passed away since the last conference.

I will even go so far as to say that the icon that the image of Joseph Smith has become within Mormonism will mutate to the point where it will be hardly recognizable. There is nothing unexpected in this. For a fascinating study as to how Christ has been used in this regard, see "American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon" by Stephen Prothero (book reviews can be found at [http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/american\\_jesus/](http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/american_jesus/)). Among other things, Prothero describes the various ways in which Mormons have used Jesus in iconic fashion, and how Jesus has come to mean many different and often contradictory things in different religiously oriented communities within America. In this regard, the functional analysis

mentioned above is perhaps the most useful. How Jesus will be understood in a given community is best predicted by what the dominant mythology needs him to do. If the people feel the need to be liberated, Jesus will be a liberator. If the people feel the need to be governed in order to avoid the chaos that has recently threatened to engulf them (according to their perception), Jesus will be a benevolent governor. Etc.

Why should we expect the fate of Joseph Smith to be different than that of Christ? Different groups will use icons such as Christ or Smith for their own purposes. The apologists for the group are often at the forefront of this effort, and some of the best know among them also become icons. Montaigne and Nibley were in this category, from what I can tell.

So, I suggest that the entity – the organism – that Mormonism has become will defend itself and attempt to grow and survive in any way it can. This means that apologists, and even founders, are malleable in the public mind, to such a degree that practically speaking, they are expendable.

## **Conclusion**

I was initially amazed at how similar Montaigne's apology for Catholicism is to many current Mormon apologetic strategies. However, once one thinks about the nature of the problem (defending a social order on which many people depend) and the few options that are available to the apologists, this response is perhaps to be expected.

We work with the tools at hand. Skepticism was the tool at hand in Montaigne's day. He could not deny that scepticism was required and useful. So, he used it in the only way he could to accomplish his objective – to defend Catholicism – and this required him to exaggerate the uncertainties that result from a skeptical approach to life. At least some great essays resulted from his efforts.

Mormon apologists have done the same thing with the tools that they have at hand, including skepticism and variations on a variety of postmodern themes. The result will be, I believe, regarded by future generations of Mormons with bemusement similar to that of today's well-educated Catholics when contemplating their forbearers' critique of Galileo. Another parallel closer to home, perhaps, is the current attitude of the former Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (now the Community of Christ) toward their once foundational belief that Joseph Smith did not engage in polygamy and all of the apologia once used to defend that position (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/undeception.pdf>) That is, the common refrain will be something like, "Look at this! How sad" or perhaps, "What the hell were they thinking!?"

For this reason, the current generation of most faith traditions has little knowledge of what the apologists for their ancestors have said. The best apologists specialize, in particular, in burying their dead and sometimes even helping their wounded colleagues into the grave while still breathing.