

Daniel Peterson's "Reflections on Secular Anti-Mormonism" An Off-the-Cuff Reaction

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

Yesterday I posted at the Recovery from Mormonism ("RFM") bulletin board (see http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/w-agera.php3?site=exmobb&bn=exmobb_recovery) the full text of an essay written by BYU/FARMS' (the Foundation of Ancient Research and Mormon Studies) Daniel Peterson, along with my commentary. I chose this format for a couple of reasons. First, because I simply read the essay and annotated it on the fly, and second because I did not want anyone to think I was taking Peterson's highly entertaining comments out of context.

Within a short time of my posting (no more than a few hours) the board monitors at RFM received a complaint from the people at the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research ("FAIR") that my post violated their copyright in Peterson's essay, which as noted below was on FAIR's website (see <http://www.fairlds.org/>). The link to the article at FAIR was provided, and I would have thought FAIR would appreciate me advertising for them at RFM. And given the nature of my commentary, I suspect that the way in which I dealt with Peterson's argument is well within the "fair use" exception to copyright law. Nonetheless, since FAIR complained and RFM wants to be well inside their copyright obligations, I wasted an hour chopping up yesterday's writing for re-publication at RFM. The result is below.

I note in passing that the folks at FAIR have a long history of taking a legalistic approach to information sharing. They seem to have bought fully into the idea that Mormons are engaged in a life and death struggle with the forces of darkness that seek to overcome them, and that a wide range of questionable means are justified by the righteousness of the ultimate Mormon end. Boyd Packer is no doubt proud of FAIR in this regard. So, it is OK to cyber squat, publish misleading pap of many kinds with a thin scholarly veneer, specialize in character assassination, etc. The essay I review below is a prime example of this kind of thing. I also note that my criticism does not apply to everyone at FAIR.

I don't accuse anyone at FAIR of stupidity, ill-will or anything of that kind. They are products of the fascinating confluence of, on the one hand, powerful Mormon dogma and conditioning systems within a human group that has reached the critical mass required for the creation and maintenance of culture, and on the other hand, the very secular forces Peterson is stumbling around that are being

injected with increasing regularity and potency into Mormonism's veins. I have further comments below, directed at Peterson, that deal with the idea that people who do the kind of thing he does are not bad, just the predictable product of a particularly narrow (and bad) culture that is struggling for survival in a rapidly changing world. The same kind of confluence is producing conflict in the Muslim world of a more violent kind as we speak.

Back to Peterson and his essay. It classically illustrates how Mormon apologists use straw-men arguments and a variety of other flawed analytical techniques to reassure a group that the belief system in which they are heavily invested is worth preserving. A friend drew a few of Peterson's comments about this piece to my attention. He apparently managed to make a copy of it during the short time it was up at RFM yesterday. Peterson said,

"In my opinion, [McCue's] purported rebuttal substantially and grossly misrepresented my position at numerous fundamental points, creating a ludicrous straw man in which I can't recognize my own ideas."

I have preserved enough of Peterson's text below to allow anyone who wishes to judge how badly I have mischaracterized his statements.

I suggest that those who read this remember that Peterson's most important audience is people who are like I used to be. That is, faithful Mormons who think BYU is a respected academic institution when it comes to religious studies (few wolves in sheeps' clothing are worse than evangelists dressed in academic robes); who respect Peterson's academic credentials; who assume that Peterson is employing the usual scholarly standards in what he writes; and most of all, who fervently hope that Mormonism is true. For these people Peterson is compelling and this is precisely what I find so offensive about his writing – it does not present anything remotely resembling a fair case and hence whether by design or not, will tend to dupe trusting people. On the other hand, virtually anyone near the perimeter of Mormon faith who takes the time to read this will likely be treated to a few good laughs and groans.

I have called this an "off-the-cuff" reaction because I wrote my comments while reading Peterson's essay for the first time, and then re-read them once to edit for spelling and tone. Since I was forced by FAIR to waste another hour to re-read and chop up what I did yesterday, I added a few more comments while doing that. Prior to posting this on my website I received several comments by email pointing out spelling errors and other oversights. Those have been corrected as well as a few other things I noticed while doing that. In sum, this is still a very rough document.

I simply start at the beginning of Peterson's essay and add my comments as they occur to me. I have excised at FAIR's request the portions of Peterson's text that are not relevant to my comments.

Peterson's text is designated by "DP" and mine by "bm". I am sure there are lots of typos in what follows. This exercise is not important enough to me to justify the time that careful editing would require. But what I have done is enough to allow most who have "ears to hear" to understand the nature of the apologist beast that Peterson typifies.

Best,

bob

Reflections on Secular Anti-Mormonism

by Daniel C. Peterson

<http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2005PetD.html>

DP: A prolific ex-Mormon now-atheist writer on Mormon historical topics, asked last week whether he was planning to attend this FAIR symposium, responded that, no, he wasn't.

bm: Peterson seems to believe that few slurs are more potent than "atheist" given the number of times he used it in this essay, and how he used it. I don't find the term to be useful and observe that it is mostly used by people like Peterson to denigrate rather than communicate useful information about what someone else believes.

A "theist" is a person who believes in a god of some kind. An "atheist" is a person who does not so believe. But what kind of "god" are we talking about? Einstein referred to "god" as whatever caused the amazing reality he spent his life exploring. He said that this reality must have been created by an intelligence of such staggering magnitude that we cannot comprehend it, and should reverence, it. However, he had no idea what kind of intelligence that might be or where it came from. It could be a three line algorithm created by random chance, a nice old man with white hair, or who knows what.

Was Einstein a theist (he believed in a god of some kind) or an atheist (he thought most of the ideas people have about god have an extremely high probability of being false)? What is clear is that Einstein was uncertain as to god's nature to such an extent that his idea as to what might be god would not be accepted as god by most literalist religious people, and hence it is reasonable to say that he was agnostic (he did not know) about god. Hence, I would call him an agnostic instead of an atheist or theist. I use the same label for myself. Many thoughtful people whom Peterson would call atheists because they don't believe in the kind of god he does, have beliefs similar to mine.

As an aside, I have found a great deal of wisdom in Einstein's writing related to the formation of culture and how his personal spirituality worked. I recommend in that regard:

<http://www.spaceandmotion.com/albert-einstein-god-religion-theology.htm>

<http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Albert-Einstein-Quotes.htm>

<http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Theology-Albert-Einstein.htm>

http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/quotes_einstein.html

Thinking about Einstein reminded me of how many people to whom society owes a great deal were agnostics, deists (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism>) or full blown atheists. Many of America's founding fathers were somewhere between atheist and deist, for example. Many of our greatest scientists and social innovators have held similar views. And what about all of those Buddhists, Taoists, etc.? Pretty much all atheists.

It is unreasonable to suggest, as Peterson does throughout his essay, that lack of any particular religious belief denotes moral defect. In fact, it is worse than unreasonable. It is foolish and perhaps even immoral in our highly interdependent world. It is this kind of tribalism that must be broken down in as many aspects of society as possible if we are to avoid the kinds of disasters that occurred on 9/11, the riots that are currently going on in the Muslim world as a result of a few religious cartoons published in Europe, and a host of other silly and/or dangerous things. Furthermore, the kind of ignorance Peterson trumpets is precisely what must be overcome as people around the globe digest the facts regarding their interconnectedness with each other, their dependence on the planet's limited resources, and the tremendous difficulties humanity faces as a result of a population that continues to grow and consume ever more resources.

DP: I will, as advertised, reflect on "secular anti-Mormonism." I'm grateful for the assignment because, frankly, anti-Mormonism of the evangelical kind has come, with a few exceptions, to bore me intensely. It's not only that it tends to be repetitious and uninteresting--I think I've mentioned here before the film that my friend Bill Hamblin and I have laughed about doing: Bill and Dan's Excellent Adventure in Anti-Mormon Zombie Hell. It's not merely that the same arguments reappear ad nauseam, no matter how often they've been refuted, and that reviewing essentially the same book for the thirty-second time grows tiresome.

bm: "To refute" means to establish or prove that a proposition is false. While I don't think the Evangelicals come at Mormonism from the best perspective for the most part, I have read enough of Peterson, Hamblin and Midgely's responses to the Evangelical critique to know that most of the time they do little more than kick immense amounts of dust into the air for the purpose of showing that the Evangelicals have not quite pinned the Mormons to the mat on this or that point. To call what Peterson does in this regard "refutation" is offensive to anyone who understands the subject matter. However, he is likely convincing to the faithful

Mormons who read his work and assume on the basis of his hyperbole that the Mormon position is rock solid.

This reminds me of the FARMS reviews I read while still faithful of Todd Compton's book "In Sacred Loneliness". That book deals with the Joseph Smith's plural marriages. FARMS tore the book apart. I had read a troubling review in a local newspaper, and heaved a sigh of relief when I saw that the "scholars" at BYU had panned it. Years later while beginning to investigate Mormonism using real scholarly sources I found Compton's rebuttal to the FARMS reviews (see <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/7207/rev.html>) and felt ill. In a few minutes of reading Compton I realized that his approach was reasonable, and that I had been duped as a result of trusting FARMS and not bothering to read Compton myself. This approach, whether conscious or not, characterizes what I read in Peterson's work.

I do not suggest that Peterson is dishonest, just completely taken in by his point of view. People like him used to confuse me. Smart, well-intentioned, pleasant, honest as far as I could tell. Before I could happily relegate Mormonism to the rear view window I needed to feel that I understood how people like this could appear to lie on behalf of something so obviously false as Mormonism. While writing a number of lengthy essays on this topic I found that people like Peterson are common in most religions and other ideology based social groups. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf> and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> for example. The power of denial and related psychological forces is far greater than I had imagined. These forces are responsible for Peterson's, and other similar behaviour, in Mormonism and many other groups.

Time and again as I made my way through Peterson's essay I was struck by his denial of probabilities. We can't be certain about anything in the historical or current world. However, some things are demonstrably more probable than others. The best strategy for any purpose where knowing what is real is important is to adopt the information most likely to be correct as time passes and for the most part, science provides the most reliable information available to us and is accepted as such. Apologists like Peterson tend to accept scientific information as their guides as long as it does not conflict with their most important religious beliefs. Those beliefs require them to be certain that some things are real (the Book of Mormon is real history, for example) and defend that position against any disconfirming information that comes along.

I examine the pattern of belief that this causes in many social groups, including Mormonism, at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.does%20mormonism%20cause%20irrational%20belief.pdf>. We end up being able to predict where various religious believers will reject scientific information that is highly probable to be correct on the basis of understanding where their religious beliefs conflict with science. That is a

simple idea that allows us to illustrate a striking pattern of irrationality. And of course, each believer can see the irrationality in other religious groups, but not his own.

So, as you read below something Peterson has suggested to be a real state of human or physical affairs and I propose an alternative, ask yourself which is more likely to be a reasonable estimate of reality.

DP: (You've heard the definition of insanity as when you keep doing the same thing over and over and over again, and expect to get different results.) It's also the deep streak of intellectual dishonesty ...

bm: Intellectual dishonesty is hardly the most likely cause of difference of opinion related to religious belief. Let's have a look at the science related to why people tend to disagree and why people tend to unjustifiably certain that their own point of view is correct. Let's look for patterns of similar behaviour that are found in a wide variety of human groups that might help us to understand Mormon, post-Mormon and many other similar kinds of behaviour.

Consider, for example, as an alternative explanation for certain kinds of extreme post-Mormon behavior (as well as Mormon apologist behaviour), denial of the sort I describe in my essays linked above. Or how about cognitive dissonance and bias of various sorts? Denial and cognitive dissonance apply to post-Mormons as well as Mormons and other groups of humans. Emotional and social "proofs" are also applicable to one group as much as to the other.

Once you get beyond dishonesty and stupidity as the presumed causes of behaviour or belief with which you disagree a lot of things make much more sense. Some Mormon behavior is irrational, and some post-Mormon behavior is irrational. If you to think in these terms, you have a chance to sort out error from accurate observation in your camp as well as elsewhere.

The greatest gift I have received as a result of my exodus from Mormonism is increased humility. That is, I am now prepared to admit that many of my current opinions about what is real are wrong even though they may be the most likely to be right of all that are currently known. The best I can do is select as my opinion the view that appears to have the greatest probability of being correct. And though I try to do that, I will be mistaken much of the time. That is human nature.

The teachability that comes from acknowledging how likely we are to be wrong is a wonderful thing, as is the idea that reality is what it is. Reality does not have to be what anyone, no matter how old or presumably sacred or wise, says it is. It just is. The respected biologist John Maynard Smith expresses beautifully the consequence of adopting this point of view in his interview at www.meaningoflife.tv. That site is another fine source of big picture thinking.

DP: that runs through much of the countercult industry, the triumphalism that exaggerates and even invents problems on the Mormon side while effectively pretending that no problems remain to be addressed on the so-called "Christian" side.

bm: Peterson is highly selective here. Many believing Christians apply the same scholarly standards to their own faith as to Mormonism. Throughout this essay, Peterson sets up straw men that will be recognized as such by most who are familiar with the relevant literature or phenomena. However, since his target audience is generally speaking ignorant of these things, many of them will find him persuasive when he spouts ridiculousness like this.

DP: (This couldn't possibly be more clearly illustrated than in recent evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant use of DNA data to cast doubt upon the Book of Mormon. In what can only be described as a display of either stunning ignorance or appalling cynicism, these anti-Mormon crusaders ignore the fact that the assumptions fundamental to current deep-historical DNA studies flatly contradict traditional and widely held conservative Protestant understandings of the book of Genesis.)

bm: As already noted, many believing Christians apply the same scholarly standards to their own faith as to Mormonism. But Peterson would likely disparage the faith of Christians of this type because they also tend not to be literalist believers in the Bible.

Peterson's assessment of the DNA research is laughable. This is classic apologistese. Even former-BYU microbiologist Scott Woodward is on record to the effect that the DNA case against the Book of Mormon is probably correct (that is, the Book of Mormon is not real history), while he notes that this case is not 100% certain. Woodward did not mention that nothing in the empirical world is 100% certain and that scientists consider action based on the manifestly improbable to be irrational. An example of this would be continuing to make important decisions on the basis that the Book of Mormon is real history when it is highly probable not to be.

DP: No, I'm quite content, for today at least, to concentrate on secular anti-Mormonism, which I often find much more interesting and intellectually challenging, and which, I'm coming to believe, constitutes the real locus of action in coming years.

bm: Not if Mormons still wish to cozy up to the Evangelicals as Mormonism's traditional foundations, like the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's trustworthiness, continue to crumble.

DP: I will pass over very quickly a message board that I like to monitor that is, in its way, a kind of wildlife preserve for secular anti-Mormons.

bm: He is referring to RFM.

DP: Some of you are probably familiar with it. Although it is of unquestionable sociological and psychological interest, it offers little if anything of intellectual merit. What was once said of William Jennings Bryan could be said of even many of the star posters on this message board: "One could steer a schooner through any part of his argument and never scrape against a fact." Several, even, of the posters with the greatest intellectual pretensions on the board have consistently demonstrated themselves incapable of accurately summarizing Latter-day Saint positions and arguments, let alone of genuinely engaging them. It's hard not to think in this context of Groucho Marx: "From the moment I picked up your book until I laid it down," Groucho wrote to the novelist Sydney Perelman, "I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend to read it." Many on this particular message board seem to be of the same mentality as the academic who was asked whether he had read the new book by Professor Jones. "Read it?" he replied. "Why, I haven't even reviewed it yet!"

bm: Peterson's friends likely thought that was pretty funny. RFM gets over 100,000 hits per day. A huge, diverse group of people post their thoughts there, or read there. How reasonable is it to suggest that all of this group (including me I presume) are as ridiculous as Peterson suggests? Peterson makes no attempt to compare RFM to anything that would put it in context or help us to understand it. And particularly, he does not compare it to any of the many other Mormon related on-line communities that display ignorance, ill will and silliness of similar as well as other types.

So, what is RFM? First, it is not designed as a forum for intellectual discussion. It is supposed to be a safe place to vent, and a lot of venting occurs there. Venting is not pretty, and usually contains a lot of irrationality. See the essay on my website titled "Chaos and Forging the Self" for a summary of my take on RFM in general. Until posted there it can also be found at http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/w-agera.php3?site=exmobb&bn=exmobb_recovery. However, despite RFM's lack of academic pretension, I have read some brilliant stuff there as well as a lot of silliness, pathos, hilarity and humanity. And I can name a dozen people who are either successful practising lawyers, respected university professors and/or practising scientists who regularly post at RFM right now. I am sure there are

many more of this type who post there and I have not had the chance to get to know in real life.

As he does consistently throughout this essay, Peterson has here set up a straw man to knock down to the cheers of those who are generally unencumbered by the relevant facts and trust that he is telling them an accurate story. As you read remember that I am one of the ill-willed idiots Peterson has described.

DP: What the board does offer are displays of bravado, strutting, believers' arguments completely misunderstood and misrepresented, bold challenges hurled out to those who are barred from responding, and guffaws of triumph over enemies who are not permitted to reply. Dissent is rigidly excluded from this board, even as its denizens criticize the Church for its supposed "repressiveness.

bm: As already noted, RFM is a place for venting and recovery, not argument. Many topics are verboten there, such as political discussion of all kinds, since they distract people from the place's purpose. And there is a certain amount of exercise of questionable judgement about how things are done there, as is the case in all human groups. Many people who post at RFM go to many other places to engage in debate and find information. Should this be surprising?

DP: However, notwithstanding the rigorous exclusion of all troublesome dissent from their domain, the faith these posters have in their own unanswerably brilliant selves is oddly refreshing to see in atheists, whom you wouldn't expect to believe in any God at all.

bm: More Peterson hyperbole. More straw-men. Is it reasonable to assume that RFM is the sole source of information for people who participate there or that just because a person vents (or does anything else) at RFM that they have personally subscribed to everything said there? And what does God have to do with this?

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

bm: Voltaire was one of the leading atheists (shiver) of his day who spent much of his time skewering the silly apologists for the Christian position, like Peterson. Peterson is precisely the kind of person Voltaire likely had in mind while making this statement.

DP: But this doesn't exhaust the pleasures of that message board. It is rife with personal abuse and bloodcurdling hostility, not uncommonly obscene, directed

against people they don't know and haven't even met--against President Hinckley, Joseph Smith, the Brethren, the general membership of the Church, and even, somewhat obsessively, against one particular rather insignificant BYU professor.

bm: And some there, like me, who regularly remind people at RFM that what I call the “stupid, lying bastards” approach to Mormonism is deficient. It does not do the people or social psychological mechanisms involved near enough credit. However, a lot of post-Mormons lose their marriage, relationships with their kids and countless other important aspects of life as a result of what happens when the deceptive actions of Mormon leaders come to light. And there is lots of scientific research that shows how violent a response should be anticipated when we learn that even small scale deceptions have been practised on us. No one should be surprised that emotions run high when people find out that they have consistently through out their lives purposefully deceived by religious leaders in whom they vested almost complete trust?

DP: Ordinary members of the Church--Morgbots or Morons ...

bm: This is often, in my experience, the result of the unhappy (or happy) way in which keys on computer keyboards are set up. I can't count the number of times I have typed “Moron” while trying to type “Mormon” and have had to correct it. Believers in gods who disagree with the Mormon god may find in this a divine sign instead of the comic coincidence I see.

DP: or Sheeple, in the jargon of the board--are routinely stereotyped as insane, tyrannical, cheap, bigoted, ill-mannered, irrational, sexually repressed, stupid, greedy, foolish, rude, poor tippers, sick, brain-dead, and uncultured. There was once even a thread--and I'm not making this up--devoted to discussing how Mormons noisily slurp their soup in restaurants.

bm: Go read some posts at any of many LDS bulletin boards and you will find similar displays of ignorance and inanity.

DP: Posts frequently lament the stupidity and gullibility of Church leaders, neighbors, parents, spouses, siblings, and even offspring ...

bm: Much of this is reasonably accurate.

DP: --who may be wholly unaware of the anonymous poster's secret double life of contemptuous disbelief.

bm: And what is the penalty in most Mormon communities for disclosing that kind of disbelief? And there is nothing of secrecy or information suppression within Mormonism, is there? I wonder where this tendency toward secrecy and suppression of information comes?

DP: It is a splendid cyber illustration of the finger pointing and mocking found in the "great and spacious building" of 1 Nephi.

bm: One of the many ironies in this circus piece is that Peterson does not see how that metaphor can be used the other way. In Utah particularly, those who stand up and publicly dissent from Mormonism are often mocked in various ways by those who control the great and spacious buildings that literally as well as metaphorically dominate Mormonism.

DP: Whenever the poisonous culture of the place is criticized, however, its defenders take refuge in the culture of victimhood, deploying a supposed need for therapeutic self-expression as their all-encompassing excuse.

bm: There is a lot more to it than that, and I don't know anyone who I consider thoughtful who would give RFM top grades in all important categories. But there is some justification to the recovery approach.

I disagree with some aspects of the Alcoholics Anonymous program and philosophy, but would I be justified in going into an AA meeting and starting to debate my concerns with the people there who are struggling to put their lives back together? That is what people like Peterson have been shown to do time and again if given the chance at RFM. That he does not consider Mormonism to be a problem from which one needs to recover would put him in the same class as those alcohol vendors who say the same thing about alcohol. That kind of person, for good reason, would be barred from AA meetings.

I have no problem with the designation of a safe place where those who are critical of Mormonism can vent in peace and recover perspective and the security that goes with it (see Lee Kirkpatrick, "Attachment, Evolution and the Psychology of Religion"). Active Mormons have dozens of similar bulletin boards not to mention their meeting houses. And when you check out communities of people who have left or who dissent from other religious groups, you find much the same kind of thing.

We see here again Peterson's penchant for exaggeration and his attempt to present RFM and those who spend time there as particularly evil rather than looking for ways to understand RFM by looking for parallels in other groups. This is understandable given Peterson's apparent objective – to warn members of the Mormon community away from those inhuman beings at RFM. There is a lot of

social psych literature along these lines (see Elliott Aronson, "The Social Animal" for example). We tend to dehumanize those we wish to justify ignoring or treating badly.

DP: Contemplating a depressing number of the posters on that board, I've thought to myself, "If this is what liberation from the Mormon 'myth' makes you--a vulgar and sometimes duplicitous crank, cackling with malice and spite--then I would prefer to spend the few brief years left to me (before I dissolve into the irreversible and never-ending oblivion many of the board's posters prophesy for me and all humankind) with people who haven't been liberated.

bm: Here Peterson kills two birds with one stone. He nailed those terrible atheists again, while suggesting that people who leave Mormonism and spend time at RFM are scum. He makes no attempt to understand while attempting at every turn to dehumanize.

DP: I think of the apostates of Ammonihah, mocking Alma and Amulek in prison, "gnashing their teeth upon them, and spitting upon them, and saying: How shall we look when we are damned?"¹ Surely the damned will not look much different than this.

bm: I could not have written a better foil myself. For the second time in a few paragraphs Peterson refers to a Book of Mormon passage as if it described a real event that could be used to shed light on other real events. Without attempting the kind of useful contextual analysis that Craig Criddle provides at <http://www.i4m.com/think/history/Book-of-Mormon.pdf>, let me make a few quick points of a similar nature.

If you were starting a new religion that would of course be small and likely to attract a lot of negative attention from other social groups, wouldn't it be great if you found some scripture that showed how God's plan included this kind of thing and it was predicted to recur in your case (the great and spacious building), but that anyone who disagreed with you would ultimately meet with terrible life events? And better yet, what if this scripture predicted that someone with your name would be the leader of this new religion? That would be too good to be true, right? Oh, and why not in God's name predict that when people found out that you were misleading them or maybe even trying to have sex with their wives or daughters that they would get really mad and try to prevent you from continuing to do that to other people? "They can leave the Church, but can't leave it alone." What a brilliant prediction.

So Peterson, after characterizing everyone at RFM in the worst possible way, uses a fantasy from the Book of Mormon in an attempt to legitimize his RFM fantasy. Two fantasies = one reality.

And if you good Mormons wish to avoid the pain all of those people at RFM suffer, you'd best not spend any time at RFM. Peterson does not acknowledge that anyone who left Mormonism or changed their belief regarding God was ever happy about that choice. Peterson does not mention anyone like Robert Ingersol, for example (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf> at page 80. Etc.

DP: But I'm troubled by the capacity even of far less malevolent message boards to supply a supportive sort of ersatz community as an alternative to the fellowship of the Saints, and I worry about what participation on even relatively benign boards does to some Latter-day Saint souls. I have in mind one frequent poster in particular, who claims simply to be doubting and troubled, but who in fact never misses an opportunity for a snide remark about his Church, in which he remains active, and its teachings. These teachings involve weighty matters of utmost import. Millions have placed their hopes in the gospel's message, and, if this were false, it would be tragic and unutterably sad. Perhaps the cynicism that this poster and many others cultivate is no more than a psychologically understandable defensive shell, a self-protective whistling past the graveyard of doubt. But, even so, it is a shell that will, I fear, block the Spirit.

bm: Peterson implies that all forms of doubt block the access the Spirit presumably gives us to a greater reality. This implies that since his spiritual leaders have all the answers, we need do nothing more than obey them. No more questioning and doubting. This would be a return to the Dark Ages.

DP: I am not optimistic about his long-term prospects, barring a fundamental shift in attitude (and, even less hopefully, perhaps in personality).

bm: Well, it looks like Peterson has buried RFM now, so I will give a brief description of the place myself.

There is a great deal of evidence that justifies the perception that many Mormons have been systematically deceived throughout their lives by well-intended religious leaders and family members. Whether this perception is right or wrong, those who come to have it should be expected to suffer serious trauma. The DSM-IV (used to diagnose psychiatric illness) has a category that deals with this. See <http://home.earthlink.net/%7Ejcmmsm/article/index.html> and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.art%20therapy%20for%20recovering%20mormons.pdf>. This type of trauma is experienced by a wide of range of people who come to regard their views with regard to religion as inaccurate and suffer a loss of relationships and other forms of security and/or self identity as a result. And there is a lot of literature about how to deal with/heal from this kind of trauma. Most of this recommends something along the lines of the well-known Kubler-

Ross grieving process (see http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change_management/kubler_ross/kubler_ross.htm). Expressing anger is one aspect of this process. And people tend to pass through it and move on.

People tend to visit RFM often for a period of months and perhaps for as long as a couple of years, and then move on. While at RFM these people form a complex human community that includes idiots, savants, socializers, clowns, scientists, philosophers, bullies, babies, etc. As I said, it is a diverse human community, and has the strengths and weaknesses one should expect from such.

DP: Characteristic of much secularizing anti-Mormon participation on the Web is a corrosive cynicism that, in my experience, will erode anything with which it comes in contact.

bm: Are we talking about the same cynicism that led to the Renaissance, Enlightenment, American Revolution, etc. or some other kind? My guess is that Peterson welcomes cynicism that overturns blind obedience in old Catholicism, the Divine Right of Kings, the Muslim faith, etc. but wants to attack cynicism that questions any of his dogmas. Let's see how this plays out.

DP: It is not so much a reasoned intellectual stance as an attitude, or even, perhaps, a personality type. Those afflicted with such cynicism are like the dwarfs in the last book of C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, who are, as Aslan expresses it, so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out. Such people claim to know the price of everything and everyone, but they seem to recognize the value of nothing. But the problem may well be in the cynic rather than in the object of his scorn. "No man," as the French saying goes, "is a hero to his valet."² Why? The German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel is surely right when he responds: "This is not because the hero is no hero, but because the valet is a valet."³

bm: Peterson again dehumanizes those who disagree with him instead of looking for patterns in history and the social science literature that might help to explain persistent patterns of disagreement among groups of people. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>.

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

Some years ago, with time on my hands following the close of an academic gathering in Graz, Austria, I spent the better part of a day looking through the city's bookstores. The dollar being weak, prices being high, and my luggage

being cramped, I did much more looking and browsing than buying. I soon discovered an extraordinarily interesting topic: The treatment of Mormonism in travel books published for America-bound Europeans. Since then, I've enjoyed many similar books in French and Italian bookstores as well as across Germanic Europe. Almost uniformly, the tone is one of astonishment--subtly expressed or, often, quite open--at the stupidity and gullibility of the Latter-day Saints. Additionally, Mormon history and doctrine are plainly deemed too patently absurd to justify much effort at accuracy.

bm: Are we surprised at this? Are travel books known for their depth and accuracy? Or are we to believe that Mormonism is subject to a conspiracy by those who write these books?

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

“To Europeans, American religiosity must necessarily seem naïve, if not primitive. Here [in Germany], educated people are assisted, above all, by enlightened [aufgeklärte] theologians who reinterpret Christian teaching as an ethical doctrine suited for the everyday, but at the same time philosophically abstract. In the meanwhile, there are pastors who believe that they can get by altogether without mentioning God's name. It's completely different in America, where the Bible is still the Word of God.”⁴

bm: Again, is this news? See <http://wvs.isr.umich.edu/fig.shtml> for a University of Michigan produced summary of where the US fits into the world picture in terms of secular v. religious values. Americans should be expected to appear Neanderthal to Europeans. In many ways and for easy to see reason, Americans tend to be less socially evolved, less cultured, less educated than Europeans.

DP: According to Phil Zuckerman, of Pitzer College, rates of agnosticism or atheism in Scandinavia, the Czech Republic, and France reach levels higher than fifty percent.⁵ There and elsewhere, underused churches are being converted into concert halls, museums, art galleries, stores, restaurants, condos, even nightclubs. In Scandinavia, for some reason, it is popular to transform churches into carpet stores.⁶ It is well known that the late Pope John Paul II believed that the future of Catholicism lay not in spiritually dying Europe, but to the south, in Latin America and, perhaps even more so, in Africa. Benedict XVI appears to share that view, with reason.

bm: More news?

DP: "In the eyes of many if not most Europeans," Professor Gelfert observes, "American taste is equivalent to tastelessness."⁷ (One is tempted to suggest that, given their own still relatively recent history of something rather worse than poor taste, a bit of humility might be in order for the Germans, at least. And I say this as something of a Germanophile.) Thus, European disdain for American religiosity functions as part of a broader contempt for American culture, nicely embodied, as a surprisingly large number of residents of both the Continent and the British Isles see it, in our religious fanatic cowboy president. And what could be more American than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, widely known for its freshly-scrubbed, naïve, nineteen-year-old missionaries, hailing mostly from the American West?

bm: That is correct. Americans in general are seen in Europe as naïve and silly, and Mormons particularly so. This has been the case since near Mormonism's beginnings.

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

bm: Europeans regard Mormonism as merely another indication of America's tendency toward magical thinking. America's infatuation with various forms of New Age belief is another symptom of the same thing (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.what%20the%20bleep%20do%20we%20know.pdf> for example), as is Young Earth creationism, the popularity of alien abductionist beliefs and a variety of other things in America. And the same kind of arguments are mustered in defence of each of these points of view by people like Peterson.

DP: [Peterson summarizes material to indicate that an increasing divide is visible between America's elite (secular) and regular (religious/magical thinking) populations. Then he says:]

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

When Fargo, North Dakota, businessman Howard Dahl boards a plane for the East Coast or flies to Europe and beyond, he is often struck by the views of the people he encounters, especially their preconceptions about his part of the country. "There's a lot of condescension. You'd think no one here ever read a book," Dahl says, "or ever had a thought about anything. They think we're religious fanatics." 8

bm: This condescension is regrettable, but understandable. There are many well-educated people in the US mid-west and west whose views are similar to those of well-educated people in New York, Paris or London. And there are a surprising number like Peterson. He is well-educated. He has read a lot of books, as he is demonstrating in this essay. And he is well-travelled, as he is also at pains to let his readers know. This man is a citizen of the world. And most well educated Europeans would regard him as hopefully parochial not as a result of what he has not read or not seen, but as a result of how little he has absorbed from his experience as demonstrated by what he writes. As Einstein said, the theory we accept determines what we see.

DP: How much more so, then, Salt Lake City? Since, as studies have shown, journalists strongly tend, on the whole, to be secular, politically liberal, anti-corporate, and socially and morally "progressive," Mormonism constitutes a perfect target. They will be naturally antipathetic to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a church that is widely regarded as socially retrograde, politically conservative, and hierarchically corporate.

bm: Yup.

DP: "Still today," writes Hans-Dieter Gelfert,

"Americans promote a striking hero cult with regard to the great figures of their history. In England, a tendency to dismantle onetime heroes set in after the First World War, with Lytton Strachey's book *Eminent Victorians* (1918). The same thing happened in Germany after the Second World War. Whenever, among us, an article appears in *Spiegel* about a once-revered heroic figure from German history, one can just about wager that this person will have lost his luster thereafter."⁹

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

bm: Joseph Smith purported to speak for god; lied about his sexual activities; controlled his church and city through a series of secret quorums; ran for the US presidency; had himself ordained King of the Earth; who smashed the printing press that are about to publicize his excesses; etc. Why would any journalist want to write about that?

And against the odds, one branch of the church Smith formed became a vastly wealthy asset holding corporation estimated to rank at about no. 200 on the Fortune 500 list of the worlds largest business corporation were it in that category. This church exercises political and cultural influence in the US in a manner that many people elsewhere find both disturbing and discouraging. Not newsworthy?

Or how about the habit leaders of this organization still exhibit of deceiving those who deal with them both by silence and by the publication of clearly deceptive accounts of their own history? How about their history of lying in public (including before federal government committees in the US) and justifying this on the basis that protecting the power that backs up their alleged divine mandate requires them to wield justifies these deceptions? How about their history of using the same kind of sales techniques multi-level marketing groups and hard-core religious cults use to get recruits in the door? None of this is newsworthy?

And to cut off an argument I often hear Mormons make, the Mormon Church's wealth has nothing to do with truth. The Catholic Church is incredibly wealthy. Quakers controlled huge assets bases at one time. Lots of other examples can be given to support this point. You get money by doing the things that get money. Telling a story that will persuade people to give you money is one of those. Mormonism's wealth is no more indicative of the truth of its message than is Amway's. In fact, there are many parallels between those two organizations.

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

“a rich vein of bilious anti-clericalism, that class-based contempt that imagines every pastor as Elmer Gantry, every believer as a budding recruit for the Christian Taliban, and every Catholic as a mind-manacled helot of a pederastic priesthood. This tendency reached its apex at the [Democratic] party's 1992 convention, at which liberal and pro-labor Pennsylvania Gov. Bob Casey was excluded from the rostrum because of his opposition to abortion, while feminists handed out badges caricaturing Casey in papal robes.”¹⁰

Amusingly, every element of the attitude toward mainstream Christianity mentioned by Jenkins, down to the very language, can be paralleled--indeed,

finds almost daily parallels--on my laboratory message board with regard to Mormonism.

bm: Back to RFM we go.

DP: But this attitude isn't confined merely to the fever swamps of Web bigotry

bm: More insightful, helpful analysis.

DP: In an article published as recently as 15 July 2005, in a New Zealand periodical but evidently also many other venues, the American leftist journalist Suzan Mazur, reporting on the corporate machinations of us Mormon theofascists, even included purported illustrations of the Latter-day Saint endowment ceremony. They were reproduced from that essential and utterly reliable 1882 classic, J.H. Beadle's *Polygamy or the Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism*, and were accurate right down to details like the bishop's miters--clearly modeled on the popes' hat--worn by temple officiators.¹¹ (To those who have actually attended the temple yet seen no such garb and no such rituals, Mr. Beadle might well say, with apologies once more to Groucho Marx, "Who are you gonna believe? Me, or your lying eyes?")

bm: So, the Democratic national convention in the US, New Zealand newspapers and the American press see things pretty much the same way. And we have already dealt with the godless Europeans. This must mean that the good Mormons are pretty much surrounded. Are they an island of goodness floating in an evil world? Or maybe Peterson exaggerates. And maybe if so many people do think the Mormon worldview is unjustified, Mormons should take a hard look in the mirror. Sounds like someone might be spending a lot of energy singing Mormon hymns while arranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

What does history tell us when almost everyone who is well informed with regard to the relevant facts thinks the claims of a particular religion are silly? Are those claims usually proven true if you wait long enough? No. This happens in a tiny percentage of cases. Do the truth claims of all religions tend to change over time in light of secular/scientific findings? They do. Have Mormon truth claims changed over time in this way? They have. Most Mormons today would be stunned if they understood the bigoted, ridiculous beliefs that played a huge role in Mormonism even a few generations ago. See http://www.i4m.com/think/sexuality/mormon_sex.htm and http://www.i4m.com/think/history/mormon_history.htm for a few of these.

Given the answers to these questions, how likely is it that the Mormon claims that now appear increasingly improbable in light of what science tell us will end up being proven true?

As an aside, see James Surowiecki's "The Wisdom of Crowds" for a summary of how to tell a crowd that is likely to give us accurate advice from one will not. In a nutshell, the more diverse, independent and well-informed a crowd is, the more seriously we should take its judgement. Compare the Mormon crowd to the crowd of non-Mormon academics who study Mormonism in this regard. Which is more likely to render accurate opinions on questions like "was Joseph Smith trustworthy?".

"But," many Mormons are likely to say, "the scholars don't have the Spirit and so we can ignore what they say" or some other excuse ("these are spiritual not intellectual matters") will be offered to justify dismissing all opposing points of view. And the fact that this is how countless religions (many of whom now seem laughable) have defended themselves since at least the Ancient Greeks does not matter to those who wraps themselves in these flimsy arguments now.

DP: Agnosticism or atheism is the default setting in most circles of elite opinion, in the United States nearly as much as Europe. To an extent, secular anti-Mormonism is merely an illustration, or even an echo, of that broader phenomenon.

bm: I would say that secular anti-Mormonism is such a small ripple in a huge current that it hardly matters. One of the few things that make it interesting for anyone other than the Mormons affected by it is that what most Christians went through generations ago Mormons are going through now as a result of having been until recently enclosed so effectively that they did not know what the rest of the world was doing. And then the Internet blew the doors off the cloister.

DP: An important articulation of this view is the British philosopher Antony Flew's essay "The Presumption of Atheism"¹²--though I note with considerable satisfaction that Professor Flew, probably the most vocally atheistic English-speaking philosopher since the death of Bertrand Russell in early 1970, recently announced that, compelled by what he sees as evidence for intelligent fine-tuning in the universe, he has abandoned his atheism and come to embrace a form of deism.

bm: We should define deism (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism>). It is fairly described as atheism-lite. I am a deist or close to it because I revere whatever caused the universe, but I have no idea what it was (three line algorithm caused by chance, an old white haired guy or a pink unicorn) and I don't believe that whatever it is (if it is) has any idea about me.

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

bm: He can't seem to get enough of bashing RFM – someone there must have really gotten under his skin. But to give credit where it is due, I note that I like the term “apatheism”. That describes many of my friends. They can't get worked up about religion in any way. That was Grandma's issue; Grandma's world. There are so many other things worth thinking about now, like how do we get the Earth's population under control and learn to live within the constraints of its environment.

DP: It is not uncommon, for example, to hear and read references to faith as "religious insanity."¹³ "Religiosity," said the psychologist Albert Ellis,

“is in many respects equivalent to irrational thinking and emotional disturbance. ... The elegant therapeutic solution to emotional problems is to be quite unreligious. ... The less religious they are, the more emotionally healthy they will be.”¹⁴

bm: Amen, as far as literalist religion (like most of Mormonism) is concerned. But I think the metaphoric use of religious concepts has a great deal to commend it. See Karen Armstrong “A Short History of Myth” for example.

DP: In this, Ellis was only following the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. Religion, Freud wrote, is "the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity."¹⁵

“Religion imposes equally on everyone its own path to the acquisition of happiness and protection from suffering. The technique consists of depressing the value of life and distorting the picture of the real world in a delusional manner. . . . At this price forcibly fixing them in a state of psychical infantilism and by drawing them into a mass-delusion, religion succeeds in sparing many people an individual neurosis. But hardly anything more.”¹⁶

bm: For more recent and reasonable views, see Lee Kirkpatrick, “Attachment, Evolution and the Psychology of Religion”, or Pascal Boyer, “Religion Explained”, or Loyal Rue, “Religion is not About God”.

DP: This is more sophisticated than the description of "Morgbots" given in my message board laboratory, but its general content is remarkably similar.

bm: So, Freud is as bad as those evil people who post at RFM? Or are they as bad as Freud? What about all of the other psychologists and psychiatrists? Remember, the DSM – IV provides for the diagnosis of a clinical disorder related to the stress of leaving religions precisely like Mormonism. The evil circle widens.

DP: Yet it is demonstrably wrong. The data rather consistently demonstrate that Latter-day Saints who live lives consistent with their religious beliefs experience greater general well-being, greater family and marital stability, less delinquency, less depression, less anxiety, and less substance abuse than those who do not, and there is very little evidence that religious belief and practice are harmful to mental health.¹⁷

bm: Peterson does not mention the mountain of data that questions his sources. Duwayne Anderson, for example, has debunked many of the statistics Peterson references (The only data of his I could quickly google is found at <http://exmormonfoundation.org/2005conference> in the form of an audio file). And what about the stats re. Utah in general? It leads the US in various unflattering categories, like anti-depressant use, personal bankruptcies, some kinds of fraud, some kinds of spousal abuse, some kinds of sexual abuse, some kinds of suicide. And attempts by Mormons to show that active Mormons do not suffer from these problems are either flawed, or raise another serious question – what is it about living cheek to jowl with active Mormons that sends these statistics into the stratosphere for everyone else, because if active Mormons are not affected that means the incidence of these problems for non-Mormons and less active Mormons in Utah are astounding.

DP: As James R. Lewis argues in his 2003 book *Legitimizing New Religions*, "attacks on alternative religious groups are attempts to psychologize--medicalize--a controversy that, on deeper examination, is clearly a controversy over ideology and lifestyle"¹⁸ In language that cannot possibly fail to remind Latter-day Saints of evangelical anti-Mormonism but that, oddly, forms a point of contact with the most virulent forms of secular anti-Mormonism as well, Thomas Langham, reviewing Lewis's book for the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, remarks that

opponents of new religious movements have worked to delegitimize them through acting as 'moral entrepreneurs' who have used anti-cult ideologies to market negative stereotypes, like the 'cult' label, to the broader community. Such activities have led new religious groups...to be classified as illegitimate "dangerous organizations."¹⁹

bm: Those who recruit for new religions like Mormonism, or cults, are highly disruptive to the families of many of their recruits so it stands to reason that they will be resisted. And these are among the most emotional issues known to humankind (kids being distanced from parents; marriages being broken up; etc.) so we should expect the rhetoric used in resisting cult recruitment to be extreme. Hence, the tendency to dehumanization cult members, brand cults as dangerous organizations, etc. should be expected.

Now, turn this around and see how it applies to Peterson's inhuman caricature of the people at RFM. There we have REALLY dangerous people who the good Mormons should stay away from at all costs.

Peterson seems unable to see that most swords he picks up have at least two edges.

DP: Yet, Lewis says,

it is not self-evident that secularism should be the standard by which religion is evaluated. ... [A] humanistic methodology...should attempt to describe religionists as acting out of reasonable motives rather than from errors of judgment or psychopathology.²⁰

bm: I agree. That is what I try to do. Perhaps Peterson could try that with RFM and other aspects of the post-Mormon movement.

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

bm: Let's cast the net a little broader. Are Buddhist and Taoists irreligious? They tend to be atheists. And yet psychologists are finding that the ways of life embedded in the practises that come from these traditions are particularly healthy for today's westerners. See Martin Seligman "Authentic Happiness" and Marvin Levine, "The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga".

Peterson should define which kind of atheists he is talking about before making comparisons. Anderson (see above) used this technique over and over again to show how Mormon scholars misuse statistics. One example Anderson did not mention was the oft cited statistic that Mormon missionaries are safer while on their missions than 19-21 year old men generally. This is used to make people feel better when missionaries die or are severely injured while serving their missions. I have not chased this down yet, but I am willing to bet that the "19-21 year old men generally" category does not take into account the fact that we are comparing Mormon missionaries whose alternative would likely be university

somewhere in the US west or mid-west to a Mormon mission. That is, most deaths in this age group occur in urban ghettos, where you are unlikely to find young men who would otherwise be serving Mormon missions. When you compare apples to apples, I would be astounded if the death and serious injury rate for Mormon missionaries was not higher than for the reference group.

DP: With specific regard to Mormons, Utah death rates are below rates in the nation at large and in the mountain states for most major causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, cerebrovascular disease, accidents, pulmonary disease, pneumonia/flu, diabetes, liver disease, and atherosclerosis. Utah suicide rates are higher than the national average, but lower than the mountain states as a whole. Studies of specific LDS populations in California, Utah, and Alberta, Canada, show that LDS men are about half as likely to die of cancer as other men. LDS women also have lower cancer mortality, but the difference is not as great as for men. Death rates are lower for Latter-day Saints who have higher levels of religious participation. In short, adherence to the Mormon code of health appears to lower death rates from several diseases.²¹ The benighted Morgbots seem to be doing rather well.

bm: See my comments above.

DP: But what of the atheists and the agnostics? Let's take a look at another laboratory: contemporary Europe, which has not altogether unfairly been called a "godless continent." Europe is in a state not only of demographic but, arguably, of cultural barrenness ...

bm: Europe is uncultured compared to what? Utah? Peterson has an unusual definition of culture as well as rationality. I suppose that I should not be surprised. Mormons have long believed that they would become cultural lights to the world, despite a lot of evidence to the contrary. See "What is the Challenge for LDS Scholars and Artists", John and Kirsten Rector, Dialogue, Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer 2003, <http://www.dialoguejournal.com/excerpts/36-2a.shtml> and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.creativity.pdf>.

DP: , and it is certainly afflicted, these days, with a profound historical amnesia: Thucydides and the Enlightenment are mentioned in the preamble to the new European constitution as constituents of European identity--but not Christianity.

bm: See the U of Michigan studies above. We don't need Christianity or any other religion as a moral compass. There is a huge mass of social science literature to this effect. I can tell numerous stories of agnostics/atheists who I know personally and who live exemplary lives. One is a brain surgeon who spends one third of his time working for free each year in the Amazon jungle.

This guy is smart, fun to be with, full of life, the kind of person most people want to be near because he emanates a feeling of love and good will. Sounds a lot like "the Spirit", doesn't it. Probably just Satan deceiving us, right?

However, a metaphoric Christianity could be helpful. I buy into Gould's "non-overlapping magisterial ("NOMA") concept, to a degree at least. See http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould_noma.html.

DP: A striking drop has occurred in European birth and marriage rates, which Pitzer College's Phil Zuckerman connects with the equally striking decline in religious belief. "Religion," he says,

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

bm: Overpopulation is one of our most critical issue right now, and Peterson is lamenting a decline in birth rates. This is Mormon ignorance in full flower.

DP: But Zuckerman, who is himself professedly anti-religious, is alarmed at the contrast of the low European birthrate with the high birthrates of the rapidly growing Muslim minorities within Europe. Muslims already make up at least a quarter of the residents of Rotterdam, Marseilles, and Malmö, Sweden, and fifteen percent of the residents of Brussels, the capital of the European Union. Within the next few decades, several European cities will acquire Muslim majorities.²² Observers have begun to speak of "Eurabia," and "Europistan." Others have alluded to what seems to be a "collective death wish" among Europeans, as their birth rates have fallen below levels required simply to replace themselves.

bm: The Muslim countries take religion very seriously, even more so than the US. And they have huge birth rates and an aversion to scientific knowledge that contradicts their beliefs, similar to religious people in US. This issue is of great concern to population scientists. Peterson has obviously seen this data, but it has not penetrated him.

DP: During a trip to England a few years ago, I went beyond my accustomed haunts into certain relatively nondescript parts of the country. While I've long been accustomed to the large Muslim population of London, I was astonished to see halal butcher shops and Muslim garb in the most ordinary towns--everywhere.

bm: Low growth areas allow immigration from high growth areas in order to keep the low growth area economies going and for other reasons. This incidentally helps to educate the Muslim populace, which for the moment may be our best hope to change the way that culture thinks. How is this bad?

DP: Immediately after his assassination a few years ago, the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn was portrayed in the media as anti-immigration, which was true. But he was also portrayed as right-wing, which was false. The reality was considerably more interesting than initial stereotypes suggested: He was, in fact, a man of the left, and a practicing homosexual, who feared that the demographic ascendancy of scarcely assimilated conservative Muslims in his country would doom the ultra-free sexuality that he and many others value as essential to the culture of the modern Netherlands. And, surely, the recent murder of the filmmaker Theo Van Gogh on a midday street in Amsterdam by a Dutch Muslim, and the very recent London bombings carried out by British Muslims, seem to bear out his worries. "The best lack all conviction," wrote the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, "while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

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

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

bm: Or how about this. There is no god, or perhaps a deistic god. Who can tell? But here is what we can say with a high probability of being correct. Really bad things will continue to happen on a regular basis. And, our individual and collective choices will continue to determine the kind of society in which we and our children will live. On this basis alone we have plenty of reason for moral behavior, to keep our promises, be faithful to our spouses, etc. And the social psych literature shows that our behaviour, regardless of religious belief, tends in this direction. We also have plenty of reason to simply enjoy life as it presents itself to us each day.

DP: But, here, an observation needs to be made: If, as in this case, the unbeliever's loss of faith stems from what she might well regard and characterize as a particular, almost revelatory, realization, then whatever arguments she puts forward afterward will be, to some degree or other, ad hoc, designed--no less

than those of apologists for belief--to support a paradigm that was actually chosen on different grounds.

bm: I must not be smart enough to follow this. Peterson will at least agree with me on this point.

DP: Dan Vogel's take on the Witnesses, for example, strikes me as embarrassingly strained and almost desperate. From his presupposed atheistic ...

bm: Another awful atheist.

I wonder what Vogel believes? Peterson gives us no idea. Many people who do not agree with Peterson's ideas about God would give a spiritual, or Karmic or other non-materialist interpretations of the book of Mormon witnesses. However it is not hard to understand why Peterson uses this approach. It is far easier for him to dismiss Vogel's analysis on the basis of his "atheistic" perspective than to deal with the evidence Vogel puts on the table. This is precisely the kind of garbage that sucked me in when I read FARMS review of Compton and decided that I did not need to read Compton.

I have not read Vogel's book, but am familiar with the evidence he no doubt discusses. There is plenty of evidence to support the proposition that the testimonies of the witnesses do not mean what Mormons are taught they mean. That is, it is likely that none of the witnesses actually saw or touched the golden plates, saw an angel etc. It is probable that all of this occurred in some kind of vision, or implanted memory, and that at least some of the witnesses were uncomfortable with the way in which they testimonies were worded and used by Smith.

DP: point of view, however--having conceded that the Witnesses were both sane and sincere, but still unwilling to grant the accuracy of their statements--it is necessary, almost unavoidable, that he explain them away as nineteenth century visionaries to some extent culturally incapable of distinguishing fantasy from reality.

bm: I haven't read Vogel on this point. But how about this. In the early 1800s in the US Northeast there were many people who saw visions that supported the truth claims of various religions. Alleged angelic visitations were common. Affidavits were sworn to this effect. Martin Harris (I think – I am going from memory here) eventually testified to the legitimacy of some of Strang's heavenly visitations.

Were only Smith's "revelations" valid? If so, how do we distinguish his from the rest? Of if they were all of the same kind, how do we explain them? There are plenty of scholars, starting with William James ("The Varieties of Religious Experience") and including more recently people like the neurologist Andrew Newberg (himself a deeply religious person with whom I spent a week last summer) ("Why God Won't Go Away") who do this nicely. The bottom line is that there are many explanations for this kind of experience that do not require a belief that what is reported to us really happened. See the section on "spiritual experience" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 101.

DP: It's a matter of what are sometimes termed "prior probabilities." As Sherlock Holmes said to Dr. Watson, "First, you eliminate the impossible, and then whatever is left, however improbable, must be the truth."

bm: Prior probabilities is one of the keys to Bayesian probability theory, generally regarded, along with scientific investigation, to give us our most reliable understanding of what is real. It has nothing to do with Sherlock Holmes.

DP: The problem of evil itself--so lethal to the faith of that Sunstone atheist--will serve as an illustration of how paradigms and prior probabilities function in these matters. To an agnostic or an atheist, someone who assigns a very low probability (or even none at all) to the existence of God, the existence of massive human and natural evils in this world constitutes a serious and perhaps fatal, if not merely redundant, blow against theistic belief.

bm: That depends entirely on the kind of god one worships. Deists, for example, have no problem with this. I have no trouble with it.

DP: To someone, however, who regards the existence of a benevolent and powerful God as probable, even highly probable or certain, on other grounds, the existence of such massive evils represents merely a problem to be worked out in the light of her theistic presuppositions. Her proposed solutions will seem gratuitously ad hoc to atheistic critics, but, from within her paradigm, function much the same way as refinements to broad scientific theories function under the stimulus of new data and problems.

bm: One of the many problems with that position is that it can be used to defend anything. It does not give uncertainty its due. See the essay at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.does%20mormonism%20cause%20irrational%20belief.pdf> for more on this point.

Why should we believe in the Mormon God instead of the Muslim God or the God of a pygmy tribe in the Amazon? Each is equally defensible, as well as

indefensible. And there is more evidence of alien abductions than for any of these gods. Once we accept as probative of reality the feelings on which religious faith is based, we can prove anything and hence nothing.

DP: Similarly, defenders of the Book of Mormon are sometimes accused of ad hoc improvisations when, from their point of view, they are merely refining and making more precise a paradigm that they regard as reasonable and supportable on other grounds.

bm: I presume this to be a reference to the "limited geography" theory of the Book of Mormon. Or how about that paragon of logic and probability, the "two Cumorahs" theory? These theories tend to only be attractive to those who have deep seated social and other needs to believe. Mormon scientists have indicated that the limited geography theory and the Mormon response to the DNA research of people like Southerton (see http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/magazine/index.php) is improbable. The best Mormons can do on this front with justification is to say that the case against them has not been proved with 100% certainty. The Young Earth Creationists, holocaust deniers, alien abductionists and countless others Mormons regard to be cranks have long used precisely the same defence for their points of faith. This runs back at least as far as the ancients Greeks (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.apologetic%20mind.pdf>).

DP: However, as I've tried to illustrate, such refining is not restricted to theistic paradigms; it occurs just as clearly in naturalistic attempts to explain away claims of the divine. It's not a matter of black and white, but of relative plausibility and richness of explanation.

bm: Let's see how quickly we disappear down a post-modern rabbit hole now.

DP: Some atheists are positively giddy with the good news of unbelief. One reason, of course, is the sadly checkered history of religious believers. "When one considers how much blood has been shed in the name of faith--in whatever God it might be--one might perhaps wish," says Hans-Dieter Gelfert, speaking this time not as a mere observer of the Americans but as, himself, a religiously skeptical European, "that the founders of expansionist religions, among which Christianity figures, had chosen not faith but humble doubt as the royal path to God."²³

bm: Consider how well those terrible atheists in Scandinavia are making out in most social categories important to Mormons.

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

In Pryor's case, his beliefs are so well known, so deeply held, that it's very hard to believe, very hard to believe that they're not going to deeply influence the way he comes about saying, "I will follow the law." And that would be true of anybody who had very, very deeply held views.²⁴

bm: A reasonable point.

DP: "Deeply held views," you see, is frequently a code term for religious views these days, and savors of theocracy.

bm: Why is this the case? There are lots of non-religious ideologies that have done mankind terrible damage. Hitler. Stalin. Pol Pot. Mao. Space craft cults. Etc. The problem is not religious belief per se, it is dogmatic and irrational ideology, such as many aspects of Mormonism.

DP: During a visit a few years ago to Iran, under the auspices and with the sponsorship of the regime there, more than a few of the two dozen or so other American academics who were part of the group pressed me to acknowledge the allegedly strong similarities between Utah and the Islamic Republic. It is fashionable in some circles to speak of Utah as a theocracy, and even of the Latter-day Saints as America's Taliban or, for short, the "Utaliban." Which is, of course, utter nonsense. But the avowedly anti-religious Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven*, which portrays Mormons and Mormonism essentially as a violent threat to non-Latter-day Saints, was a recent bestseller.

bm: Krakauer's fair point is that the seeds of irrationality that caused the murders he chronicled are found in mainstream Mormonism.

DP: Critics of religious belief point recently to al-Qa'ida, the Taliban, and Wahhabism. But they should not be permitted to forget Josef Stalin, nor, for that matter, the entire murderous twentieth century, in which atheists and quasi-atheists killed tens of millions. Hitler, a virulent anti-Christian, regarded humanity as a bacterium on the earth's surface. And Stalin railed against God even on his quite horrible deathbed in March of 1953.

bm: See my point above. More straw men. The point is not that theism or atheism are necessarily bad or good. It is that dogma and other forms of

irrationality are bad. To the extent Mormonism relies on irrational dogma and encourages blind obedience, it is bad.

DP: He had suffered a severe stroke that had left his right side paralyzed, and his last hours were spent in virtually unbearable pain. Slowly, he was strangled. As his daughter Svetlana later reported, her father choked to death while those around his deathbed looked on. Although, at the very last, he had seemed at most merely semiconscious, he suddenly opened his eyes and looked about the room, plainly terrified. Then, according to Svetlana, "something incomprehensible and awesome happened that to this day I can't forget and don't understand." Stalin partially lifted himself in the bed, clenched his fist toward the heavens, and shook it defiantly. Then, with an unintelligible murmur, he dropped motionless back onto his pillow, and died.²⁵

bm: And what inference are we justified in drawing from that story? A man in extremis on his death bed may have done something that appeared odd. Are we to assume that he saw God coming for him? This is too weak to be called fear mongering, though it seems to attempt that.

DP: I confess that I find those who rejoice in atheism baffling.

bm: No surprise here. Peterson's perspective should be expected to make many aspects of our world baffling to him.

One of the important things to note about Mormonism is the extent to which its worldview can prevent its faithful from grasping some of the most basic aspects of the society and culture by which they are surrounded. This is how you explain both people like Peterson, and people like me who until age 45 literally had no idea about the reality of the history and social practise of Mormonism (my own religion) while getting top of the class grades in an undergraduate program in the humanities (minor – religious studies, ironically), law and MBA.

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

bm: And many other stories can be told of atheists or agnostics who went peacefully and happily to their graves. What does this prove? More attempted scare mongering. See the interview with John Maynard Smith at www.meaningoflife.tv for something more realistic.

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

bm: More fear mongering. Many people with even a moderately broad perspective don't seem to have this trouble. As the non-theist and respected biologist Ursula Goodenough puts it, "Life is like a coral reef. We each leave behind the best, the strongest deposit we can so that the reef can grow. But what's important is the reef.". I am content with my place in the reef; to enjoy life's miracle while it lasts; to learn to pay more attention to the tiny part of the miracle that is before me, moment by moment; and think less about those parts of the future that are beyond my influence.

DP: I can certainly understand coming to the sad conclusion that this is, in fact, the truth about the human condition: That we live briefly, then we die, and we rot. That so, too, do our children and our grandchildren. And that so, also, does everything we create--our music, our buildings, our literature, our inventions. That "all we are is dust in the wind." But I cannot understand those who regard this as glorious good news.

bm: This is likely one of those things that one must experience. This transition was a wonderful relief for me, and continues to enliven me. Many others report a similar experience. Again, see Maynard Smith's interview above for a nice summary. And see my account of dealing with a son in the ICU shortly after going through my transition at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.an%20agnostic%20in%20a%20foxhole.pdf>.

DP: Perhaps, on second thought, though, I can understand those who might see it as a liberation. "If there is no God," says Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, "that means everything is permitted." Why? Because nothing matters at all; everything

is meaningless. However, this liberation comes at a very, very high price. "If we believe in nothing," said the great French writer and Nobel laureate Albert Camus,

if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance. There is no pro or con: the murderer is neither right nor wrong. We are free to stoke the crematory fires or to devote ourselves to the care of lepers. Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.²⁶

At the point where it is no longer possible to say what is black and what is white, the light is extinguished and freedom becomes a voluntary prison.²⁷

bm: An old canard. More fear mongering. There is a mountain of social scientific data that shows that our moral instincts have nothing to do with religion and everything with our evolved biology. And this likely is simply explained on the basis that human groups populated by lies and cheats did not prosper. See the bibliography at the end of <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.van%20hale%20show.pdf>.

DP: Consider, too, this supremely complacent remark, offered by a vocal atheist critic of Mormonism during a 2001 Internet discussion: "If there were a God," he reflected, "I think (s)he'd enjoy hanging out with me--perhaps sipping on a fine Merlot under the night sky while devising a grand unified theory." Only someone very comfortably situated could be so marinated in smugness about the question of whether or not God exists.

bm: I would enjoy both the Merlot and the discussion as well. I would prefer Pinot Noir, however, and presume that some well-chosen bread, cheese, olives, etc. would be part of the deal. It is nice to feel comfortable with reality as best we can apprehend it.

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

bm: So what? How does that change the probability of what is real and what is not? Peterson needs a primer in reasoning far more than many he likes to criticize.

DP: Yes, the problem of evil is a huge one, but to give up on God is to give evil the final say. It is to admit that child rapists and murderers dictate the final chapters in the lives of their terrified and agonized victims; that Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot really did triumph, forever, over the millions they slaughtered; that, in the rotting corpses of Darfur and Iraqi Kurdistan, we see the final, definitive chapter of thousands of lives; that there is, really, no hope for those whose health is in irreversible decline; that every human relationship ends in death, if not before.

bm: A big part of Peterson's problem is his narrow point of view regarding how religious people think. When you approach these things that twist his knickers from a Buddhist, Taoist or any of many other religious points of view, they are not problems.

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

Secular anti-Mormons typically criticize The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on two broad grounds. First of all, they say that its claims are untrue.

bm: Amen. I would say that Mormon claims are highly probable to be untrue.

DP: Second, they accuse it and its leaders of wrongdoing--with respect, for example, to the origins of plural marriage, its supposed manipulation of history, and the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

bm: Amen again. The kind of deception Mormons leaders use is not justified.

DP: But it is not clear that, on a purely secular and naturalistic basis, either form of critique can be coherent. In order for one or both types of criticism to be coherent, it may be that theism is a necessary precondition.

bm: I can hardly wait for this.

DP: Permit me to explain, very briefly. I'll take them in reverse order.

First, the critics' basis for criticizing Mormonism on moral grounds is unclear, and its coherence needs to be demonstrated.

bm: See my point above. It is pretty simple. The deception of Mormon leaders is not justified. There are lots of other reasons as well, but this one is enough.

DP: "Rebellion cannot exist," observes Camus, "without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right.²⁸ But on what basis can a materialist, whose universe is exhausted by material particles and the void, claim that something is objectively wrong?"

bm: Here we go down the postmodern rabbit hole. Camus is one of the post-Modern philosophers who support the Mormon intellectual position that as long as it "works", "feels good" etc. Mormon belief and practise is justified. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 10, and go to page 15 to cut straight to the point.

DP: Do right and wrong not become matters merely of personal preference, and, perhaps, of power? Not only existentialists but many superficial "life counselors" suggest that we should construct our own "meaning" for life. But is self-constructed meaning really meaning at all? Or is meaning not, rather, something that can only be received, from another intelligence? And why should anybody else pay even the slightest attention to somebody's self-constructed "meaning?"

bm: Elementary ethics rest on a number of rules, the most common of which resembles the Golden Rule (Kant's categorical imperative), while others are derived from utility theory and justice theory. Deception of the type in which Mormonism's leaders have engaged, and in which they still engage, run contrary to each of these. The idea that atheism implies immorality is preposterous.

DP: Camus observes of the atheistic French revolutionaries of 1793 that, when they effectively "guillotined" God, "they deprived themselves forever of the right to outlaw crime or to censure malevolent instincts."²⁹ "From the moment that man submits God to moral judgment, he kills Him in his own heart. And then what is the basis of morality? God is denied in the name of justice, but can the idea of justice be understood without the idea of God?"³⁰ If those who deny any objective basis for morality nonetheless go on behaving morally and invoking morality, we can only be grateful that they have not pursued the implications of their position to their logical end, and that they continue to live on borrowed moral capital. Of the nihilistic revolutionaries who are the subject of his brilliant meditation in *The Rebel*, Camus remarks that

All of them, decrying the human condition and its creator, have affirmed the solitude of man and the nonexistence of any kind of morality. But at the same time they have all tried to construct a purely terrestrial kingdom where their chosen principles will hold sway.³¹

bm: On whose side is Peterson citing Camus? His words don't fit in my mouth.

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

bm: More fear mongering and straw men. Why don't we talk about the social record of the godless Scandinavian countries? Why don't we talk about the problems with Christianity in America (see <http://harpers.org/ExcerptTheChristianParadox.html>)? Oh, but I suppose if America were all Mormon – all like Utah – things would be much better. Peterson is compelling only to those who share his myopic point of view.

DP: Camus and Auden may have been right. On the basis of what moral principles do secularizing critics pronounce the Church wanting? How were those principles chosen, and why should anybody else defer to them? Even if one were to grant the factual claims on which they stake their moral judgments, it is not at all clear that those moral judgments are capable of bearing any objectively real weight.

bm: See the above. This is one of the reasons for which many Europeans are likely to regard people like Peterson as ignorant. The amount of reading the man has done to understand the little he does must be close to world record territory. And I don't accuse him of stupidity, ill will or anything else of a similar sort. He is a product of Mormon culture. Similar people are found with all other similarly narrow cultures that I have studied. See the long essays referenced at the beginning of this review.

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

bm: I think I can feel what is coming. This runs down the line of the post Modern Mormon position outlined in the Denial essay I reference above.

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

However, on a completely secularist, naturalistic view, it seems that "thoughts" are really merely neurochemical events in the brain, able (in principle, at least) to be described by the laws of physics. But the laws of physics are deterministic--I'll leave quantum indeterminacy out of consideration here ...

bm: Good thing, because it is irrelevant above the quantum level and that is where our brains function.

DP: because I don't think it helps either side much--such that, if "thoughts" are merely physical, it is unclear how we can really say that a conclusion follows from premises. Why? Because any given brain state seems to be causally determined by the preceding brain state. And it is hard, moreover, to see how the neurochemical condition of the brain can have a relationship of either truth or falsity with the atmosphere of a distant planet--or, for that matter, with anything else. A lump of cells is neither true nor false. It isn't "about" anything else; it just is.

bm: I can't believe my good fortune to be witness to the public expression by a prominent Mormon apologist of something this ridiculous.

Peterson here says that we can know nothing about culture, history, etc. if we adopt a naturalistic position (see www.naturalism.org)? I just re-read the paragraph above. It is worse than I thought. Peterson says that if I adopt the secular, naturalist point of view I abandon my claim to be able to find any reliable evidence about anything.

DP: Thus, truly consistent secularist critics of Mormonism may have sawed off the limb on which they were sitting. They may have deprived themselves not only of a standard of moral judgment that cannot be dismissed as merely subjective,

but of a coherent claim to be able to address questions of truth and falsity (with respect to Mormonism and every other topic). Some form of theism, or, at least, of non-naturalism, may be required to save their position from being merely self-refuting. (If it is not, this will have to be demonstrated.) But if they adopt theism, or even mere non-naturalism, they will no longer be secularist critics, but will have become something else.

bm: I can hardly wait to forward this to my never-LDS scientist friends. They will bust a gut.

DP: Many years ago, as a missionary in Switzerland, another elder and I met a woman at the door while we were tracting. When we told her that we represented The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she smiled quite oddly and, even more oddly by Swiss standards, invited us in. She immediately fetched her husband, and asked us to tell him the name of the Church that we represented. He too smiled oddly when he heard it, and I began to wonder what sort of people we had found. But then he explained that he was a Yugoslavian-born physician who had once been a Melchizedek Priesthood holder in our Church. And he told us a story that, I confess, I have never checked since; I may have some of the details wrong, but the gist of it is as follows: Decades before, he had served as a counselor to a priesthood leader in his native country as the communists were consolidating their power there. Several times, he said, this priesthood leader had dreams warning him that members of his congregation needed to flee because the secret police would soon be coming for them. And the man was right every time. However, the former counselor, with whom I was speaking, had eventually made his way to medical school in Switzerland, where his studies had taught him that revelation was an illusion. But how, I asked, did he account for his former priesthood leader's remarkably accurate record of forecasting visits from the secret police, a record of which I knew (and know) nothing but what he had told me? "Brain chemistry and chance," he replied.

bm: That is a good answer.

DP: There was, in other words, no substantial or necessary link between the various brain states of the priesthood leader and external events. That they coincided was just sheer good luck for those who thereby escaped the clutches of the commissars. (I might add that the German missionary with whom I was working that particular day, a converted German merchant sailor who was, to put it mildly, plain spoken, thereupon asked if he could visit the home again with his tape recorder, because, he said, this man furnished an unforgettable specimen of how Satan deceives people. Visibly surprised by such bluntness, the man agreed that he could return.)

bm: Peterson is here treating us to a display of Mormon arrogance based on the same kind of emotional epistemology, and unjustified certainty, that causes suicide bombings and riots over cartoons. Peterson applauds this in the same way other such arrogance and aggressive behaviour is applauded in other ignorant religious communities. Blind faith is a beautiful thing to witness.

DP: If there were powerful arguments compelling us to forsake religious belief, and if there were no persuasive arguments for such belief, we might feel ourselves obliged to accept what I, at least, regard as the bleakness of the secular, naturalistic worldview.

bm: It is clear by now that arguments that many would find compelling are not acceptable to Peterson.

DP: But we are not so compelled, and there are persuasive arguments for belief. The question is at the very least equally balanced. And in such a situation, as William James brilliantly argued against W.K. Clifford, religious belief represents a rational choice. Even if one thinks the matter only fifty-fifty--which I emphatically do not--James's advice to "choose the sunny side of doubt" strikes me as eminently reasonable. Besides, as we now know, it's healthier.

bm: Whether the question is "equally balanced" depends entirely on the evidence one believes to be relevant. If you eliminate emotion based evidence on the basis that it is demonstrable unreliable, the question is far from balanced.

Consider the pattern of irrational belief related to religion described at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.does%20mormonism%20cause%20irrational%20belief.pdf>. Basically, many religious believers (including Mormons) can be shown to generally accept the findings of science, but to deny them where the information produced by science conflicts with important religious beliefs. The Mormon attitude regarding many aspects of archaeology, DNA science etc. relative to the Book of Mormon are a prime example of this. The evidence Mormons and other religious people use to justify their irrational denial of scientific evidence in this regard is mostly emotional and/or social in nature. When the emotional and social evidence is eliminated, the question of belief in any particular kind of God (such as the Mormon version, who is alleged to have appeared to Joseph Smith, etc.) is far from balanced. There is no reason to believe that any of the these versions of God is any more likely to be true than the others. And ask any believer about the probability of the others being true.

DP: I'm grateful to Lou Midgley for drawing my attention to an anecdote related by the eminent Protestant church historian Martin Marty with reference to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It involves the famous eighteenth-

century French hostess Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, the Marquise du Deffand, a friend of Voltaire and other leading intellectuals of the day. When Cardinal de Polignac informed her that the martyr St. Denis, the first bishop of Paris, had walked a hundred miles after his execution, carrying his head in his hand, Madame du Deffand replied that, "In such a promenade, it is the first step that is difficult." She meant, of course, that it is not the claim that St. Denis walked a hundred miles that poses a difficulty. Perhaps he actually walked only ninety-nine miles, or perhaps he walked a hundred and two--such differences are immaterial. The fundamental question is whether, after his beheading, he walked at all. Once that essential point has once been granted, the rest is mere detail.

bm: This is an apt analogy. It uses something extremely unlikely (walking anywhere after having one's head severed) to help us understand something else that is extremely unlikely (Mormonism's founding events being true).

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

if the beginning of the promenade of Mormon history, the First Vision and the Book of Mormon, can survive the crisis, then the rest of the promenade follows and nothing that happens in it can really detract from the miracle of the whole. If the first steps do not survive, there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full interest in the rest of the story.³²

bm: As noted above, these events are about as likely true as is a man to walk anywhere without his head.

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

bm: This position presumes that social groups do not act in ways that affect their truth claims. Think, for example, of the case made by the Fundamentalist Mormons. They say that Mormonism started out as God's only authorized organization (a man walking without his head), but that when polygamy was

abandoned the mainstream Mormon Church apostatized and so lost its authority. And if you take Mormon theology seriously, the FLDS have a pretty good argument. There are three options. First, God made some rules that can't be broken as He told early Mormon leaders. Second, the rules He made were provisional on some basis as later Mormon leaders say. Third, all Mormon leaders have misunderstood or misrepresented their experience and God (if he/she/it exists) did not give any commands in this regard. I prefer the third. There is no reason to assume that either of the first two are necessarily correct, contrary to Peterson/Midgely's assertion.

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

bm: What a lovely note on which to end. Those who believe in magic lamps may also perhaps regard Mormonism's supernatural claims to be worth serious consideration since they are similar, and similarly improbable, phenomena. For the rest of us who prefer the best possible purchase on reality, there are many other alternative and far preferable worldviews.

And as long as faithful Mormons continue to trust people like Peterson to guide them – well intentioned and smart though he no doubt is – they will not have much chance of catching wind of reality.

Concluding Thoughts

A few of the lessons from social science that Peterson's essay demonstrate for Mormons and all others (including those terrible people who frequent RFM) are as follows:

- We all tend to be unjustifiably confident that we are right and those who disagree with us are wrong;
- We tend to dehumanize those who disagree with us so that we can more easily justify not taking them seriously;

- These distorting forces are particularly strong when we are dealing with the ideas that are foundational to our dominant social group or light up the emotional machinery in our brains, and so we should be particularly distrustful of our instincts in situations of this type; and finally
- We should expect the experience people have with religious groups to have a powerfully compelling effect on them – to put them “beyond reasons” in many ways. And we should expect this of ourselves. Pascal Boyer (“Religion Explained”) and many others have noted that the mystic as well as social experience that produces Mormon testimonies and many other kinds of metaphysical belief is powerfully persuasive to the person who has had it, and tends to leave the strong impression that something real has been experienced. William James wrote about this almost 100 years ago in his classic “The Varieties of Religious Experience”:

“... although similar to the states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance... and as a rule, they carry with them a curious sense of authority”.
William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, Modern Library Paperback Edition, 2002, p. 414-415.

Andrew Newberg et al describe the neurology of this process in “Why God Won’t Go Away” (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> at page 77). He believes that the powerfully persuasive experiences that are associated with religious or spiritual practises result from well understood mental processes that suppress the parts of the brain responsible for our sense of separateness. This experience resembles in some ways making love, and hence it is not surprising that once people determined how they could produce it, it attracted a lot of attention and was given special significance.

Meera Nanda sums up as follows:

“At their peak, meditative experiences invariably bring about a feeling of having touched something far deeper and far more real than what is normally experienced by the five senses in our ordinary lives. And this conviction itself becomes a source of validation of the of the objective reality of what they have seen: what they see in their minds, they assume, must exist outside. Vision gets fixed into metaphysical systems built on super-sensory entities and processes. The experience of losing the boundaries of one's ego, the feeling of having transcended time and space, gives the feeling of becoming one with the universe, of "seeing" the entire macrocosm in one's own mind. ...This noetic propensity to make

existence claims with absolute certainty is not a metaphysical excess or a delusion: It is part and parcel of the mystical experience. ... What neurosciences seem to be telling us is that while the neurological processes that give rise to mystical experiences are real, they prove nothing about the ultimate nature of reality or God. Just because we can study the neuro-physiology of mysticism in a scientific manner, does not make the experience scientific or rational in any way. (We can study schizophrenia in a scientific manner, but that does not mean that schizophrenics are rational). (see "Trading Faith for Spirituality: The Mystifications of Sam Harris" a review of Sam Harris' book "The End of Faith" by Meera Nanda at http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_article.asp?9389).

- Pascal Boyer ("Religion Explained") notes that there is an unlimited number of possible explanations for beliefs about god (including perhaps a pink unicorn with magical powers), and yet there are a relatively small number of kinds of "gods" in which human groups believe and these correlate consistently with what we know about how human psychology and sociology work. This pattern itself suggests that the nature of god is function of human psychology and social circumstance rather than an understanding of something that is real. Or as Goethe put it, "As man is; So is his God; And thus is God; Oft strangely odd." Is this a certainty? Have we "proved" it? No. But when we ask "What is more likely, this theory or that?" with regard to Boyer's hypothesis and others like it and any particular set of literalist religious beliefs, it is hard to justify as reasonable the particular religious beliefs. They tend to have been formed in particular historical circumstances and when set in a broader context are not as explanatory or sensible as theories such as that espoused by Boyer which are designed to explain many different religious theories.
- I suggest that data of the kind just summarized is not enough to justify dismissal of the entire idea of "god". God is beyond science, and he/she/it could be something that is simply beyond our comprehension, as many of the leading figures of most major religions have suggested. However, the research just noted is enough to justify the conclusion that anyone who puts forward a specific understanding of god that is contradictory to many other understandings of god should bear the onus of persuading us that this understanding (almost certainly based on some kind of mystic experience of faith in authority) has a higher probability of being correct than Boyer's explanation for the same thing. I do not believe that this can be done.