

Does Mormonism Cause Irrational Belief?

January 1, 2006
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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Notes for a Podcast with “Hyrum” and Mike Norton at
www.thechurchisnottrue.com

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It is the theory [in which we believe that] decides what we can observe. Albert Einstein

Introduction

Most non-Mormons who understand Mormonism will be puzzled by why anyone would think it necessary to ask this question, the answer is so obvious to them, while Mormons will be offended that anyone dare ask it. This reminds me of Joseph Campbell's definition of mythology: “Other people's religion”.

The purpose of this podcast is to expand the perspective around Mormon (or other) religious belief and see if that does anything to how it is perceived. I can say that in my case, this kind of change in perspective has had a radical and helpful impact on how I perceive Mormonism and other religious beliefs.

I prepared this set of notes while in the process of getting information up in the mental air for purposes of discussion. The notes hence contain much more information than we will be able to present, as well as references to websites and other materials that are relevant to the topics we are addressing. Hyrum is going to post these on his website.

The idea that our perception of something (religious belief in this case) changes as the framework or context within which we see it changes is nothing special. This is how our perceptive faculties work with regard to everything else we know about, so it would be odd if it did not happen regarding religion. However, we have powerful perceptive biases built into us that make this a painful exercise, and dramatically slow down this process or even prevent it from happening. Social scientists think that this is because of the importance of being a member of a stable social group has historically had to human survival. In particular, we are biased against perceiving anything that might threaten our place in our group (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 116).

After considering how perception works in general, we will examine the pattern of irrational human beliefs that result from the conflict between religious and scientific understanding of what is real, and then look at a couple of specific examples from Mormon history that concern the foundations of Mormon belief and see whether the context surrounding them changes how they are perceived, and we will take about the reasons for which many Mormons cannot digest this information when its meaning seems obvious to non-Mormons.

Personal background

I was born to faithful Mormon parents. I am the oldest of seven siblings. My parents have each served in almost all Mormon leadership positions from the Stake level down. My parents and all of my siblings are still “faithful” Mormons as far as I know. My Mormon ancestors go back to Nauvoo. I have polygamous great grandparents. I was a “rebellious” teen in what I now see as a minor way. I was experimenting with life in the usual teenage way. But my “sinning” caused me to leave home at age 16 due to the stress it caused within my family. This rift caused great pain to me, and so I repented fully at age 18 and had some powerful spiritual experiences on which my testimony depended (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> at page 77) for many years. I became a “straight arrow” because playing loose with the rules had been so painful and so from then on it was straight up the middle of the fairway for me – I was a completely obedient Mormon from then until my mid-40s.

I went on mission to southern Peru (1977 – 79). My wife and I married in the Cardston temple about 18 months after I arrived home from Peru. We had our first child 9.5 months later, and now have seven children and one grandchild. I completed a BA (Russian language major and religious studies minor), then a law degree and an MBA (near top of the class grades in each case) and have practise taxation related business law for the last 20 years. I served in many Mormon leadership positions including Bishop for five years from age 30 to 35.

I am now 47 years old. About 4 years ago I asked to be released as Stake Mission Pres. of the Calgary, Alberta Stake. Shortly thereafter I began to seriously read Mormon history for the first time in my life. A few months later on Dec. 15 2002 I resigned my Mormon membership.

I celebrate Dec. 15 each year as my “Independence Day”. I think it appropriate that this date falls so near the winter equinox which has been celebrated by most human cultures since the beginning of recorded history as a time to be thankful for the annual renewal or rebirth of the Earth herself.

See

<http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.the%20creation%20and%20erosion%20of%20false%20faith%20-%20a%20timeline.pdf> for more detail as to how I perceive my journey through Mormonism.

Destruction and Construction of a Worldview

I did a lot of praying, reading, writing and thinking as I left Mormonism and tried to put a then-shattered world back together again. After I discovered Internet bulletin boards, people started asking for copies of the “notes” I made as part of my study (or as I now perceive it, my self therapy – see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.art%20therapy%20for%20recovering%20mormons.pdf>), and eventually it was easier to set up a website than send out long word documents by email. So I have created a website at <http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>.

The process of watching cherished beliefs turn to dust was the most painful and traumatic of my life. The process of creating a new world view from scratch was the most exciting, enlivening and joyful of my life. I have never felt as grounded, interested in life, enthusiastic about the future (short, mid and long term) than I do now.

“Leaving the Church” but “Not Leaving it Alone”

Some Mormons tell me that I am just another person who left the “Church” but “can’t leave it alone” as predicted by Mormon prophets. My response is that it is pretty easy to prophesy when you predict what tends to happen anyway, like balls roll downhill.

Scientists (see for example David Sloan Wilson, “Darwin’s Cathedral”) tell us that in humans as well as many other small group animal populations, once a cheater or source of danger has been identified, individual group members will expend more energy than makes sense from their personal point of view to warn the group about the cheater or source of danger so that he won’t be able to take advantage of other group members. The warning instinct in birds is an example of this. The first bird to spot an approaching hawk or other predator will issue a warning call, even though this will make it more likely that the predator will attack the bird that calls.

This behaviour in general is thought to be due to the way in which we depend on our social groups, and so our instinct is to sacrifice ourselves to some extent for the betterment of the group.

My behaviour relative to Mormonism, once I found out that I had been systematically deceived by mostly well intentioned family members and leaders, was to issue a warning that might save members of my group – and particularly members of my family – from the kind of pain and difficulty I have suffered. It is clear that I expend more effort on this part of my life than can be justified by the benefits I receive from it. My time is worth a lot of money, and during the past few years I have spent a lot of time reading and writing about Mormonism.

But as noted above, this is normal behaviour, and to predict it as have some Mormon prophets requires as much inspiration as to predict that if you deceive people they will be angry with you and some of them will try to punish you for your deceit while warning others to stay away from, or be careful with, you.

The Effect of Perspective on Perception

All of our perceptions and hence beliefs are far more dependant on perspective than we generally realize. It is easy to demonstrate this with ordinary perception. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perception> and [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761571997_1/Perception_\(psychology\).html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761571997_1/Perception_(psychology).html). Much our out ability to perceive depends upon the frame of reference (of different kinds) within which we see something.

Our perception of colour changes each time we place one colour beside something that is different. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color>. Our perception of music changes with the kind of art we are looking at, and vice versa. See PBS site - <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/multimedia/multimedia.html>; then click on “Keeping Score: MTT on Music” and then “Primal Moves”.

Our perception of our own culture changes each time we come to know another culture. This is the old “fish don’t know anything about water” idea. I learned at least as much about Canada as Peru while I served a Mormon mission in Peru. As I came to know China through my legal work over many years with people from Hong Kong and Taiwan, I also came to know Canada. Etc.

The concepts of “figure” and “ground” in art, or “melody” and “harmony” in music are our best understood examples of this phenomena (see Hofstadter, “Godel, Escher Bach”). It is well known in the visual arts that if I want to change how the figure (the subject of my painting) is perceived, I can either change it or the “ground” (the context within which the figure appears). Likewise, if I want my melody to sound differently, I can either change it or the harmony that goes with it.

Importantly, most complex phenomena can be perceived in many different ways, and we tend to be able to see many of these. However, we stop being able to see alternative interpretations of ambiguous data once we are rewarded for seeing one interpretation. The same would apply if it is important for any reason (like fitting into our group) that we see a particular interpretation of ambiguous data and not others (see Interpretative ambiguity - <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 90).

And perhaps most importantly, the perception of magic depends upon controlling the context within which something is seen, or not seen. If we are caused to focus on one thing, many other things often escape our notice (see Misdirection - <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 96).

Most religious people, including most faithful Mormons, would agree with everything I just said. However, they would disagree if I suggested that these principles apply also to religion. That is, religion is in a privileged category as far as they are concerned. It is just “true”. Full stop. No discussion. That is that. This position cannot be justified on rational grounds.

Literalist v. Metaphoric Religious Belief

Literalist religious belief is a powerful model or theory which has a predictably pervasive effect on our ability to see and understand what is around us. This causes us to assume to be real things have a high probability of not existing, and to misperceive or not perceive at all many things that have a high probability of being real, but are inconsistent with our theory of reality as dictated by literalist religious belief.

As already noted, I am not critiquing metaphoric religious belief. While it has some potential for mischief, in my view for the most part it tends to be an important part of many healthy approaches to life. And Mormonism can be taken either literally or metaphorically. I know some Mormons whose understanding of their faith is entirely metaphoric. I predict that we will see a movement in this direction as time passes with regard to well educated people who choose to remain affiliated with the Mormon Church. This is not hard to predict. Virtually every mainstream Christian religions either has, or is, going through this transition.

For example, the Mormon doctrine that man can literally become like god has many metaphoric antecedents, and in my view is a wonderful metaphor (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> at page 22) that encourages us to think in terms of our unity with all being, and our role as creators. We may see ourselves as having the to decide what we value, and then act so as to bring this into existence. By so doing we become in small ways like the gods. The more powerful humankind becomes the more apt this analogy, and the more we can learn from ancient mythology’s error prone gods.

The idea that man is one with god is one of the oldest theological concepts that Smith likely came into contact with during his relatively superficial schooling in Jewish Kabbalistic mysticism (see <http://www.gnosis.org/jskabb1.htm>), which was in turn influenced by Christian Gnosticism,

which likely was influenced by much older Hindu and Buddhist concepts. The Hindu tradition's position on this point is summarized as follows:

“For Hindus, this attempt to divest the ego by consciously realizing its identity with the ground of the entire macrocosm - what the Hindus call the Brahman - is the very essence of what the Vedas and Upanishads teach: "Thou art That," "all this Brahman" and the atman (self) in you is the Brahman. Brahman, the Vedas teach, is the sole, truly existing, non-material, eternal reality which is beyond space, time and causation. Once you experience the sense of being beyond space, time and causation through yoga, breath control and meditation, you will realize the truth of the Vedas, namely, the self in you (atman) is identical with Brahman, your consciousness encompasses the entire macrocosm, and that you are, in fact, God. Once you reach this state of mind, you are not held back by fears or tempted by desires: the here and now of the material world become illusory and lose their grip on one's mind. Thus, the achievement of the sense of one-ness with the universe is a central commandment of Hindu and Buddhist teachings. While Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions have their mystics, only the Eastern traditions provide a doctrine that can make sense of the mystical experience of unity or one-ness. (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)

Most religions include a mixture of metaphorical and literal beliefs. Mormonism has some metaphorical beliefs, such as that the Biblical story of the earth's creation in six days is not to be taken literally, but rather is a metaphor for six creative periods that must have lasted much longer than 24 hours each given what science tells us.

Due to the findings of science, linguistic and textual analysis of the Bible and other ancient religious documents, for the last couple of hundred years at least there has been a trend within Christianity and other religions toward a more metaphoric understanding of religious texts and concepts. Some Christian sects regard the entirety of the Old and New Testaments as metaphoric. And pastors tend to be more metaphoric than regular members.

However, within orthodox Mormonism most of Mormonism's foundational beliefs are taken to be literally true. God really did create Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden that really was in Missouri; God impregnated Mary in the usual fashion and hence Jesus is God's literal son; God really did appear to Joseph Smith; Joseph really did translate the Book of Mormon from golden plates an angel really gave to him; the Book of Mormon stories really happened; etc.

It is the dogmatic approach to knowledge required by literalist religious belief that causes the problems I will try to point out during this podcast. To the extent a religion can be shorn of its dogma, it will become more functional and healthier for its adherents in my view. However, religious authority is usually largely based on dogma. Once authority has to be earned it is much more difficult to maintain. If history is any guide, those in control of religious institutions can be counted on to give up their power and influence as slowly as possible, and this means giving up the literalist belief and dogma that sustains power as slowly as possible.

Religious dogma regarding authority can be thought of in business terms as a barrier to entry; something like a monopoly power that keeps other competitors out of a market. And it has the same effect as monopoly power: It creates costly, poor service oriented organizations that are designed more to benefit those who run them than those whom the organizations are supposed to serve.

Literalist religious beliefs in an age dominated by science and religious belief are a fascinating study in consistent, predictable contradiction. For example, most modern religions, including literalist religions like Mormonism, accept reason as our best guide to reality except where it conflicts with “revealed truth” in a way that would threaten the credibility and hence authority of the religious institution in question.

The authority and credibility of religious institutions and their leaders is critically important because literalist religious believers place enormous confidence and trust in the ability of their religious institution and its leaders to tell them what is “right” or “true” and hence “what to do” regarding a wide variety of contentious, difficult to answer questions. For example,

1. What are the proper roles of man and women in the home, community, government, etc.?
2. Is birth control or abortion justifiable, and in which circumstances?
3. In what circumstances is sexual intercourse permitted (and hence implicitly how young should people marry and start having children)?
4. Is homosexuality justified?
5. How should different races relate to each other and is interracial marriage OK?
6. When is war justifiable?
7. To what extent is it justified for humans to play god by cloning, genetic engineering, combining technology with human and other biology, etc.?

By answering questions of this kind religions have both simplified social interactions (which is useful in some ways) and created social fiefdoms under the control of different religious and/or political leaders. This supercharges the natural and increasingly dangerous human tribal propensity that is part of our small herd animal heritage.

The history of each literalist religion and hence the “truths” that they have emphasized while answering questions such as those above constrains their ability to accept the knowledge that science has to offer and creates a predictable pattern of irrationality.

Literalist Religious Belief Impairs Our Ability to Perceive and Reason in Some Ways

Alcohol Impairs Judgement

You are at a party. One of your friends has had five beers during two hours because he is upset about breaking up with his girlfriend. And he is not headed to his car to drive home after loudly proclaiming, “I’mmm noooo drun” and “I aaam juus fiiiine ta driv hom!!!”. You don’t doubt his sincerity or the certainty of his belief. Do you feel justified to take his keys away, forcefully if necessary, and prevent him from driving his car?

Most people would feel justified to intervene. In fact, if it is your house and he is your invited guest, you probably have a legal obligation to take his keys away from him.

The justification for both our feeling about the “right” thing to do and the law that in some cases compels us to act is objective data that clearly indicates that a certain amount of alcohol impairs human judgement. There is no reasonable basis on which to dispute that conclusion.

So, once someone has had a more than a certain amount of alcohol, we do not take what they say seriously. We may love them, trust them in most circumstances, etc. but in this particular circumstance, we don’t trust them because we understand that they are “under the influence” of something that overpowers their reasoning ability.

During this podcast, I will attempt to demonstrate that certain types of religious belief overpower the human ability to reason in a fashion similar to alcohol. That is not to say that religion somehow makes people drunk or that the impairing capacity of religion is as extensive as it is regarding alcohol. But rather, that just as there is a correlation between drinking alcohol and impaired reasoning, there is a correlation between certain types of religions belief and certain kinds of impaired reasoning and that this pattern is so predictable that it is reasonable to infer that religion causes this particular form of impairment to our rational faculties.

I am not suggesting that the impairment mechanism is the same and in fact I am sure it is quite different. All I suggest is a similar correlation between circumstance (drinking alcohol or having certain religious beliefs) and inability to perceive and react normally to certain kinds of stimuli.

The Effect of Literalist Religious Belief on Perception and Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of how we come to believe that we “know” something (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology> and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 7). Most of us use a curious mix of epistemic principles. For the most part, we have adopted the norms of science as our most reliable means of discerning reality, but we allow those to be overridden by other means of “knowing” what is real, such as those used by literalist religion.

The Interface Between Literalist Religious Belief and a Scientific Epistemology

In basic terms, here is how I believe the interface between literalist religious belief and a scientific epistemology works:

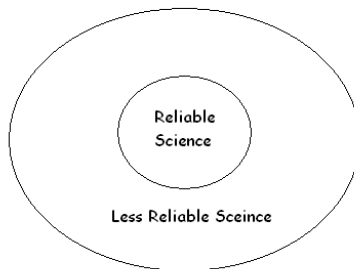
1. The scientific method produces the most reliable knowledge known to man through its use of a particular type of reasoning by a community of people dedicated to checking each other’s work to ensure the highest possible degree of accuracy.
 - (a) The scientific method is the use of various evidence gathering and theory testing mechanisms to form and test hypotheses about how the natural world works.
 - (b) Science works on the basis of the majority view. Sometimes the minority is proven right over time. However, at any given time the most reliable information is that accepted as the best we have by the majority of knowledgeable scientists working in the area in question, and unless something like a religious belief gets in the way that is what we tend to accept and act upon.

- (i) Therefore, if we want to have the greatest chance of achieving our objectives it is rational to accept the majority view of knowledgeable scientists working in the area in question and irrational not to do so.
 - (ii) And if we are rational we will adopt and use that information as soon as we reasonably can and we will be consistent in how we use it. That is, we are irrational if before accepting and acting upon certain kinds of scientific information (for example, that which conflicts with our religious views) we require a far higher probability that it is accurate than we require in other similar cases.
- (c) All scientific analysis is done on the basis of what is more probable to be accurate. That is, the question is not “is this idea true or not?” but rather something like, “how probable is it that this theory is our best approximation at the moment of truth, and what degree of reliability can we expect if we use this theory to predict future events?”
 - (d) The most reliable of scientific knowledge produces the amazing technologies we use every day.
2. The primacy given by religion to science (except when it is too dangerous to do so as indicated above) is the result of the success science has had in developing technology and predicting many things.
 - (a) That is, science has had far greater demonstrable prophetic success, and success in performing what amount to miracles, than has religion.
 - (b) Imagine our ancestors seeing television, flight to outer space, cell phones, medical treatments, etc. These are miracles produced by science. This demands that science be acknowledged as our most powerful means of coming to understand reality.
 3. Science’s status as our best means of understanding reality frequently brings it into conflict with ideas that religious believers perceive to be foundational to the legitimacy and authority of their religious institutions. The primacy religious believers give to demonstrably improbable beliefs in this regard produces the irrational pattern of belief that I am attempting to describe.
 4. I define “reason” or “rationality” to mean that we will seek out, accept and use the information most likely to enable us to have the highest probability of achieving our conscious objectives. It is therefore irrational to ignore such evidence, and it is irrational to use that evidence inconsistently.
 5. Here is a simple example of how a rational behavioural model might look:
 - (a) I have an objective of some kind;
 - (b) I will act based on my understanding of cause and effect relationships so as to achieve that objective;

- (c) Hence, I will consistently seek and use all reliable information reasonably available to me as to the cause and effect relationships that will help me to achieve my objective.
 - (d) To the extent that my behaviour is consistent with this model, my behaviour is “rational”.
 - (e) To the extent my behavior is inconsistent with this model, my behaviour is “irrational”.
 - (f) See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reason>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationality> ; and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principle_of_rationality for background material as to how “reason” is treated for various scholarly purposes
6. The Dark Ages were characterized by a lack of the rational, testable kind of reasoning that science uses and a focus instead of the metaphysics of theology (how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?; how does the godhead work?; etc.). The return to the Greek emphasis on investigation and reasoning with regard to testable phenomena brought with it the Renaissance, which eventually led to democracy and the kind of society we now treasure.
- (a) The importance of concentrating our energy on improving ideas that are testable is hard to overestimate. This is what dragged Europe out of the Dark Ages. It's neglect in favour theology and religious faith is also what pushed the Muslim world into its own version of the Dark Ages shortly after 1000 CE (see Van Doren, “The History of Knowledge”). The lack of testable hypotheses and reasoning is one of the reasons for which the disputes in Northern Ireland and Palestine are so long running and show few signs of resolution – there is no rational basis to resolve these disputes.
 - (b) When we concentrate our energies on testable ideas we will predictably and gradually winnow away what does not work and then refine and improve the ideas that work or have the most potential to work. On this simple basis science has produced enormous human power and wealth during the last few centuries.
 - (c) People like Mormon apologists can seldom see that by their abuse of reason in defence of Mormonism they destroy their ability to distinguish Mormonism from other forms of irrational belief. In many ways, one kind of irrationality is as bad (or good) as another. This is the point of the review referred to above of Sam Harris’ recent book “The End of Faith” at (See http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_article.asp?9389).
 - (d) On the other hand, Galileo’s views (the Earth goes around the Sun, etc.) were eventually accepted by the majority of humankind, despite how threatening and unpopular they initially seemed. The same is true for Darwin’s views regarding biological evolution, though it will take much more time for those to be absorbed to the extent Galileo’s have been.
7. Scientific knowledge becomes less reliable as the phenomena in question become more complex. Phenomena like the prediction of weather patterns, whether global warming is

due to human activities, how important population control is to future human welfare, how human culture will develop in the future and why it has developed as it has are susceptible to scientific analysis but with far less precision and hence predictability than how cell phones can be counted on to work, for example.

- (a) Take the impact of human beings on global warming as an example. This is a complex, contentious area of scientific enquiry. However, a strong majority view has now developed with regard to it (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_warming). See also in this regard <http://www.ucsus.org/>, <http://www.earthpolicy.org/>.
 - (b) I suggest Googling “global warming” “scientific consensus” to get an idea of the polarization of opinion this issue causes, and the range of views. It is similar in a sense to some religious issues in that it is so complex that lay people cannot realistically test the opinions put forward by the experts, and it is so important in a variety of ways that it produces an emotional roar that drowns reason’s measured but relatively quiet voice (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf> at page 34).
 - (c) For a look at the question of human overpopulation and its potential impact on the Earth and humanity, see http://www.earthpolicy.org/Books/Out/Ote2_3adapt.htm as well as comments by Harvard’s Edward O. Wilson including “The Future of Life” at http://www.ncseonline.org/ncseconference/2001conference/Chafee/2001Chafee_Report.pdf, “The Bottleneck” at <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?articleID=000E5878-3E45-1CC6-B4A8809EC588EEDF&catID=2>, an interview at <http://www.pbs.org/thinktank/transcript1021.html>.
 - (d) It is irrational for those of us who are not experts to ignore the majority scientific opinion with regard to something like global warming. Many in North America still ignore this information likely as a result of the sacrifices it calls upon us to make. Our ignorance may cost our descendants dearly. This kind of “denial” (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>) is a common and well understood feature of human perception. It applies to religious and other beliefs as well that would be painful and otherwise difficult to change in the same fashion it does to things like global warming.
8. There is a huge area outside of science. That is, science only addresses questions that are testable and there are likely far more questions that are not testable than testable given the means science has at her disposal at the moment. Does God exist? What is God like? Does Heaven exist? Hell? What caused the Big Bang? Do the parallel dimensions predicted by String Theory exist? None of these questions as well as countless others are amenable to scientific analysis. Science has been aptly described as a small clearing in the midst of a vast forest, with the odd trail pushing out from the clearing into the forest’s darkness.
9. See the figure below for a graphic representation of “Reliable Science”, “Less Reliable Science”, and “Non-Science”. Consider the “Non-Science” area to be without limits.



- (a) When dealing with issues that are outside of science, it is more rational to accept theories that are consistent with science than those that are not. For example, science cannot tell us what caused the Big Bang. However, if one person suggests to me that he believes our reality to be the result of a cosmic pink unicorn with magical powers who created us in some kind of a science experiment to entertain his kids, and another person tells me that reality as we know it was the result of a natural process that we still do not understand, I am justified in believing that the second person is more reasonable than the first. That is, in cases where we don't know how things work, it is more rational to admit uncertainty instead of accepting any particular and specific theory of what happened. Among the many good things this does is keep our minds as open and flexible as possible. Once we make up our minds as to how something works, that will hinder us from seeing other alternatives. So we should delay that event for as long as reasonably possible and only do so on the basis of solid evidence (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 63 and page 90).

- (b) And, at the fringes of science we can sometimes find patterns that will allow us to use science in surprising ways. For example, Pascal Boyer in “Religion Explained” shows surprisingly consistent patterns in religious beliefs regarding things such as god and explains them on the basis of other aspects of human psychology and sociology. I might find, for example, on questioning the first person above, that his believe in the pink unicorn was handed down to him by his ancestors and plays an important role in ordering his society. This would strengthen my belief that he is likely not perceiving anything real that is outside his own head when he thinks he is communion with his unicorn god.
- (c) Boyer also notes other patterns with regard to religious belief. For example, 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.
- (i) 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.”
- (ii) 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.
- (iii) Interestingly, some New Age ideologies that formed in light of the naturalistic point of view tend to fair better in this analysis than traditional religions. This likely accounts for at least part of New Age’s growing popularity.
- (d) This brings up another pattern noted by Boyer and many others – 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.
- (i) 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.

- (ii) 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.
- (iii) 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).

- (e) I suggest that data of this kind 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.

10. As noted above, literalist religious believers in the Developed World tend to accept science, but also tend to believe that when science conflicts with their religious beliefs that science should give way. This creates a predictable pattern as follows: Smart, well-educated and literalist religious people will tend to have irrational beliefs wherever their religious beliefs contradict science. These can be mapped as set out below.

How Different Literalist Religious Believers Deny Science

11. I am going to run down a list of questions about different things that is designed to get us to think about how certain, or uncertain these things are from a scientific point of view, and how different kinds of religious or irreligious people would react to them. As we go through these questions, think about how each of the following kinds of person would react to them, assuming in each case that they are well educated, intelligent and well informed:

- (a) a Mormon,
- (b) a Young Earth Creationist Christian ("YEC"),
- (c) a Jehovah's Witness ("JW"),
- (d) a New Age believer who does not accept belief in God, accepts all branches of science that are shown to be reliable, believes that the Earth and universe are forms of life (see Brian Swimme's interview at www.meaningoflife.tv), and to the extent that a certain form of astrology does not conflict with science (think of the area outside both circles above) takes seriously ideas related to "karma" or "fate" that are derived from this astrology, and uses quantum physics and string theory to justify as reasonable this form of belief. I know a number of scientifically oriented people who fit this description,
- (e) an atheist scientist who is believer in alien abductions. I will provide more background regarding this kind of person below drawn from personal experience.

12. Here are the questions:

- (a) If I place a lighted match in a pale of gasoline, the gasoline has a high probability of exploding.
- (b) If I place a lighted match in a pale of water, the match has a high probability of going out.
- (c) If I follow certain procedures, I can:
 - (i) Cause an atom to split and produce a terrific explosion;
 - (ii) Make my voice heard on the other side of the Earth or in outer space;

- (iii) See some of what is happening right now in places on the other side of the Earth, in parts of outer space or inside my own heart;
- (d) Up this point, our entire group is in agreement – science is accepted as the best means of predicting what is real.
- (e) The Earth is far more than 6,000 years old.
 - (i) The YEC alone disputes this and so parts company with the rest here.
- (f) Genetically, there is only a tiny difference between humans and mice, and even less between humans and other primates.
 - (i) Everybody is OK here.
- (g) Most life on Earth is the result of biological evolution.
 - (i) The YEC parts company again despite agreeing on genetics.
- (h) Humankind evolved from the same branch of life as mice and apes.
 - (i) The YEC, the Mormon and the JW (I think) all dispute this.
- (i) The kind of God in which the Mormon/Evangelical Christians/JWs/Muslims etc. believe really exist;
 - (i) Each disagrees with all of the others.
- (j) God (pick any kind you wish) caused evolution;
 - (i) Beliefs are all over the map again.
- (k) Life on Earth originated on another planet.
 - (i) Beliefs all over the map but depending on radically different kinds of evidence.
 - (ii) The alien abductee believer/scientist has peculiar and specific beliefs that are completely at odds with his otherwise scientific outlook, while expressing as a possibility beliefs like those found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origin_of_life or http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/life_origin_041130.html.
 - (iii) For a religious take on some of the same issues see <http://www.answersingenesis.org/home/area/faq/origin.asp>.
- (l) God (pick any kind you wish) created evidence of evolution, dinosaur bones etc. to test the faith of humankind;

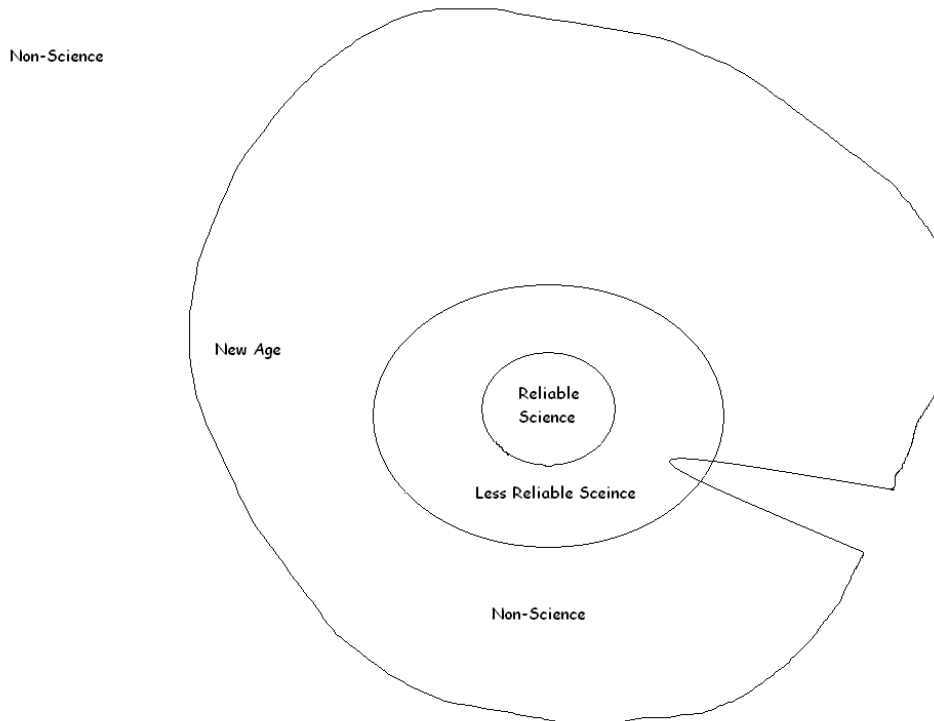
- (i) The YEC is on her own again.
- (m) If we continue to have babies and burn fossil fuels at current rates, we may have an environmental catastrophe on our hands.
 - (i) The alien abductee/scientist and New Ager are likely to have strong opinions re. this, but will not express anything like the certainty as with regard to the technology oriented questions above.
 - (ii) Others are all over the map.
 - (iii) The YEC may believe that God is in control of the process or the “End of Times” is about here, so don’t worry about it. See <http://www.harpers.org/ExcerptTheChristianParadox.html> - “Other End-Timers are more interested in forcing the issue—they’re convinced that the way to coax the Lord back to earth is to “Christianize” our nation and then the world. Consider House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. At church one day he listened as the pastor, urging his flock to support the administration, declared that “the war between America and Iraq is the gateway to the Apocalypse.” DeLay rose to speak, not only to the congregation but to 225 Christian TV and radio stations. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “what has been spoken here tonight is the truth of God.” The apocalyptic may not be wrong. One could make a perfectly serious argument that the policies of Tom DeLay are in fact hastening the End Times. But there’s nothing particularly Christian about this hastening. The creed of Tom DeLay—of Tim LaHaye and his Left Behind books, of Pat Robertson’s “The Antichrist is probably a Jew alive in Israel today”—ripened out of the impossibly poetic imagery of the Book of Revelation.”
 - (iv) If I join the Mormon Church and live by its standards I will be happier than if I continue my life as a JW/YEC, etc.
 - (A) The Mormon will be on his own here.
 - (v) Repeat the last question for each of the other religious believers with the same result.
 - (vi) The essence of a human being – her spirit – is contained in the blood so blood transfusions are to be avoided even if the cost is death.
 - (A) the JW is on her own here.
 - (vii) Authority should be judged, and trusted, on the basis of its ability to predict.
 - (A) All agree.
 - (viii) JW leadership is not reliable because it has failed on at least have a dozen occasions to predict the second coming of Christ.

- (A) All agree, except the JW.
- (ix) People who are proven to have been deceptive or consistently incorrect regarding matters of importance should not be trusted without independent verification of the legitimacy of what they have to say.
 - (A) All agree.
- (x) Examples are provided in the case of each of the YEC leaders, Mormon leaders and JW leaders which clearly establish that each have been either deceptive or incorrect regarding many matters of foundational importance with respect to their religious movements.
 - (A) In each case, the believers either reject or rationalize the evidence of deception and/or error and indicate that the leaders in question are worthy of continued trust, and all the rest of the group shake their heads in amazement.
- (xi) The form of astrology espoused by the New Ager offers information about the future that is more reliable than chance.
 - (A) This brings into focus the similarities between the New Ager and the scientifically oriented religious believers.
 - (B) They all reject her numerology or astrology just as she rejects their forms of religious faith.
 - (C) The difference is that since her astrological beliefs arose after science was well established they do not conflict with science at all, whereas since each of the religious believers views pre-date science to extent there are areas of conflict.
- (xii) What will happen after death?; what happened before life on Earth?; what is the nature of God?; etc.
 - (A) Beliefs all over the map.

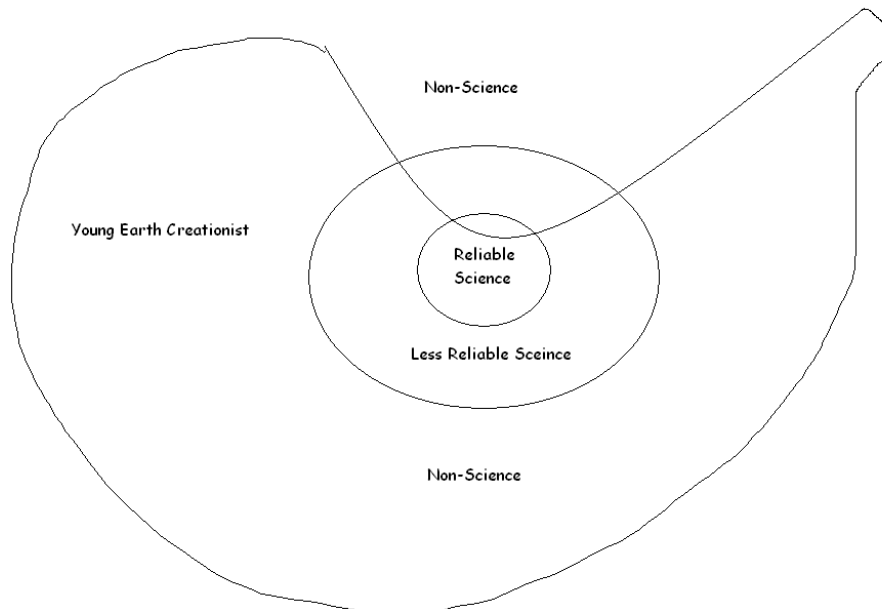
Belief Maps

13. I note the following pattern regarding answers to these questions:
- (a) The YEC has the most trouble with science since her views are the oldest and most literal.
 - (b) Both the Mormon and the JW make for a more interesting analysis relative to science since Mormonism arose in the early 1800s and the JWs in the late 1800s, and so incorporate an early scientific understanding into their theologies, but their early leaders (while perhaps thinking that they were being consistent with science) committed to positions that are now thought to be scientifically silly.

- (c) If we map the belief systems of the individuals just considered against the circles defined by science on the map we talked about earlier, in each case we see a pattern of contra scientific beliefs that tend to be inconsistent with the attitudes of the person in question regarding science in general, and that tend to match their religious beliefs. That is, each person will have contra scientific beliefs that are inconsistent with the remainder of the scientific outlook (and hence irrational), but that are consistent with their religious beliefs.
- (d) The New Ager (See figure below) will tend to have the following contra-scientific beliefs:
- (i) The idea that astrology has any merit at all disagrees with science. This causes people to put faith in probably false cause and effect mechanisms.
 - (ii) But the conflict with science will be less than that of the traditional religionists.
 - (iii) For example, my wife and I were at a party a few nights ago. A nice lady offered to analyze both my wife's name (Juli) and the name of one of her friends who was also there (Julie) to see if they were "balanced" and "what they meant". This lady then launched into a complex numerology/astrology exercise that reminded me a bit of the Chinese Feng Shui tradition (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feng_Shui) which I think she called the "Calvarian philosophy". I Googled just now and could not find anything for that or related terms. In any event, on the basis of the single letter difference in the two names just noted, this nice lady could have gone on for hours regarding the differences between my wife and her friend in terms of personality, etc. and suggested that by changing their names they could change the personalities, course of life, etc. She, in fact, changed her name five years ago for this reason. We found out that books are published that allow you to get what essentially a horoscope for yourself day by day, and that if Christopher Reeves had used this system, he would have known that he was in grave danger the day he broke his neck and would not have gone out of the house that day, and hence would still be OK today. Etc. I listened politely, let the lady know that I thought this was basically another form of Feng Shui or astrology and as useful or not as either of those, and allowed her to bear us her testimony of how much better her life has been since she adopted these practices. My wife noted that sometimes just believing that good things are coming your way allows you to live better, and we left it at that. The lady in question was unstable enough that I did not want to push the point, and eye brows were raising all over the room as people listened to her story. After the party, I told my wife that I didn't see any difference in principle between the system of knowledge this lady used and many aspects of Mormonism, including father's blessings, patriarchal blessings, and other ways of deciding how to behave that are based in superstition.

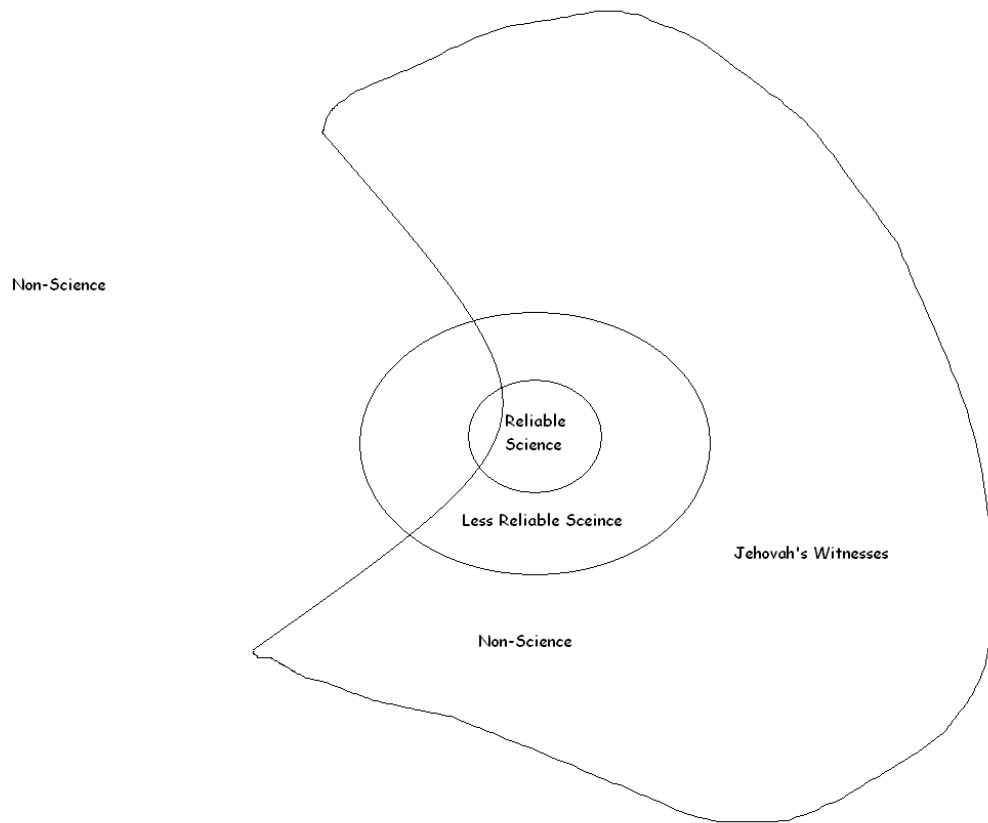


- (e) The YEC (see figure below) will tend to have the following beliefs: If I am with a scientifically oriented person and I find out that they are a fundamentalist Christian, I can predict with a high probability of being right that they will be ignorant of and/or dispute most aspects of evolutionary theory as well as the scientifically recognized age of the earth. This means that they will likely be ignorant of or disagree with evolutionary psychology and a variety of other forms of knowledge that are proving valuable to many people in many ways as a result of a wide variety of human behaviour that it enables us to predict with a greater degree of reliability than anything else that has come along so far. It means that they will likely regard knowledge and human culture of various types as dangerous. This group of people tends toward extreme political views and dysfunctional magical thinking of a variety of sorts.

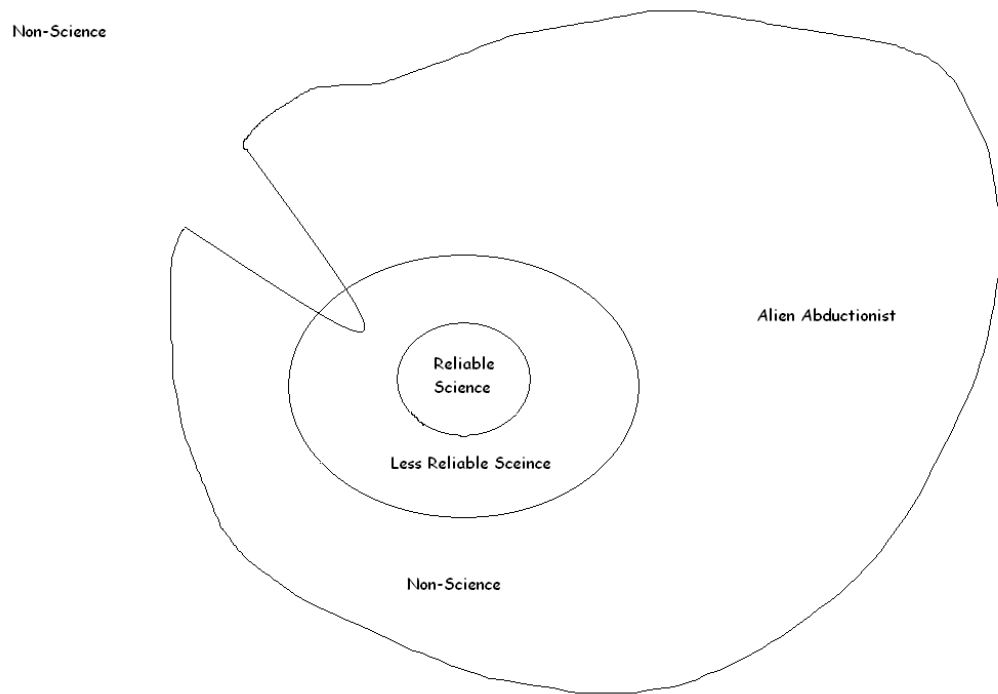


- (f) The JW (see figure below) will tend to have the following beliefs:
- (i) She will be ignorant of the science related to and/or espouse certain odd beliefs about the importance of blood (it contains the human spirit) and will hence think that blood transfusions are unethical;
 - (ii) Largely as a result of this she is likely to have odd opinions regarding the rights of government to mandate various kinds of individual behavior;
 - (iii) And yet, JWs will use science to argue their case against other religions (see http://www.watchtower.org/library/g/2002/6/8/article_01.htm - "Understandably, religion has been rejected by many people of science for its resistance to scientific progress, its dismal record, and its hypocrisy and cruelty. Professor of microbiology John Postgate points out: "The world's religions have . . . brought the horrors of human sacrifice, crusades, pogroms and inquisitions. In the modern world this darker side of religion has become dangerous. For unlike science, religion is not neutral." Comparing that with the assumed rationality, objectivity, and discipline of science, Postgate claims that "science has come to occupy the high ground of morality."). As I read parts of this website I could not

tell if I was reading Mormon or JW apologetics. Many of the same techniques are used by both groups. For example, JWs are like the Mormons in that they trumpet the scientific competence of their believers, claim to be scientific in orientation, use science as a sword to make their case where they can, and keep quiet about the conflict between some of their most important beliefs and science.

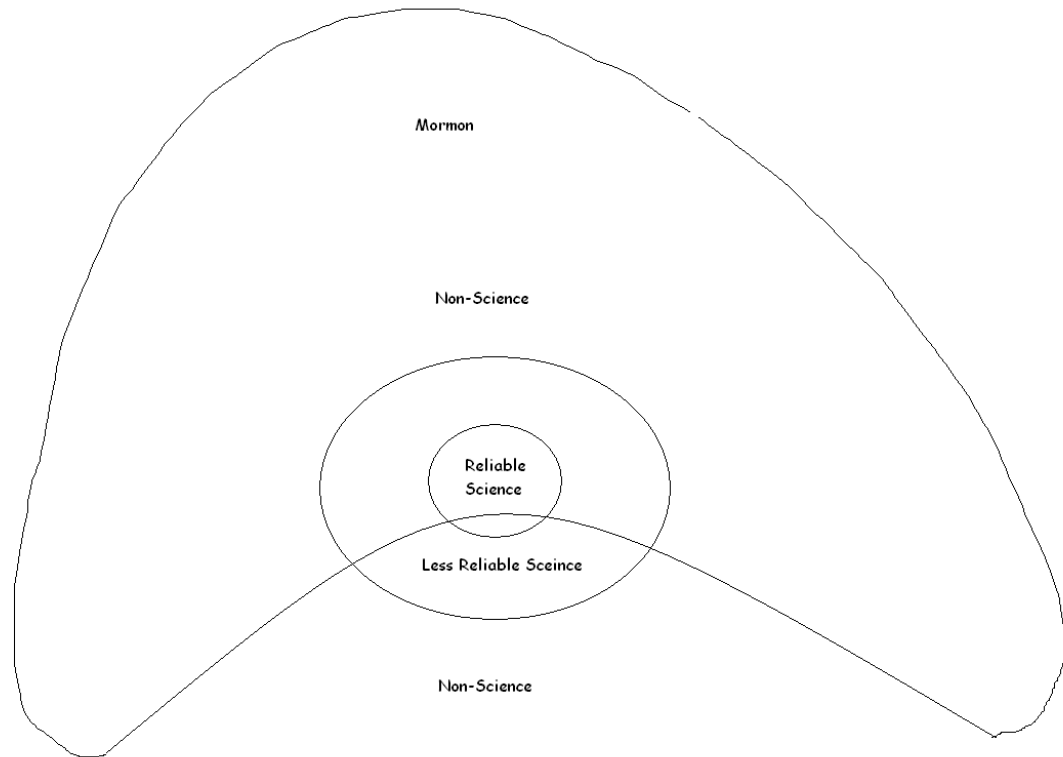


- (g) Perhaps the most striking case of all is that of the alien abductee believing scientist (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 100 and figure below).



- (i) Here we find a stunning juxtaposition of two seeming opposing views of the world, each based in evidence and scientific theory. This is an important point of view, and hence I will flesh it out a bit.
- (ii) The kind of person I have in mind is the John Mack of Harvard type. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/aliens/johnmack.html>; or David Hufford of the Penn State College of Medicine – see http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/about/people/dhufford/).
- (iii) Mack and Hufford have similar views – hardheaded science across the board, with the exception of one relatively small subset of belief that most of their peers regard as bizarre and out of character. Mach re. alien abductions (they are probably real) and Hufford re. “ghoulies” that cause the sleep paralysis experience (they are probably real). Re. sleep paralysis in general (which likely explains both alien abductions and “ghoulies”) see <http://www.csicop.org/doubtandabout/sleep/>, <http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2005/09.22/11-alien.html> and <http://tps.sagepub.com/cgi/content/short/42/1/113>.

- (iv) I spent a week with Hufford last summer, found him to be rational, engaging, pleasant, and to hold a belief in the literal existence of a species of being that causes the “sleep paralysis” experience that I do not believe is justified by the evidence. My position was shared by each of the scientists who were at the same conference and with whom I spoke about this matter, while speaking in glowing terms of the rigor with which Hufford collected and presented his data. They disagreed only in the conclusions he drew from it, and were baffled in many cases by that. The reaction of Mach’s peers to his position was similar.
 - (v) Sometimes the “outliers” like Hufford and Mack end up blazing a new trail that becomes the norm as more evidence is gathered, and the scientific community takes seriously well developed sets of data with accompanying theory like Hufford’s even through they are far from the mainstream.
 - (vi) No doubt other scientists will test Hufford’s data and claims.
 - (vii) As a result of this kind of testing, which is a basic part of how the scientific community operates to winnow the unreliable from the reliable, for every person like Mack or Hufford to reverse the trend of science in a given area, there are dozens who are shown to have been incorrect and hence are forgotten.
 - (viii) As already noted, laymen like me are hence not justified (if we wish to keep our claim to rationality) in taking “long shots” by agreeing with people like Mack and Hufford who have views that are rejected by the majority of scientists knowledgeable in their field. To be rational, we must accept what is most probable to be correct, which means placing our confidence in those who have shown themselves in the long term over countless issues to be most likely right. That is, the majority of the scientific community that is knowledgeable with regard to the issues in question.
 - (ix) Were I an expert and agreed with Hufford, for example, then I would be welcome to do so, my opinions would be subjected to the scrutiny of my peers and would have eventually the impact to which their merits entitled them. Some times this takes a long time. Mendel, the founder of genetic science, was ignored until well after his death.
- (h) A well educated Mormon (see figure below) will tend to have beliefs as follows:



- (i) He will accept that Biblical metaphor is acceptable in some cases at least because the Mormon temple ceremony describes the creation of the Earth as occurring over a long period of time thus indicating that Genesis need not be taken literally. Hence metaphor is OK regarding many of the Old Testament stories.
- (A) So, while being prepared to take a metaphoric position regarding many Biblical teachings such as the six days of creation, the age of the earth, the existence of dinosaurs, etc. he will not do the same regarding the Tower of Babel, and hence will be in conflict with science regarding how languages developed.
- (B) This is the result of the reference to the Tower of Babel as a real event in the Book of Mormon which Mormons have a much more difficult time dealing with as metaphor than they do the Bible.
- (C) For linguists, the idea that human language diverged less than 6,000 years ago is as crazy as the idea that earth is less than 6,000 years old.

- (D) Therefore, most well educated (from a Bible studies point of view) Mormons would accept that Noah's Ark is likely metaphor or myth, same for the falling of Jericho's walls and Jonah and the Whale.
 - (E) Same for Christ's miracles, the Virgin birth, the literal resurrection, etc. Since they are referenced by the Book of Mormon they must be taken literally.
- (ii) He will likely be ignorant of and/or dispute evolutionary theory on a basis that is consistent with the statements of Mormon leaders of the years instead of science. That is, evolution may have been used by God to create life but probably not to separate one species to another, and certainly not to create man from mere animals.
 - (iii) He will likely believe that the Garden of Eden literally existed and can be located in Missouri and hence he will be ignorant of and/or dispute various accepted aspects of how recent genetic, linguistic and other research has shown that homo sapiens originated in Africa and spread from there starting about 65,000 years ago after a far longer history of pre-homo sapiens life forms in other parts of the globe (He will think that the Garden of Eden literally existed and can be located in Missouri and hence he will be ignorant of and/or dispute various accepted aspects of how recent genetic, linguistic and other research has shown that homo sapiens originated in Africa and spread from there starting about 65,000 years ago after a far longer history of pre-homo sapiens life forms in other parts of the globe (see <http://www.abc.net.au/science/features/globaldna/default.htm>; <http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu/dev/themes/keytheme1.htm>; <http://www.handprint.com/LS/ANC/evol.html>; <http://www.talkorigins.org/>; <http://www.becominghuman.org/>; <http://library.thinkquest.org/26070/data/eng/>; and Jared Diamond, "Guns, Germs and Steel").
 - (iv) He will likely be ignorant of and/or dispute various accepted aspects of how the Americas were populated and the origin of the Amerindians (Israelite) and in particular she will be ignorant of and/or dispute the validity of the DNA research that shows that it is extremely unlikely that Hebrews immigrated to the Americas.
 - (v) He will have an incredibly inflated idea of the importance of the US in current and future human affairs, and paradoxically a belief that government should be involved in our lives as little as possible.
- (A) The former belief is largely due to the role given the US in Mormon belief which includes a leading role for the US to play as an instrument in God's hand as He established His church (Mormonism) in American and then uses Mormonism and America as a tool in His hand as He controls the run up to and timing of the End of Times.

- (B) The latter belief is due to the way in which Mormon leaders wish to maximize their influence over their followers. To do that, they must keep the US and other governments off the playing field to the extent possible. That is, more civic government = less religious government.
- (C) The following set of dysfunctional beliefs (and many others) are likely due to this odd combination of belief shaping forces:
 - (1) international cooperation is not as important as most people think it is;
 - (2) the circumstances in which war undertaken unilaterally by the US is justified more often than most people think it is;
 - (3) it is not that important that rich countries should be taxed and their wealth used to raise the standard of living in poor counties;
 - (4) the extent to which government influences our lives should be limited more than most other people would consider appropriate. This would apply to things like health care insurance, environmental standards, employment retraining, retirement funding, what can be taught in schools, etc.;
 - (5) however, when social behaviour contradicts religious belief the government should be involved to restrict things like access to birth control mechanisms of certain types, stem cell research, what can be said, seen or done in public, the kinds of recreational drugs can be used, etc.
- (vi) He will have an usually deferential attitude toward certainty types of authority, and more resemble in behavior the conformity oriented Asians than the individualistically oriented North Americans (see Richard Nesbitt, "The Geography of Thought").
- (vii) He is likely to exhibit "shame based behaviours" of various types (see http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/papers/2004/10/19).
- (viii) He will relatively easily susceptible emotional manipulation, which explains in part at least Utah's US leading incidence of multi-level marketing and financial fraud participation rate. This, Mormon family size and the payment of tithing is likely related to Utah's US leading personal bankruptcy rate.
- (ix) He will have unusually rigid ideas with regard to the appropriate roles for men and women. This may well be responsible at least in part for Utah's US leading rates of anti-depressant use, reported spousal abuse and certain types of sexual assault.

- (x) He will likely regard homosexuality as a sin, perversion of human nature or “test” (like a bad temper or physical defect) of some kind that God has imposed on some humans that must be overcome.
 - (xi) He will regard any knowledge that contradicts Mormon dogma as dangerous, suspect, and to be avoided despite a clear pattern in Mormon history of many now regarded as sound scientific and social ideas being rejected, and then accepted.
 - (xii) He will not consider controlling Earth’s population or a wide variety of other ecological issues to be of significant importance. In this regard, as noted above, he will disagree with the vast majority of scientists and will be working against the interest of humanity with regard to what is probably the single most important issue that faces humankind today.
14. What are the “proofs” used by each of the literalist religions to show that they have the truth and in a broader perspective, what do these “proofs” reliably tell us?
- (a) Certainty of conviction. “I know X is true!! I have felt it in my bones!! God has told me that X is true!! I was overcome [in this or that way] and so I KNOW that x is true!!” etc.
 - (b) Sincerity of belief. They are not faking it; they are not trying to trick us; they really do believe as they say they say they do.
 - (c) Good works. Each of these groups can point to worthwhile things they do for each other and for others.
 - (d) Smart, well-educated, successful believers. Each of these groups can point to admirable (by almost any measure) believers.
 - (e) Some of the group’s traditional (or “revealed”) beliefs are shown by science to be true (and some of the group’s traditional (or “revealed”) beliefs are shown by science to be false, but they don’t emphasize that).
 - (f) The group and its leaders are persecuted by unbelievers.
 - (g) Earlier authoritative sources (like the Bible) predicted the group or its leaders.
 - (h) A kind of circular logic that makes the group’s theory of reality impossible to disprove (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 10).
 - (i) This creates a "head I win; tails you lose" proposition. That is, “If you feel what I predict you will feel or otherwise believe what I believe, then you have found the truth. If not, you are either sinful, or prideful, or being tested by god, or not faithful enough, etc. and hence have not yet seen what is certainly true.” But nothing you can do or evidence you can muster can change the “truth”.

- (ii) As noted above, without a rational, objective basis to test truth claims humankind has demonstrated the ability on many occasions to spin our wheels, argue, fight, kill each other etc. for centuries while making little progress in terms of knowledge and destroying all kinds of valuable things.
- 15. Since each of these “proofs” is used by most if not all literalist religions, they are all in the same camp. Systems of this type are hence of no use to those who are trying to determine what is real, but of great use to those who are attempting to persuade others that a particular ideology (Mormonism or any of the others) is true regardless of what the evidence suggests in this regard.
- 16. The pattern of irrationality described above can be traced throughout Mormon history.
 - (a) Consider, for example early Mormon attitudes toward geology, evolutionary theory, cosmology, race relations (until recently).
 - (b) And what about the way in which Mormon leaders fought to keep polygamy, lied for over a decade about their behaviour, and finally abandoned it in the early 1900s. Then having been forced to do so, they took Mormonism mainstream. What would Mormonism be like now had it retained polygamy? Talk about “prophetic leadership”.
 - (c) If God is responsible for Mormonism, to say that He works in mysterious ways is an understatement, and He has an exquisite sense of irony.
 - (d) We should also note that in Mormonism and other literalist religious faiths the leaders have learned not to say things that science may be able to test. How long has it been since a Mormon leader broke new ground on any subject in a way that is potentially subject to testing? They continue, however, to defend the irrational positions that are foundational to their faith as a result of the statements of prior and to an extent pre-scientific leaders (such as Smith and Young in Mormonism’s case), until they decide that a position needs to be abandoned and then they use the tools described below under the heading “Does Religion Give Way to Science?”.
- 17. As a result of this mapping exercise and the consistency of the pattern of where religious and other forms of non-scientific belief override science, I am able to predict things about what people will believe, and what kinds of evidence they will likely favor to evaluate in a way that most well informed people would regard as rational. I can use this knowledge of how scientifically inclined religious people will tend to become irrational regarding certain aspects of science to either steer away from contentious subjects during polite conversation, or to discredit their reasoning abilities in general if I am in a debate with them. The consistency and breadth of this pattern of irrationality tells us that religious belief tends to impair reasoning in well-educated, intelligent and rational people. In this narrow sense, religion is a “mind virus” to use Richard Dawkins term. I don’t, however, go as far as he does in disparaging religion. It has many worthwhile attributes that I hope we will have time to get to.

18. Many other patterns re. religious belief can be pointed out. One interesting pattern is between the social context in which a religion is created and how it balances individual power against institutional authority.
- (a) Religions that arose in environments of scarcity where group cooperation to find, preserve, fight for, etc. resources required a high degree of group cooperation tend to emphasize the importance of conformity to group norms and hence group sanctioned sources of authority.
 - (b) The Hebraic religious traditions are “scarcity” religions.
 - (c) Each of the YEC, Mormonism and the JW’s are “restorations” or “reforms” of the most lax and traditional forms of Christianity from which they sprang and hence emphasize this form of authority.
 - (d) Scientific understandings of humanity tend to emphasize more individualistic orientations toward authority because of what science has shown in terms of how much control we seem to have over our environment.
 - (e) New Age ideologies almost invariably emphasize how much power the individual has because of the environments of plenty, security and power in which these ideologies were created, though they ironically tend to claim some kind of ancient wisdom as well.
19. In most cases, the problematic beliefs are inherited. In some cases, however, they are adopted because of religious conversion (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult>; Levine, “The Power of Persuasion”, Hassan, “Breaking the Bonds”) or in the case of people like Mack and Hufford, investigation and another form of conversion based more scientific analysis than the kind of social conditioning that is usually related to religious and ideological conversions.
20. How do we explain the patterns noted above? My attempt (at length) is found at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>.

Two Types of Literalist Religious Irrationality

The pattern that this analysis brings into focus is clear – literalist religious belief causes the two kinds of irrationality.

First, it causes the adoption of irrational scientific views where literalist religious belief contradicts with science. This often results in the adoption of irrational, dysfunctional opinions and behaviours. It is reasonable to call this irrational because the standards of evidence and probability religious people use when it comes to rejecting science suddenly change when we find a religious belief that conflicts with science, and this behavior is consistent from one religious group to another. That is, they can each see how irrational the others are when they reject high probable scientific conclusions on the basis of religious belief, but cannot see this in themselves.

Second, as our “map” in the figures above show, the further from the center of science we get the more complex phenomena become and the less predictable or reliable knowledge related to

that phenomena. And yet people who hold literalist religious views hold their most certain opinions regarding phenomena that are outside the purview of science, and hence are among the most uncertain of all we experience. As noted above, these include questions like “Does God exist?”, “What is God like?”, “What will happen after death?” etc. This is demonstrably irrational – the belief the uncertain to be certain – and the pattern of irrationality holds as just noted. That is, religious people tend insist that the demonstrably uncertain to be certain while under the influence of religious belief and not otherwise.

We are irrational if we ignore the clear lessons of human history as to the folly of believing that we have certain knowledge as to how questions of this kind must be answered. Dogmatic certainty with respect to the untestable is what creates the kind of ignorance and tribalism that has made a wasteland of Northern Ireland and Palestine, causes suicide bombings all over the Middle East and flew airplanes into the World Trade Center.

And we are irrational if we do not use consistent decision making principles. Inconsistency in the use of evidence and reasoning principles related to science is at the root of both of the first two types of irrationality just described.

Neither God nor religion is a problem, but people who purport to speak for God or think they knew with certainty what we must do to please God are a serious problem. Their behaviour is irrational. I agree with the bumper sticker that pleads “God, Save Us From Your Followers”.

This denial of probable reality and hence adoption of irrational belief as a result of religion has been carefully studied as part of a wide range of consistent human perceptive failures (see again <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>), and relates largely to our historic dependence on social groups for survival and reproductive opportunities.

Our instincts to defer to group opinion and authority structures, even where to do so is irrational in the manner noted above, were developed during time when we were much more dependant on our dominant social groups than we now are and hence it was more important to keep our place in the social order than to be “right” about many kinds of things. These instincts change slowly.

This form of "reasoning" runs through Mormonism and other literalist religions from front to back and is characterized by first ignoring evidence for as long as possible, and then ignoring the probable implications of that evidence. This form of argument is raised to an art form by the various apologists for literalist religions (see the standard of proof so high that it cannot reasonably be overcome), which is a practise at least as old as the ancient Greeks (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.apologetic%20mind.pdf>).

Does Religion Give Way to Science?

In short, yes, but it usually takes a long time. I suggest that it is irrational not to wish to take advantage of the most accurate available information today when we make important decisions. And most Mormons will acknowledge this to be the case if an example from another religious group is put them, while being unaware of the extent to which their own faith extracts a high price from them in the same way. For example, Catholicism waited for a long time to acknowledge that Galileo was right and the Popes were wrong. This waiting is required to reduce the negative effect on authority that admitting a mistake should be expected to have.

Now, think about some of the crazy things Brigham Young and Joseph Smith said and did and the behaviours Mormonism causes as noted above. The few Mormons who are aware of these things joke about how silly these things are, but do not take them seriously because they were so long ago and they can be excused on the basis that people make mistakes, that “things were different” back then, etc.

This, in my view, is the reason behind the de facto Mormon rule that Mormons cannot question whatever the current prophet says, and only the current prophet can say when a past prophet has been mistaken.

And when we talk about the current prophet, what that really means is the entire group of 15 (the apostles and Mormon First Presidency) since they have to act unanimously. So, when we hear Gordon Hinckley say that he doesn't know what “as man is god once was; and as god is man may become” and that “we don't teach that”, he is effectively saying that prior Mormon prophets are wrong and we can assume that it is highly probable that he is articulating a position that was vetted by the 12 and FP before he said it through a national media outlet.

The Book of Mormon/ DNA debate is another interesting parallel to Galileo within Mormonism. Unless the tide of evidence radically changes, the BofM will be acknowledged at some future time to be ahistorical. Mormon foundations reflect the values of the early 1800s, which were more scientific than the older religions like Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism. “Line upon line, precept upon precept” is a scientific concept, which leaves the door much more open for serious changes in course, though this will be used as sparingly as possible since religion largely appears to people these days as an oasis of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

So if the basic rules changes very often, then religion gives up its advantage. This rule will hence only be used for the most foundational of changes, like the blacks and the priesthood. Perhaps at some point it may have to be used to “clarify” how polygamy works (it is not required to be lived even if legal to live it in the US, for example).

Whenever possible Mormon leaders will rely upon the “human error” exception that applies to all prior prophets, but this is best applied to things that are not important. If something important comes up for consideration, then a lot of time is likely to pass before it can be acknowledged as an error and during that time the point in question will be redefined as unimportant.

Remember, for example, how important earlier generations of Mormons felt the precise form of the temple garments they wore were, or the precise wording of the temple ceremony (including the recently eliminated penalties), or the institution of polygamy.

Going the other way, pioneer women would not have been able to conceive of the way in which the RS has been shown of its autonomy, and they have lost their ability to give blessings of various types. And how would early Mormons who used alcohol, tea and coffee in moderation, and in many cases produced wine at the direct behest of Brigham Young, felt if they could see current Mormon attitudes regarding the Word of Wisdom.

Or better yet, the “we didn't really understand” interpretive rule could be used to allow for a metaphoric interpretation of the Book of Mormon that would be similar to how the Bible is interpreted by most mainstream Christians today. See for example the JW interpretation of the “six days of creation” at http://www.watchtower.org/library/g/2002/6/8/article_01.htm. Much as do Mormons, they reconcile the Biblical account of creation with science by saying that earlier

generations of Bible readers did not read correctly when they assumed that the “days” spoken of in the Bible for the creation were of 24 hours each.

Mormons may respond to the suggestion that Mormon belief has radically changed by saying that the changes made within Mormonism over time are not important – that the important truths are unchanging.

Tell that to the Mormons who had to abandon polygamy after shaping their lives around it. And the continuing vitality of fundamentalist Mormonism is the direct result of the trauma Mormon culture experience when this “eternal principle” was changed by mainstream Mormonism. If you take seriously Mormon theology and the statements made by Mormon prophets both before the so-called First Manifesto in 1890 as well as between the First and Second Manifestos (1905), the fundamentalists have by far the stronger case.

Or what about the manner in which racial prejudice and condescension has been such a large part of Mormonism? What about Mormon attitudes toward gay people? A strong case can be made that Mormon leaders are killing gay people as time passes and they refuse to acknowledge the validity of what science has to say about human sexual nature, and that this is done to preserve the power of Mormon leaders.

What women who have ruined their health by having too many children on the basis that if they exercised faith God would care for their health? What of men and women who have sacrificed their education or persuaded educational goals inappropriate to their nature as a result of a skewed perception of gender roles in life?

Many other examples could be provided. We are talking about issues that go right to the core of how we live and who we are.

Is the Mormon Assessment of Joseph Smith’s Trustworthiness Rational?

An important example of how Mormon perception fails is illustrated by the way Mormons and non-Mormons answer the question “Should Joseph Smith be trusted?” in light of evidence related to his history of error and/or deception regarding many important matters.

The assessment of trustworthiness is one of humanities most common and well developed abilities. Hence, we are all experts in this regard. However, we are all also subject to the forces of denial and bias referenced above. In particular when our place in an important social group is at stake, or the foundations of an a social group that is foundational to our life is put into question, social theory predicts that our ability to perceive and assess the implications of evidence relative to or group, including the trustworthiness of group leaders, will be impaired (see Malcolm Gladwell, “Blink”, Gerd Gigerenzer, <http://www.cebiz.org/cds/FastFrugalPsychReview.pdf>, Heuristics and Biases Power Point Presentation, http://www.cog.brown.edu/courses/cg195/power_pt/CG195Shotola.ppt, and Cass Sunstein, “Moral Heuristics” at <http://www.bbsonline.org/Preprints/Sunstein-01102004/Referees/Sunstein.rev.pdf>).

Furthermore, when we have a large investment in a social group, we will tend to be less able to see it as it is than others who do not have a similar investment. Hence for the same reasons that we hire investment and legal advisors to help us make important decisions where greed and/or fear can be counted on to impair our judgement, we should seek the assistance of professionals to help us assess the merits of our religious groups.

Smith had a lengthy history of either lying or simply being wrong about important things. Mormon apologists admit this (in most cases at least) and respond that Joseph Smith never claimed to be perfect; a prophet is only speaking as such when he says so; and in any event prophets sometimes make mistakes. On this basis they dismiss a series of incredibly important deceptions/errors that include the following:

Joseph Smith's Career as a "glass looker"

Smith's career prior to becoming proclaiming himself to be God's prophet was that of a treasure digger who told people that he could see treasure buried on their property when he looked in his peep stone.

Some people hired him to dig for treasure. This was against the law and seen as a kind of scam that gullible should be protected from much as our securities laws now protect people from unethical stock promoters.

Smith was charged several times with regard to his treasure seeking activities, and it seems probable that he was convicted at least once. But regardless of whether he was convicted, the court documents clear the nature of what he was doing.

The original court documents regarding Smith's trial at Bainbridge trial have now been found. See <http://www.wcax.com/Global/story.asp?S=3861495>. For an overview of this story from a pro Mormon point of view, see <http://www.lightplanet.com/response/1826Trial/facts.html>. This, however, does not add the new documents to the old story. For the post Mormon point of view, see http://www.xmission.com/~country/reason/ny_js.htm. This likewise does not include the new data.

I note that the new records found include evidence of four charges related to "glass looking" (treasure seeking), which belies the standard Mormon position that this kind of thing was common and accepted in Smith's day. It was not. It was regarded as a scam and treated by the populace as such.

So, the record as it stands regarding Smith's brushes with the law is as follows:

1. He was arrested on at least four occasions on charges related to "glass looking".
2. He admitted that he was a treasure seeker.
3. After at least one of those arrests, he was tried. It appears most likely that he was given "leg bail" (get out of town or go to jail) after being found guilty.
4. His mark in that case, Josiah Stowell, still seemed to have faith in him, which speaks to his charismatic powers. This is often the case – the victim remains in denial long after other observers have grasped what happened. The victim, after all, is the one who is most invested in the fraud – he fell for it.
5. Many of the rest of the people who had been involved in the venture felt it was fraudulent and brought the charges to put Smith out business. This group included Smith's father-in-law to be.

6. Shortly after his trial, Smith admitted he had been lying about what he could see in his peep stone and renounced glass looking in conversation with his father-in-law, and started to tell the story related to his finding the golden plates that he eventually "translated" into the Book of Mormon using the same peep stone that he had used for treasure seeking.
7. Here is how historian Marvin Hill, writing in 1972 sums up the issue:

"In the meantime, if the bills should prove authentic and demonstrate that Joseph Smith was tried as a "Glass Looker," what shall we make of him? Nearly everybody seems to have conceded that if Joseph Smith was indeed a gold digger that he was also a religious fraud. This is a view, however, of our own generation, not Joseph Smith's. Joseph himself never denied that he searched for buried treasure, only attributing the stories which circulated about him to his work with Stowell. In one place he admitted that he did such work but never made much money from it. Martin Harris, who for most of his life was a believer in Joseph Smith, only confessing that he "lost confidence in Joseph Smith" while he was a Shaker in the 1840s, was quoted as saying that Joseph and his father were part of a company which searched for treasure. Hosea Stout, who believed in the Prophet, said that the gold plates were found by means of a seer stone." see http://www.lightplanet.com/response/1826Tr...Trial_Hill.html

In sum, there is little doubt that Smith was a treasure seeker, and that this activity was against the law in the time and place where he lived. As Hill points out, this does not mean we can be 100% sure Smith was a fraud, and as I have said, for me that is not the issue. The issue is one of trustworthiness. As this incident and others noted below indicate, Smith was not the kind of person I would trust now, and during his own time he was far enough outside the standards of set by his community for trustworthiness that he should not have be trusted then either. That many people did trust him is testament to his charisma; his ability to sell what the people wanted to buy. He is no more worthy of trust than Rev. Moon, the people who run the Hari Krishna organization and a multitude of others who over time have presented themselves as having God's authority and felt justified in deception (whether sincerely or not does not matter to me) because they were sure that their ends justified their means.

After these notes were originally published, a friend sent me a note that included the following information:

In my mind, Joseph Smith's veracity as a prophet rests primarily on the reliability and trustworthiness of his 1838 history. Either the events described in that history happened as Joseph claimed or they did not. As Joseph F. Smith emphasized, "Mormonism ...must stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith. He was either a prophet of God, divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned, or he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. There is no middle ground." Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 1, p. 188. Gordon B. Hinckley and Jeffrey R. Holland have also made similar statements in the last few years.

During the podcast, you correctly point out that nobody really knows if Smith had the visions he claimed because nobody else witnessed any of these events. Therefore, we must rely solely on Joseph Smith's word in determining whether or not these events truly happened. The issue then becomes how reliable and credible is Joseph Smith as a witness. In this regard, those portions of his 1838 history that can be verified become

extremely important. The easiest portion of the 1838 history to verify is Smith's description of his money digging background. A look at how accurately Smith reported the facts regarding this portion of his life gives us a lot of insight into the truthfulness and credibility of his other claims. Smith had the following to say in his 1838 history about his involvement in money-digging:

In the month of October, 1825, I hired with an old gentleman by the name of Josiah Stoyal, who lived in Chenango county, State of New York. He had heard something of a silver mine having been opened by the Spaniards in Harmony, Susquehanna county, State of Pennsylvania; and had, previous to my hiring to him, been digging, in order, if possible, to discover the mine. After I went to live with him, he took me, with the rest of his hands, to dig for the silver mine, at which I continued to work for nearly a month, without success in our undertaking, and finally I prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it. Hence arose the very prevalent story of my having been a money-digger (Joseph Smith History, verse 56).

This statement creates a number of false impressions. First, the 1838 history creates the impression that prior to October 1825 Joseph Smith had no involvement with searching for buried treasure. But the historical record establishes that the Smith family was well known throughout the Palmyra region for their treasures hunts. The historical evidence also establishes that the Smith family relied on occult practices and the use of peep stones in their money digging activities. This statement also creates the impression that Joseph was merely a hired hand who helped with the digging in Stowell's treasure hunting endeavor. Contrary to the impression created by his statement, the evidence establishes that Joseph Smith was recognized as the leading glass looker or peep stone seer in the New York region. It was because of Joseph's reputation as a peep stone seer that Josiah Stowell traveled over 100 miles from his farm in southern New York next to the Pennsylvania border to Palmyra in order to hire Joseph to locate buried Spanish treasure on his farm through his peep stone.

Next, the 1838 history's description of Stowell's treasure hunting venture strongly hints that Joseph Smith viewed this activity as foolishness, particular Smith's claim that he "prevailed" with Josiah Stowell to give up his hunt for treasure. But the 1826 court records tell a very different story. After many weeks of digging, members of Stowell's family became alarmed that Mr. Stowell was squandering his money on Smith's money digging escapades. These disgruntled members of the family of Josiah Stowell then filed charges against Joseph Smith in order to protect Stowell. A preliminary hearing on the charges was held. During the hearing, Joseph Smith confessed that he "pretended" to see things through his peep stone.

Although the judge ordered Joseph bound over for trial, the judge also gave Smith "leg bail", meaning that he allowed Joseph Smith to escape or "get out of town." In other words, Smith gave up his money-digging activities with Stowell because he faced going to jail, not because he prevailed upon Stowell to quit as he reports in his 1838 history.

At least one LDS apologist (Richard Turley) claims that this "trial" was an attempt to persecute Smith by members of Stowell's family who were hostile to Smith's religious claims. However, the court records say nothing about any religious claims made by Smith. The whole proceeding focused exclusively on Joseph's money digging scams.

Under any normal standard, Stowell's family members were doing what any reasonable person would have done under the same or similar circumstances.

Joseph Smith cover-ups the true extent of his money-digging and the Josiah Stowell affair in the same 1838 document in which he reports the First Vision. If we are to judge the credibility of the rest of Joseph Smith's 1838 history by the credibility of verse 56, Joseph Smith's reliability as a witness fails miserably. The bottom line is that Joseph Smith was not truthful about his involvement with money digging and Josiah Stowell in his 1838 history.

Based on this lack of credibility, how can we, and why should we, believe anything else in Joseph Smith's 1838 account?

Joseph Smith Record of Deception and Error

In many cases, Joseph Smith either deceived his followers and others, or make serious errors with regard to significant matters. For example:

1. Smith repeatedly asked his followers to in one way or another give him their money and property, and while he did not get rich as a Mormon leader, it gave him and many members of his family by far the most money and respect they ever saw).
2. Smith told many women that God commanded them to marry him (and have sex with him) and promised them in exchange that they and their families were assured a place in the celestial kingdom.
3. Smith said God told him to lie to his followers and others about his sexual activities. Assuming he really believe that, what else did he think God told him to lie about? Maybe seeing God, or having golden plates, or receiving God's authority?
4. Smith persuaded his followers to invest in the ill-fated, illegal Kirtland "anti-bank" by telling them that, "... like Aaron's rod the [Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Bank will] swallow up other banks "and grow and flourish ... and survive when all others should be laid in ruins".
5. Smith persuaded his followers to invest their money in land around Kirtland by telling them that, "This place [Kirtland, Ohio] must be built up, and will be built up, and every brother that will take hold and help secure and discharge these [land] contracts shall be rich".
6. Smith said that the nations of the earth shall bow to the Mormon gospel or they "shall come down" and "shall be laid low of power."
7. Smith told his followers that they should retain their lands in Missouri and seek legal redress against their enemies. If they should not obtain it, God will avenge them with "ten thousand of his Saints" and all their adversaries would be destroyed.
8. Smith said that the Book of Abraham is a translation from Egyptian papyri.
9. Smith said that the Kinderhook plates were of ancient origin.

10. Smith said that a Greek Psalter was an Egyptian alphabet.
11. Smith said that he found the bones of a Zelfh, a “white Lamanite” and told an elaborate story about how he lived, how he had died, etc.
12. Smith said that the Book of Mormon society occupied all of North and South America.
13. As the end of Smith’s life neared, he became increasingly grandiose in his claims and promises. This is a pattern I have often seen in the business world. As a chance for power begins to slip away, the tendency is to promise more and more, and by so doing to exaggerate more and more, and this sometimes produces enough greed in those who hear the promises that they will extend more time, credit, etc. .For example, Smith set up yet another secret quorum (the Council of Fifty) to among other things help him manipulate the apparently democratic process of Nauvoo government and the Mormon Church (the sustaining of Church officers was a meaningful vote in those days – Smith tried to get rid of Rigdon as his counsellor at one point and was voted down), and arranged for it to sustain him as “king of the Earth”. The members of the council were to be “princes” of the Earth, and to reign with him upon Christ’s return, which was imminent. The over the top nature of this move caused a number of important supporters to abandon him, leading shortly thereafter to the confrontation that resulted in his death.
14. See <http://home.teleport.com/~packham/prophet.htm> for more.

Joseph Smith’s Deception with regard to Polygamy – A Crucial Test of Credibility

Let’s use Smith’s polygamy to illustrate the use of evidence and probability to determine what is most likely to be real; or what happened. Here is the question:

Which is more likely, that God told Smith to lie as indicated above or that Smith was one among countless alpha males in human groups who had the chance to have sex with a lot of women because of their perceived authority, and took it?

This is a consistent pattern in small religious groups led by males but not females) - the male in charge has a lot of sex with his female (and often male) followers and justifies this one way or another.

The following are Mormon apologist arguments (numbered below) in favour of Smith being commanded by God to act as he did, and possible responses (lettered below):

1. Smith tried to preach the doctrine publicly but met such resistance that he went underground with it. This is strange behavior for one who wants to be "alpha male" and keep the women for himself and was risky in other ways since it put his authority at risk;
 - (a) Many cult leaders openly use their alpha male powers to have lots of sex. It makes sense to me that Smith would have tried to do this. But he was not powerful enough to pull it off, so what he do? He went underground to keep as much power as he could. I don't think he planned this. He tended to end up "marrying" the women who worked in his home, or in whose home he lived. I

suspect that as a powerful, charismatic man, he found himself with the chance to bed a fine looking young thing now and then, and took it. Then he had to justify his actions because word of things like this tends to get out. So, the sacred nature of the event, God's command of it, the necessity for secrecy related to it, etc. were all by products of the fact that he had some something, did not have to power to do it in public and had to justify it in order to hold onto his power.

2. Joseph tried to get others to live the doctrine. This caused him problems. It does not make sense that he would have done this on his own.
 - (a) This is a classic co-opting strategy. When called on his behaviour by his associates, Smith let them in on the game. He used sexual access to the females in the group as a control/ power tool. But where he did not have to use this, he did not. For example, Hyrum did not know about polygamy until just before section 132 of the D&C was proclaimed. And it is easy to understand why it would be useful for Joseph to have Hyrum proclaiming right to the end that Joseph was telling the truth about not practicing polygamy. Hyrum really believed this. The testimony of innocents is often the most compelling. That is why it is best for Mormon missionary work if Mormon missionaries and members do not know the whole story. They are modern Hyrums - spreading innocent falsehoods; weeping as I hold my friend Angela (see story below) I would weep while telling her about what I "knew" regarding her dead parents, god, etc. and so bringing more fresh meat and energy into the "system".
3. Joseph refused to countenance immorality per se as he understood it. Otherwise why would he turn on John C. Bennett? Bennett was powerful, charismatic, and popular. If this was all about sex and power, why turn Bennett out of the Church? Why humiliate him? Why not keep him as the perfect 'partner in crime'? Why take the action that he must have known could backfire terribly?
 - (a) Smith could not control Bennett. Rather than do as he was told and allow Smith to use sexual access as a control tool, Bennett started to freelance. He approached women on his own instead of getting Smith's approval. This was against the rules of the club Smith was running and got Bennett kicked out. When you look at early Mormonism through the prism of the sociology of power (see for example David Swartz, "Culture and Power - The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu") a lot of things that don't otherwise make sense come into focus.
4. Remember, you can't argue that Joseph wanted the women "all for himself" because he went to great lengths to teach the doctrines to the Twelve, men whose sympathies he knew. It would have been far easier to insist that he alone had to "bear the burden" and require them to support him in his plural marriages rather than engage in their own. Yet, he was constantly seeking to expand the circle of those initiated into plural marriage. He is a strange alpha male which wants to share the 'spoils' with everyone, even the unwilling.
 - (a) The study of sexual access within cultish human groups, and our close cousins the apes, is consistent with what Smith did. That is, the alpha male does not have all of the sexual access. He uses his power to choose those females (or

males) he wants for himself, and to dole out the remainder so as to control the rest of the males in the group.

5. The opinions of non-Mormons as to what is more likely the case (God inspired Smith or Smith was a typical alpha male) are irrelevant. They don't understand, and in any event, putting things to a vote is no way to find out what really happened.
 - (a) There are many cases in which it makes sense to use the informed opinion of a group of people to filter our biases and misperception. The in this case would be to construct a group of people who are least likely to be affected by the particular biases we have reason to be concerned about while trying to answer a particular question, and most likely to be well informed regarding the same question. We do this intuitively all the time. And the entire scientific enterprise is organized on this basis. For example, the majority opinion regarding whether God exists is not helpful to me because the vast majority of people are poorly informed and/or subject to bias in this regard. However, the majority of people are well informed with regard to when another person should be trusted or not. Hence, the opinion of non-Mormon people in general is relevant if they hear the story of Smith's sexual adventures told relative to his story about what god told him to do. However, Mormons are conditioned so thoroughly and have so much social capital at stake in Mormonism that their opinions are not worth listening to in this regard.
6. If you ask people whether someone claiming to be the Son of God is really the Son of God or crazy, most would probably say "crazy." But, this does not logically exclude a true Son of God somewhere, at sometime. This appeal to the majority is useless for determining truth, and is only a diversionary tactic from the real issues.
 - (a) This is a great example. We are not talking about logical proofs. We are talking about the probability of something being real based on the available empirical evidence. Smith's trustworthiness goes down in flames on that basis with a very high probability. Any claims with regard to Christ are much more difficult to test because of how old they are. Some of Smith's claims and all of the claims made on behalf of Christ are unscientific and hence not susceptible to direct testing. Some of Smith's claims, however, are testable. Many of them now seem exceedingly improbable on a scientific basis. And when it comes to trustworthiness, though what he says god told him is not testable in any way, it is so at odds with the conception of god that he used for most purposes that it is fair to conclude that he was deceiving his followers. This is an issue of a different type. We do not wish to be lead by people who are in a position of trust over us, and who consciously mislead us for any reason. Full stop. There are many religious leaders around who have used this ploy that Mormons and others would recognize instantly as scam artists. With few exceptions, the only people who would willingly follow this kind of religious leader are those who have been conditioned to do so, or who are irrational in other ways.
 - (b) And if an appeal to the authority of the group is useless, why has the kind of principled appeal to the wisdom of carefully constructed groups that I have described proven to be such a powerful thing with the scientific and other aspects of modern life? While his book has some problems, there are some interesting

ideas in this regard in James Surowiecki's "The Wisdom of Crowds" (see <http://www.cnn.com/2004/SHOWBIZ/books/07/14/wisdom.crowds/>). The bottom line is that well constructed groups of people are our best route to wisdom with regard to many things. This is not some kind of absolute, but rather just the best way to find the most reliable information to which we have access from time to time.

We are not talking about little things here. We are talking about the most intimate details of the lives of men and women who submitted to polygamy; we are talking about the financial life blood and future of many families; we are talking about the deaths of many who followed Smith.

There is a clear pattern in Smith's prophecies, "translations", etc. When he needed people to obey him, he would pull an mesmerizing prophecy out of the hat; and he would speak with utter certainty regarding things that no ordinary man can be certain about, thus buttressing the impression that he was not ordinary man, and using the usual power invoked by the expression of certainty regarding things most of us would like to be true.

There can be no doubt as to how a group of non-Mormons would react to the information above regarding Smith's polygamy and broader pattern of deception. They would not find him trustworthy. That Mormons continue to believe Smith to be worth believing about anything of substance, and particularly about things on which his authority depends, is eloquent testament to the irrational power of Mormon religious belief.

When we consider the same question related to other religious and cultural leaders, we find a similar pattern – believers tend to irrationally believe in the trustworthiness of the leaders on whom their important social groups depend for stability.

Why Does This Kind of Irrationality Matter?

The response of many Mormons and other religious literalists who read this is guaranteed to be,

"So what? No one is perfect. Mormonism does so much good that it just does not matter what Joseph Smith did and whether our faith in him and Mormonism causes us to be a bit behind the times when it comes to science. This is a trade off that we think is justified because of all of the good things that being Mormon does for us."

As noted above, Mormonism causes all kinds of problems. However, we need not go beyond the major problem we face in our world today to understand why it is essential that every force that works against understanding reality needs to be dismantled. That is, humanity is becoming so powerful that we can destroy ourselves. This is not likely to happen by blowing ourselves up, but rather by destroying our environment to the point at which it will take so long to recover that many of our descendants will die as a result of what we and our ancestors have done (Robert Wright, "A Brief History of Progress" and Jared Diamond, "Collapse" for example).

The only way to deal with this problem is through education, and as a result of the very biases that are explored in this essay and in greater detail at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> we have our work cut out for ourselves to convince enough people on the globe that we need to make significant current sacrifices in order to hand this planet on to the next generation in reasonable condition. The basic value system of Mormonism and many other literalist religions works against this by teaching that family size should continue to be maximized, by focussing attention on things like missionary work instead

of a responsible attitude toward consumption of goods and production of waste, etc. Mormonism and other literalist religious faiths both teach counterproductive values, and distract valuable human capital from the important issues.

Meera Nanda, a microbiologist and philosopher of science who was raised in India as a traditional Hindu and now espouses a secular humanist (naturalist – see www.naturalism.org) puts it this way:

“The attitude of many moderate rationalists on matters of spiritualism has been of benign neglect or even indulgence. It all appears so harmless and it might even have some positive contributions to make to one's health and tranquility of mind. ...

But what kind of claims is [sic] made by spiritualists and how they justify these claims matters a great deal. It matters because, beliefs matter. What we believe in is of utmost importance, as Harris himself so correctly emphasizes, because "beliefs are actions in potentia, as a man believes, so he will act" (p. 44). I am in full agreement with Harris when he says that "Even apparently innocuous beliefs, when unjustified can lead to intolerable consequences" (p. 46). (See "Trading Faith for Spirituality: The Mystifications of Sam Harris" a review of Sam Harris' book "The End of Faith" by Meera Nanda http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_article.asp?9389).

Consider, for example, the Mormon belief that spirits are created prior to existence on Earth and are waiting for their "turn" to come to Earth, and that each human being has the duty to have as many children as reasonably possible. What if every man and woman on Earth adopted this point of view? The result would be a population explosion and ecological disaster.

Or what of the belief that God has his own timetable for wrapping up the Earth's existence, and hence we need not seriously concern ourselves with things like ecology? This is not a mainstream Mormon point of view, but benign neglect of this issue is the Mormon way, and the Mormon concern with regard to some aspects of evolutionary theory has caused Mormons in general to shy away from reading in that regard, which contributes to the depressing state of scientific knowledge in the adult US population. I don't have data for Mormons, but have no reason to believe based on my experience as a Mormon that Mormons are much if at all better than the average US citizen in this regard.

For example, in a Gallup poll in 2004 (see <http://www.arachnoid.com/opinion/religion.html>) it was found that only 35% of US adults believed that evolutionary theory is well supported by the evidence. About the same number believed that the Bible should be literally interpreted. And a staggering 20% believe the Sun revolves around the Earth (see <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1996/05/24/MN67867.DTL&type=printable>).

To overcome this problem, I suggest that Mormons and other religious literalists need to become far better connected to the reality of our world. And for this to happen, their distraction with metaphysics to the extent that it overrides science and obscures their connection to reality needs to end. As noted above, there is a close analogy between the lack of progress during the metaphysics Dark Ages in Europe and the state of ignorance literalist religious people evidence today with regard to the reality of their world.

How Can We Protect Ourselves from Irrationality?

In many circumstances we acknowledge that our reason is impaired by emotional and other forces and follow rules to protect ourselves. Here are a few of the circumstances in which we or our ancestors have chosen to organize our affairs in this way:

1. Medical doctors are advised not to treat family members because the emotional forces involved have been shown to impair judgment.
2. For the same reason lawyers are advised not to act on their own behalf, and the insurance companies that protect law firms from negligence claims deny coverage where lawyers are representing companies in which they have large shareholdings because it has been shown that a disproportionate number of negligence claims come from cases of this type.
3. Financial and legal advisors are routinely hired to assist us to make important financial decisions where fear and/greed may impair judgement.
4. Our corporate business world, though far from exemplary in terms of reasoning and virtue, is set up to require independent members of boards, executive compensation and audit committees, etc. in recognition of the human inability to exercise power in a reasonable fashion.
5. Law firms often require "second opinions" whereby one partner must review the work of the person primarily in charge of a matter to ensure objectivity.
6. Large accounting firms sometimes require the partner responsible for a matter to rotate each few years because of the problems that have arisen as a result of partners becoming too close to their clients and losing objectivity.
7. We often seek marital or family counselling to deal with issues that are known to be so emotionally volatile that we cannot reasonably expect to deal with them on a rational basis.
8. Our democratic institutions are perhaps the greatest social monument of all time to man's inability to make rational decisions when in the possession of power, and hence under the sway of greed and/or fear.
9. And if this is not our greatest monument to this aspect of human bias and our need for help to be rational, then the scientific enterprise certainly is. It requires peer review before publication of a material nature. It requires the pooling of knowledge for public critique. In myriad ways it acknowledges that the wisest among us have blind spots that only others will be able to help us see.
10. Fear, greed and other primal emotional forces have been shown in countless experiments to interfere with rational functioning, and we are advised to distance ourselves from whatever causes these forces to play on us before making important decisions.

The conventions just described are designed to protect us in various circumstances against predictable failures in our ability to perceive, and so are similar to the “don’t drive after drinking regardless of capable you think you are” rule. In similar fashion, it is advisable to follow similar rules to protect us against the proven inadequacy of our reasoning relative to our most important religious beliefs.

This means that we should not take seriously the views of religious people that contradict the best scientific information that is available. Religiously driven opinions of this type are demonstrably irrational.

Most of us routinely do this with regard to the religious views of other people. It is much more difficult to follow the same rule regarding the religious view of our own group. However, not to do so is as demonstrably irrational as driving after drinking more than a very small amount of alcohol.

The rational thing to do in this regard is to defer to science where it disagrees with our religious beliefs, and work toward gaining the perspective necessary to see the irrational parts of our religious culture for what they are. And it is extremely unlikely that more than a small percentage of the population will do what I have just outlined because of the way in which religious beliefs are perceived by those who hold them to be foundational to life itself.

And so we should not be surprised that despite the record of human history and current findings of the social and other science related to the human tendency to err, in their wisdom religious leaders and those who follow them proclaim their certainty and disdain for the views of any who dare disagree with them. This is a breathtaking form of ignorance, and arrogance, once it is seen in the context of the human endeavour to know as it has played out over our recorded history.

Is There A Better Way Than Literalist Religion?

We will conclude with a review of alternative belief systems that are more or less consistent with science and find meaning through an understanding of nature. There are many religious and cultural groups that provide most of the benefits Mormonism offers (loving, supportive people; high standards in terms of personal integrity, commitment to family and community; emphasis on education; etc.). Many of these are also consistent with science while finding a reverence and source of meaning in nature itself (see Ursula Goodenough, “The Sacred Depths of Nature”; www.religiousnaturalism.org; www.naturalism.org for example). These systems also tend to encourage us to accept life and nature as it is instead of being constrained by the dogmas related to literalist religion as described above. They also tend to make extensive use of sacred texts from many cultures on a metaphoric basis. I have found wonderful sources of joy, peace, reverence and wonder in worldviews of this type.

Many of these religious groups do not include dogmas that require certainty of opinion with regard to the manifestly uncertain aspects of reality prevent learning, engrain a dysfunctional relationship to authority of various kinds, and retard mental and social development in many ways. Many also are oriented toward helping individuals determine how living life will be most likely to work best for them instead of strongly socializing them toward a narrow range of options in terms of how to live.

Many religious groups encourage a much more functional, healthy relationship to authority than the dogma and blind-obedience oriented approach used by Mormonism and other literalist

religions. Authority must earn its respect, and it is critically important in my view that children be raised to only cede authority the respect it earns. This includes parental authority. For example, homosexual people for example have needs quite different from heterosexual; many women are not well suited to be, or do not wish to be, stay at home mothers; many men are not suited for or do not wish to earn the kind of income required to support a traditional stay at home mother and family; etc.

I left Mormonism because I felt that my trust in Mormon leaders had been abused by the way in which I had been taught (or not taught) about Mormonism, but more importantly because I felt that Mormon culture (for the reasons indicated above as well as at (out of my faith? And where else?) was so dysfunctional that I should not raise my children as Mormons. That is not to say that Mormonism is all bad. But the bad (or dysfunctional) far outweighs the good (or functional), and I was not prepared to allow my children to be negatively socialized.

Humans are highly “mimetic” (prone to copy behaviours). This is a big part of what sets us apart from other primates. It enables us to learn what is required to survive and prosper in the radically different environments into which humans have been born during our history (see Quartz and Sejnowski, “Liars, Lovers and Heroes”). This means that we will absorb much of what defines our social group.

I don't like what I see in Mormonism now for the reasons noted above. Remember particularly the list above of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours I can reasonably expect from an orthodox Mormon. By leaving and sounding an alarm on the way out the door, I feel that I am doing what is best for me and my family (and I am certainly enjoying life more now than ever), and as well I am acting as part of the heretical warning system that Joseph Campbell says is the life blood of all institutions.

And most importantly, I am not going to put my children in the position in which I was put. I do not believe it would be moral to allow them to be socialized, to marry in Mormon temples, to go on missions, to build their marriages on demonstrably false, irrational foundations, and then face their wrath when they find that those they trusted (including me) had not been “watchmen on the tower” who were looking after their best interests, but rather zoo wardens who kept the animals feed, comfortable, caged and ignorant in their belief that they knew all that was relevant to their existence.

I have still not digested the enormity of the fraud that was practiced on me by mostly well intended Mormon family members and religious leaders.

I will have nothing to do with this kind of deception, and certainly will not enable those who would deceive my children as I was deceived. And it does not matter to me in the slightest whether the deceivers have good intentions or not.

And as noted above, there are many alternative belief systems that are far healthier in my view, given what I value, than anything Mormonism has to offer.

Supplemental Notes

The following are ideas I worked with related to the what is found above that may be of interest to some people who have listened to the podcast.

Religious beliefs are seen by most literalist believers as a constant. “God is eternal and unchanging as is His word ...” is the basic idea. This puts religion in a special category, since there is nothing else in our world that is unchanging in this way. And, it makes us feel good since there is at least one thing we can count on – God and the beliefs that depend on Him.

This perceived constancy is in fact a false idea, promoted by people who want to feel secure and be religious leaders who want to preserve their authority. However, when we look at the history of any religious group, we see tremendous change in what God demands, how he is perceived, etc. Think of how radically Catholicism has changed over its close to 2000 years.

For an insightful analysis of how this process has worked in the US relative to Christ, see Prothero, “American Jesus – How the Son of God Became a National Hero – reviewed at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9402E5DD173FF93BA15751C1A9659C8B63>.

“Oh,” but many Mormons are thinking, “Catholicism is a false religion. True religion, like Mormonism, does not change unless God reveals new information to his prophets”. That is a common, and false, perception of Mormonism. See for example the chapter on Mormonism in Prothero’s book just cited in which he provides some insight into the evolution of Jesus’ role in Mormonism.

The following is another summary of how I try to deal with decision-making in general that comes at this topic from a slightly different angle, and describes how this approach leads me to deal with Mormonism and all other belief systems that are proposed to me regarding religion, government (or politics), economic systems, child rearing, health treatments, financial products, investment opportunities, etc., and in particular why I don’t think using “Moroni’s promise” or any other Mormon means of find the “truth” about Mormon claims is worthwhile:

1. There is a reality that is external to me and it is at least to a degree capable of being known. I can never be 100% certain that I have accurately perceived this reality, and in fact can be practically speaking certain that I have not accurately perceived the whole of it.
2. Certain understandings of reality or aspects of reality are much more likely to be accurate than others and this determination can be justified based on evidence and reason.
3. The more accurately I perceive reality the more likely it is that I will achieve what I intend.
4. The use of the scientific method is the most reliable way to determine what is real.
 - (a) Each time we have to make a decision as to what is “real”, we will need to choose between alternative interpretations of evidence. The question to ask in each case is not “what is true?” but rather “which interpretation is most likely to be correct?”
 - (b) The key to science is testability. If I can test a proposition, I can determine how well that proposition can be used to predict future events. Technology has grown out of science’s most reliable findings in this regard.

5. Most of what I do depends directly or indirectly on my beliefs as to what will happen as a result of my actions.
6. Some things are simple enough that I understand with a high degree of probability what my actions will cause. If I touch the stove I will be burned; if I drop the ball it will fall to the ground; etc.
7. Other phenomena are so complex that it is somewhere between difficult and impossible to predict the consequences of my actions. Will my health be improved if I don't drink coffee?; Will I be happier if I remain Mormon (or stop being Mormon)?; Will I go to Heaven after death if I continue to obey the leaders of the Mormon Church?; etc.
8. I have found it useful to divide the universe into four types of phenomena in terms of predictability.
 - (a) First, there are questions about which science provides very reliable answers. Much of physics, chemistry, biology and some parts of the social sciences fit into this category. Here, I simply try to accept what the majority of credible scientists have to say and live consistently with it, regardless of how much it may cut against my grain. For example, as I have come to understand how subject to denial I am with regard to many of my most important decisions (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>), I have had to confront painfully acknowledge the foolishness of my life long prejudice (engrained largely by my parents and well intentioned Mormon leaders) against seeking the help of professional counsellors regarding personal matters.
 - (b) Second, there are the things about which science provides answers that are more reliable than random chance, but in some cases not that much more reliable.
 - (i) Many aspects of the social and medical sciences fall into this category, and change regularly as new evidence of various kinds comes to light. Is a high protein (or low carb?) diet good for us or not? How about red wine? Not to mention various drug treatments. This aspect of science is used by many Mormons to dismiss whatever science has to say that might contradict Mormon foundational beliefs.
 - (ii) Here I still try to guide myself by what science has to say, but also try to be careful because science experiments are often far less complex than the real life phenomena we might be tempted to use the results of science to predict.
 - (iii) It is important to remember in this regard that every day I make many important decisions that depend on my beliefs regarding this kind of thing. For example, "What will happen at my law firm/in my family/with my marriage/with my friend/with my client etc. if I do X?"
 - (iv) When I make these decisions, I try to use the most reliable information possible. I recognize that the information I have is always far from

complete or accurate, and simply try to use the most reliable information possible. And any time I can improve the quantity or quality of the information or theory I have to guide me in this regard, I give thanks.

- (v) Complexity (or chaos) and emergence theory offers the best prospects for future improvement in our ability to predict the behaviour of phenomena of this type (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos_theory, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergence>). This applies as much to when and where tropical storms are likely to strike, who will win an election, how economies will behave, and whether one type of religion or another is likely to rise or fall.
- (c) Third, there are things that are not directly testable, but which are consistent with what science has to say about how the natural, testable world works.
 - (i) For example, there are several theories as to how the dinosaurs became extinct (see <http://www.sdnhm.org/kids/dinosaur/ponder1a.html>). Given how long ago this happened, these theories cannot be directly tested and it is unlikely that the question will ever be definitively answered. However, the debate is conducted using principles that are testable, and collecting, evaluating and extrapolating from evidence in a scientifically defensible manner. Until about 1994 one of these theories (that a meteor struck earth, caused a massive explosion, an ice age, etc.) was not given much credence on the basis that a relatively small meteor (like that alleged to have struck earth) could not reasonably be expected to do that much damage. Then, a meteor was observed striking Jupiter (see <http://www.astrobio.net/cgi-bin/mobileCatalog.cgi?sid=1253&ext=.html>) and causing the kind of damage that would have been required on earth to render the dinosaurs extinct. This caused the stock in the “meteor theory” to rise. This is how scientific analysis is conducted regarding uncertain issues.
 - (ii) Another example of this sort is theories related to how life arrived on earth. Some theories suggest that meteorites striking earth carried with them the material necessary for the creation of life given the already existing earth environment (see http://www.chem.duke.edu/~jds/cruise_chem/Exobiology/sites.html and http://www.resa.net/nasa/origins_life.htm).
 - (iii) String theory (see <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/elegant/>) is another area of important scientific research where so far there is no evidence to support a theory about which scientists are very excited by of how consistent the theory is with other well tested scientific disciplines (quantum theory and relativity theory in particular) and how many questions it would answer if it is true. And the implications of string theory are truly mind boggling. There is where much of our science fiction comes from – alternative selves living in parallel dimensions; multiple dimensions of reality; instantaneous travel over incredible distances; etc.

- (iv) When required to make a decision that depends on a belief related to something of this type, I focus on the reality that I do not have highly dependable information, and go with what seems most likely to be real based on everything else I understand in a more reliable fashion.
- (d) Fourth, there are things that are not testable, but which are inconsistent with what science has to say about how things happen. These include alleged the paranormal or supernatural phenomena such as alien abductions, the miracles of Jesus and other religious figures, belief in magic of other types, the belief in various types of personal gods, etc.
- (i) That is, why did the dinosaurs become extinct? They did not become extinct because dinosaurs never existed. Their bones were placed on earth by God to test mankind's faith.
 - (ii) And where did life come from? It, and the earth, were created ex nihilo by God 6,000 years ago.
 - (iii) Where a paranormal or supernatural belief (a belief that is inconsistent with everything else I am justified to believe about how the world works) is presented to me along with a competing belief that is consistent with how I understand the world to work (a naturalistic belief), the naturalistic belief is more likely to be correct and hence it is more reasonable to accept the naturalistic belief.
9. The type of knowledge hierarchy I just outlined is so commonly used that most people, including most Mormons, would agree with it. They would, however, likely either disagree with the idea that the most uncertain category includes religious, political etc. beliefs or assume that I am talking about the religious and other similar beliefs that disagree with theirs. That is, a surprising number of people consistently mistake phenomena that are category fours (the most uncertain) as being category ones (the most certain).
10. Once I understand that there is a particular type of phenomena about which almost all people consistently make this mistake in similar circumstances, it would be unreasonable to conclude that I, or my kind of people, do not make this mistake. That is, I do not consider it a belief that I am sitting here typing. That simply "is". Likewise, I don't consider it possible to leave my hand on a hot stove without being burned. Our experience with easily testable phenomena of this type is so consistent that we are justified in believing them to be certain.
11. However, other phenomena that are at the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of certainty are also consistently treated as if they are as reliable as gravity. For example, for many people the reality of god or the truthfulness of a particular religion are utterly certain. Political views for many people are similar. We don't seriously discuss whether democracy is the right way to go, do we? Or capitalism?
12. Without suggesting what is right or wrong regarding these questions, the history of civilization makes it quite clear that foundational beliefs of this sort have often changed but are strongly held until changed.

- (a) Social science explains this by demonstrating that the more disputed are a social group's foundational ideas, the less stable the group tends to be. So social groups tend to discourage in many ways a serious discussion of the validity of their foundational ideas. Hence, these ideas tend to be firmly held, not disputed, and when they change the process is usually disruptive.
 - (b) Religious beliefs at one time were socially foundational. They no longer are in most places. However, perception is reality when it comes to this kind of phenomenon. And so people who are thoroughly conditioned to regard religious belief to be socially foundational - the kind of thing that cannot be safely questioned - will tend to regard it that way.
13. Once I understand the widespread nature of this mistake and hence where in my belief system it tends to occur, the most rational thing to do if I want to understand what is real is to rely upon people who are not biased by the same social experience I am when it comes time to decide which issues are highly certain, and which are highly uncertain by perceived to be certain as a result of my social conditioning.
 14. People who fail to recognize their perception and reasoning weaknesses that are caused by their social conditioning are easily recognized by all who are outside their own group. This is why Mormons chuckle sagely at the silliness of the JW and Young Earth Creationist beliefs at the same as each of those shake their heads about the way in which Mormons naively believe Joseph Smith's impossibly tall tales. And most surprisingly, when even the brightest members of each of these groups are confronted by powerful disconfirming evidence, a large percentage of them tend to be persuaded by arguments that seem specious to those looking in from the outside. Again, this pattern is so consistent across many similar groups that if I fail to recognize that it applies to me and govern myself accordingly I am not acting rationally. I must recognize that the effect of my group's social condition on me is a form of hypnosis or denial that can be counted on as consistently as drinking alcohol or taking drugs to impair my judgement. If I do not want to be impaired, I must take steps to distance myself from this influence and until then, rely upon the kind of rules that leads wise partiers to take cabs home after a certain number of drinks – full stop, no debate, no argument. One's judgement is simply not to be trusted in certain circumstances.
 15. When you apply the kind of system I just described to Mormonism after analyzing the historical and scientific data as carefully as you can, the result is clear.
 16. Mormonism is a literalist religion that plays as many such religions do on our social dependencies, insecurities and emotions and hence has a persistent distorting effect on our ability to perceive certain kinds of data. But the rational case against it is as strong (or stronger) than the case against many other religions that Mormons dismiss is pathetically indefensible.
 17. Hence, in my view there is nothing to be gained by testing Moroni's promise or otherwise adopting the approach to find "reality" suggested by Mormonism. These are irrational tests. Neither confirmation nor disconfirmation has anything to do with "truth" or "reality".

18. However, the kind of emotional state the Book of Mormon posits as evidence of its truth has been demonstrated scientifically to have a high probability to be a product of personal and social circumstances. Hence, these feelings can tell us something about our own state and how we are reacting to our circumstances but have no connection to any reality beyond that. For example, we may have been love bombed and are ignorant about the Book of Mormon's historical context, therefore we feel good about the circumstances in which the Book of Mormon is presented to us, therefore come to believe that the Book of Mormon is "true". I understand that the Koran when sung in Arabic contains some of the most moving poetry humankind has ever produced. Secular Arabs are moved to tears by it. What does that mean in terms of its "truth"?

While this is not the main topic for discussion today, Mormonism has a number of distinct periods during which there were radically different perceptions of what it meant to be a "good Mormon", how God and Jesus should be worshipped and various other foundation beliefs. They are:

1. The first decade more or less (free seeking; very few rules; basic conception of god, the trinity, salvation etc. still forming; doctrinal conflict can be seen in the Book of Mormon itself – see <http://www.i4m.com/think/history/Book-of-Mormon.pdf> at page 27);
2. From then until the Brighamite Mormons left for Utah (rapid organizational and doctrinal evolution – the rules were constantly changing);
3. During the period in Utah up to the renouncement of polygamy (strict authoritarianism and growth of the cult of Joseph Smith under Brigham Young as the Intermountain West was colonized);
4. From the abandonment of polygamy until recently (the embrace of mainstream American culture and internationalization of Mormonism). The recent emphasis on Jesus Christ and dawning acknowledgement of the mythic nature of the Book of Mormon and other foundational Mormon beliefs.. This last stage will gather stream for some time and in my view will characterize Mormonism for some time.

Some scholars have recently suggested that the progress in the West should be credited largely to Christianity and its eventual embrace of science (see <http://chronicle.com/temp/reprint.php?id=tqm4xd5mqkk5px43d968m19qmf4w3g5y> for example). While that may be the case (I think the case is overemphasized) it was still the movement away from theology (which can't be tested) toward ideas that could be tested that finally resulted in a return to the remarkable ideas of the Greeks and their society's trajectory in terms of the accumulation of useful knowledge.

See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 7 for an overview of the Mormon system of justifying "knowledge" and its problems.

The study of "bounded rationality" (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bounded_rationality and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 36) shows that behavior that seems irrational because people seem to ignore readily available, reliable information that would help them to understand cause and effect relationships that are relevant to their stated objective can often be better understood and said to be rational once we understand the nature of their perceptions and beliefs that motivate it. For example:

1. Most non-Muslim radicals believe that Muslim suicide bombers are irrational. But, in the context of a belief that life after death includes incredibly important blessings for those who sacrifice their lives to the Muslim cause, this belief is rational.
2. Most non-Mormon fundamentalists believe that polygamous life is irrational. Precisely the same kind of bounded rationality approach as just indicated regarding the Muslim suicide bombers makes this life style rational.
3. Most non-Mormons believe that the Mormon tendency to spend a huge percentage of their discretionary time and money on Mormon related activities that have little apparent connection to reality as most people understand it is irrational. These behaviours include Mormon temple attendance, serving missions away from our closest family members for extended periods of time at important life junctures (like coming of age and retirement), spending huge amounts of time in meeting that have little purpose other than to try to get more people to attend meetings for the purpose of getting more people to attend meetings, etc. And these behaviours are similarly rational in the context of beliefs in the reality of certain states after death that depend on these behaviours.

This focuses us on the critical issues for purposes of this discussion, which are:

1. Is there a wide spread, well documented, reliable pattern that can be used to predict some circumstances in which certain people will misperceive evidence of cause and effect relationships that is obvious to other people?
2. If yes, then:
 - (a) while the theory of bounded rationality helps us to understand why people perceive evidence differently and hence behave differently, we still perceive important differences between being “boundedly rational” and being “rational”;
 - (b) “bounded rationality” is another word for dysfunctional, irrational behavior in many cases within the model of rationality most of us tend to use;
 - (c) to what extent does this pattern allow us to predict the behaviour of people with certain kinds of religious belief?
 - (d) what can we do to avoid it in our own lives?

The process of “reason” that most of us intuitively use depends upon three things:

1. Our beliefs about cause and effect relationships (smoking is bad for my health; being Mormon will allow me to go to the Celestial Kingdom after death and make me live a more happy life before death; etc.);
2. Our perception of evidence that is relevant to those beliefs (Mormons seem more happy, but Mormons also seem to use more anti-depressants than other people, go bankrupt more than other people, and have a variety of other social problems more than other people?);

3. Our assessment of probabilities as to how much the evidence we have perceived tells us about how the cause and effect relationships in which we believe apply to a decision we are about to make (I need to get across the road and can see a car coming a certain distance away at a certain speed; should I run across now or wait until the car passes?).

One of the things we all do as part of the reasoning process just described is rank our forms of knowledge in terms of how reliable they are, and that we give precedence to what we believe to be the most reliable.

Most religious people living in North America will say that science is the most reliable system of knowledge to use, except where science conflicts with important religious beliefs.

This is one of those things that seems irrational, but is explained by bounded rationality, denial etc.