

Mormon Apologetics

A Guide for the Perplexed

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

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My karma ran over your dogma. Anon

Abstract

Apologetics starts with a proposition that must be true (a dogma), and defends it against all evidence no matter how compelling. Apologists are driven by the same impulse that causes soldiers to volunteer for armed service during times of war – they are defending the truths upon which the very existence of their community depends. Tempers and emotions run high in apologetics, as in war, causing truth to be an early and frequent casualty.

Apologists do their work primarily by:

- questioning the evidence marshalled against their dogma;
- questioning the ability, credentials, bona fides, parentage and anything else that may help regarding anyone who challenges them (this is war, remember);
- insisting that even if the evidence appears to disprove their dogma that it is insufficient;
- using post-modernism to question our ability to know anything and hence our ability to question their dogma;
- alleging that the dogma they are defending had been misunderstood and changing it to something that can be more easily defended but that does not harm the authority on which their community depends;
- and if all else fails, claiming that in God's wisdom he is testing our faith as some believe he has by putting dinosaur bones that seem to be millions of years old into a 10,000 year old Earth and causing JW leaders to falsely predict a second coming of Christ on many occasions.

In short, anything that makes the case *contra* the apologist look more uncertain and fearful will be used. The more fearful believers feel when thinking about changing their beliefs, the less likely they are to do so.

It was once said that for the fight promoter Don King, the simplest truth requires at least a three rail bank shot. I would say the same of the apologetic enterprise. This is both the apologists' irony and dilemma. Apologetics is required because of dogma. Dogma is by definition certain. The apologetic defence of certainty requires the creation of uncertainty with regard to all competing theories and evidence. And yet somehow, this uncertainty must be prevented from spilling back into and so questioning the dogma that the apologist defends.

Though religious apologetics only directly influences a small percentage of believers, they are a crucial part of the defence system around dogma based religious groups. They are also tools used by these organisms to explore their environments and test the strategies available to them as they compete for resources.

The Internet has dramatically changed the nature and influence of the apologetic community within Mormonism. If at one time Mormon apologists were a “thin blue line” around a football field that restrained chaos, it is now yards thick and will become nothing but thicker for the foreseeable future. This will blur distinctions between who is in authority and who is not; will open up countless new avenues through which counsel can be sought and given; will create new opportunities to express faith and doubts; and will create, confuse and clarify countless other issues.

This will continue to trend seen in many social groups in the developed world toward a decrease in institutional power and increase in individual choice. Mormonism, as a conservative social group, will continue to lag in this regard thanks in large measure to the apologists who will continue to do what they can to protect their community. However, the winds of change will blow within the community of apologists as well as elsewhere, and so monitoring the apologetic community is a wise strategy for those interested in the nature of change that should be anticipated within the Mormon community.

Introduction

When I read religious apologetics of any kind I am bothered by a vertiginous feeling. This is largely the result of the need apologists have to obscure the evidence scientists and other scholars unearth that contradicts the dogma that apologists must defend. The feeling is like what Lewis Carroll portrayed in Alice so well as she experienced alternative “realities” through the looking glass and down the rabbit hole.

The purpose of this essay is to two-fold. First, I will outline how the religious apologetic enterprise works, using Mormon apologetics as an example. I will argue that apologists play a crucial role in the maintenance of belief and obedience within religious communities, and the development of new beliefs and behavioural standards. I will also suggest that the Internet is radically enlarging both the size of the apologetic community and the role it will play in depending and shaping Mormonism and other similar communities.

My second purpose will be accomplished if I do the first job well. That is, I hope that my explanation of how apologetics work will help those who occasionally deal with apologists to understand what to expect and hence find the experience less frustrating. If the apologists are successful, they baffle those on the inside and frustrate the outsiders. Understanding how this works facilitates the formation of realistic expectations which in turn reduces frustration. This will help those on the outside, but regrettably, is unlikely to do anything for those within a belief system since one must be able to see the system’s boundaries and understand how they work to understand the apologist’s role. Since a true believer’s sight typically ends at her world’s boundary, not only can’t she understand the apologist she is likely to avoid trying to do so.

However, as they say, if you can’t bring the mountain to Mohamed, bring him to the mountain. That is what the Internet is doing. Courtesy of the Internet, never has it been more likely that a faithful Mormon will suddenly finding herself looking into what usually appears to be Mordor but

becomes more appealing the more often it is seen. This likelihood will go nowhere but up for at least a long while.

The Apologetic Beast In Action

The bizarro nature of the apologetic experience is nicely summarized by Dan Vogel in his response to the Mormon apologists who reviewed his book about Joseph Smith (see <http://www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/making2.html>). He said:

“In reviewing my Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet for the apologetic journal FARMS Review, the Hedgeses have nothing good to say and clearly do not want fellow church members reading it. In their estimation, it is "everything that good history is not" and "an illustration of how not to write sophisticated history". Readers "seeking insight into the Prophet Joseph Smith," they maintain, "... will come away with nothing". Such unequivocal condemnation stands in stark contrast to the awards my book received from the two leading Mormon historical associations and more balanced reviews in two prominent scholarly journals.”

So, a book that is critical of Joseph Smith receives two awards from Mormon related historical associations, is the subject of reasonable reviews in scholarly journals, and is ripped to shreds by Mormon apologists. Nothing unexpected here. Just another day at the intellectual zoo.

Skimming Vogel's reply to his critics reminded me that back when I was trying to make sure I was not making a huge mistake by leaving Mormonism, I stumbled across the rebuttal that Todd Compton had written to the Mormon apologists who had panned his book "In Sacred Loneliness", which is about Joseph Smith's wives (see <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/7207/rev.html> for the rebuttal). The book had come out a few years earlier and I had not read it because after seeing a newspaper summary of the book that disturbed me, I called a professor at BYU who pointed me to the apologists' reviews. Since the apologists were scholars, and their reviews were written for a BYU publication (just as are the reviews of Vogel's book) I assumed that they were legitimate, heaved a sigh of relief and did not bother reading Compton's book. This is the intended apologetic effect.

After spending only a few minutes reading Compton's rebuttal I felt ill as the grotesque idea that people I had trusted my entire life had been misleading me came into view. I immediately looked up the reviews on the Internet and confirmed my worst fears. I felt, literally, like I had been kicked in the stomach. This was one of my defining moments on my road out of Mormonism. Having had it demonstrated to me in undeniable terms that the "scholars" at BYU had misled me, I was open to the possibility that others whom I had trusted might also be guilty of the same misdeed. As soon as I admitted this as possible, I began to see what he formerly been right in front of me but invisible. The floodgates opened. A few gut wrenching days later I had made the decision to distance myself from Mormonism but did not know how I would do that. And I foolishly assumed that what had become so obvious to me would be accepted by my family and other people whom I knew well enough that I thought I could predict their reaction.

Apologetic Foundations

What is Apologetics?

"Apologetics" is the systematic defence of a position (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apologetics>) regardless of its legitimacy. Apologetics usually start from the proposition that a truth is known and must be defended. Hence, dogma (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogma>), usually called sacred truth or something like that, is found at the root of most apologetic enterprises.

Apologetics is the opposite of real scholarly pursuit. Scholars seek understanding with regard to the real, the beautiful, the useful, etc. Science has proven to be the most reliable branch of scholarship in terms of helping us understand what is real and how relationships between real entities work.

The knowledge science produces, on average, is more reliable by far than anything else we have seen. While proving its reliability science has shown how unreliable many other kinds of knowledge are. This has created a healthy scepticism with regard any proposition about what is "real" or "how things work" that cannot be scientifically tested. Thus, a scientific approach to life gives both certainty and uncertainty more their due than is possible through any other means.

Not surprisingly, as the study of science and history progresses they often contradict dogma. This happens through two means. First, sometimes a religious dogma becomes scientifically testable. This occurred when Galileo and others began to understand planetary motion. More recently, the Book of Abraham and Book of Mormon have become amenable to scientific and historical analysis in new ways (see http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/magazine/feature_article/2004/09/22 or <http://www.i4m.com/think/history/Book-of-Mormon.pdf> for example). In these cases, a true religious truth claim, or dogma, comes into conflict with science. The result is predictable. Almost immediately almost everyone who cares about the issue and is not connected to the religious community whose dogma is under attack will have accepted the scientific conclusion. And, after enough time passes the religious community itself will accept the same conclusion. It will wait as long as possible before accepting this conclusion so as to minimize the damage to its authority structure and social order. This often benefits the group's leaders far more than its followers. In fact, it often harms the followers. The apologists job is to buy this time.

A second type of conflict is much more common than the first. That is, dogma by its nature is certain, and science suggests by inference that many things that are not scientifically testable and tenaciously believed to be true are in fact false. This is particularly the case for the kinds of beliefs that hold religious communities together. But, there is no way to use science to "prove" anything in this regard and so religious people simply tend to ignore this aspect of the scientific worldview regarding their own beliefs, while using it to debunk the claims of other religious people.

In each of the two ways just noted, the work of scientists and other scholars conflicts with religious dogma. This brings scientists into conflict with those who defend dogma – the apologists – who generally masquerade as scholars since that enhances their credibility. Academic institutions like Brigham Young University regularly lose credibility as a result of their so-called scholars participating in apologetic endeavors. An apologist in academic robes wears a particularly offensive, but to-be-expected, form of sheep's clothing.

Humans Fear Leaving Their Dominant Social Group

At the root of most apologetic success is the fact that most people (even those who are abused) feel good enough about their social experience that they are not easily persuaded to leave their dominant social group. Humans seem to have been designed that way because our connection to a social group was so important to survival during most of human history. Hence, the "We can't really know what is going on - you'd better stay where you feel secure" approach plays nicely into the hands of social groups who are trying to slow down defections. This is, hence, the foundation of most apologetic defences. Mormons use this tactic against those who criticize them, as do other Christian groups against the marauding Mormon missionaries who seek converts wherever they can be found.

The big picture apologetic game would be pretty entertaining if it did not leave such carnage in its wake – weakened reasoning ability; broken marriages and families; damaged friendships; planes that fly into buildings; riots over cartoons published thousands of miles away; etc. All of this is due in large measure to the intellectual barricades built and manned by well-meaning apologists of countless stripes. These create bubbles of irrationality which are hard to control once they have been set up, as Jon Krakauer points out in "Under the Banner of Heaven". There he chronicles the path that led the Lafferty brothers from faithful mainstream Mormonism, to Mormon polygamous fundamentalism, to murder as a result of their belief that God had commanded them to punish an unfaithful member of their group. More support for Goethe's insight that: As Man is; So is his God; And thus is God; Oft strangely odd.

The Making of An Apologist

Apologists are called on to address a problem that looks something like this. We've got our beliefs and we know that they are true. The very nature of our community depends on these truths, so they must be true. And they are being challenged. Who will defend our community against this outrageous offence that endangers our way of life?

Of course members of a community will rise to this kind of challenge. They are driven by the same instincts that cause huge numbers of men and women to enlist in armed forces during wartime. And as is the case with war, truth is usually an early casualty and regular as emotional forces dominate decision-making and action.

Just as the champions of old tended to be those suited to the task of physical warfare, apologetic champions are suited (or at least think they are suited) to intellectual battle. They tend to be well-educated, intelligent people. And since this kind of person can be found defending virtually every hare-brained scheme on Earth – from various bizarre religions through alien abductions, Holocaust denial, the flat earth theory and groundless conspiracy theories – we can be certain that lots of education and intelligence do not guarantee the accurate perception of reality. Rather, the evidence is clear that smart people are as (or more) subject to certain kinds of bias, social proof and forms of self-deception as the rest of us (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf>). And, they are better able to persuade others to go along with them because their intelligence is demonstrable in other ways.

The challenge an apologist faces drives her to the edges of her belief world. That is where one must go to meet the community's intellectual enemies. This familiarity with the edges of belief distinguishes the apologist from the run-of-the-mill believer. In most cases, a believer's sight ends at her world's boundary. Truman (see <http://movie->

reviews.colossus.net/movies/t/truman.html) had no hope of understanding his world or those who maintained his limited perception of it until found his way outside. And so, faithful Mormons cannot understand what lies outside their belief world until they have crossed its borders.

Think of terrified, blind Ivy of “The Village”, stumbling through the forest outside her artificial world as poor retarded Noah, dressed in the stolen garb of one of their community’s manmade demons, tries to kill her. She improbably turns the tables on him and ends his life (see “The Village” at <http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/master.html>). We are invited to speculate as to whether Ivy will interpret her experience on the outside as real so that it buttresses the beliefs she inherited from her community. And, we are told that the story of her experience will be told so as to support the community’s belief in the demons that require all to stay within certain physical and behavioral boundaries. Noah’s death was a sacrifice justified by the role it would play in maintaining these boundaries - he would become a savoir figure.

So, Ivy left her world to face a danger that she was uniquely suited to face, and her experience on the outside will be used to convince others, if not her, of the legitimacy of the life they lead and the boundaries that have been set for them.

It is what belief boundaries do – the kind of community they maintain – that justifies them for many who are familiar with the borderlands. And so the accuracy of the stories told that maintain the boundaries is of secondary importance. The horrors outside the community are believed by the leaders to be real. But if those horrors were described accurately, their nature would likely not be understood by the impetuous young people and so the horrors around “The Village” are supercharged by being given concrete demonic form by virtue of both elaborate stories and carefully staged appearances. Panic related to these events is both incited and calmed by the leaders, whose judgement the community has been made to trust. Occasionally evidence of apparent sadistic acts committed by the demons against livestock and pets is left where it cannot be missed. This drives home the point that everyone is surrounded by brutal, capricious forces that must at all costs not be provoked by breaching prescribed behavioural and physical boundaries. The parallels between the people at The Village and Old Testament Hebrews, not to mention many present day religious literalists, is striking.

In my view, “The Village” is a useful caricature of how and why belief systems are formed and maintained. It collapses – not quite believably I might add – into one generation a process that usually takes many and nicely illustrates the principles described by the academic literature in this regard. The section below related to “Attachment Theory” provides one point of view as to why that way of using belief systems should be expected to be successful.

Apologists can be best understood as those rare birds who have flown outside the boundaries of their unreal world, have seen at least some of what is there, and choose to reject the reality outside while defending their inherited surreality. Perhaps this will be Ivy’s path. It was certainly her parents’.

Those who go the boundary of their world react in a variety of ways. Many who arrive there with the idea of becoming apologists are surprised by what they find on the outside and become non-believers - they choose reality over surreality, and generally pay a social price for doing so. This is the route I took. The transition sometimes happens soon after a would-be apologist reaches the borderlands, and sometimes after a period of time acting as an apologist. The fellow who started and for years maintained www.whyprophets.com thought his way out of Mormonism more or less in lock step with me while we corresponded over a period of about three months in 2002.

Apologists who defend the boundaries of their world generally do so for one of two reasons. Most often this is the result of misunderstanding their experience with the “outside”. Most of them do not make it outside far enough, stay long enough, or are able to understand enough of what they experience, to accurately perceive what is there. As Einstein said, the theory we believe determines what we see. This is basic human limitation. And, most of us underestimate the power of the biases to which we are all subject in this regard (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>). We are left wondering if Ivy will be one of these, or whether she will become one of the other apologetic group, who are much more tenacious and difficult to deal with. They are members of the long line of apologists as well as religious and other leaders who have decided that the maintenance of their belief worlds is so important that deception is justified in this regard. This decision often has much to do with the power or other perquisites these people enjoy courtesy of their position within a social order.

There are no doubt other reasons for apologetic behaviour as well, but in my experience these two account for the vast majority of well intentioned religious apologists.

I will save until later a summary of how the Internet is changing the Mormon apologetic community, as well as Mormonism itself.

Are Mormon Apologists Unique?

The apologists for religions other than Mormonism, as seen by outsiders, look as silly as the Mormon apologists. Go read some Young Earth Creationist drivel (God put dinosaur bones in the Earth to test our faith). The Muslim apologists tell us that they own a toll booth on the only road to heaven and if you disagree they are justified in killing you. That shuts people up, as the recent debacle related to Danish cartoons proves. It has most of the Western world is running scared. The Jehovah’s Witnesses explain that their leaders’ numerous failed prophecies that Christ would return to Earth on specific dates is just a way for God to test their faith. There are countless similar examples that could be trotted out.

This stuff all comes from the same place – the desire to prevent ideas from changing and most importantly, to preserve the communities and power that depends upon these ideas. And note the “God is just testing us” theme. When the going gets really tough, that argument is the last resort. Look for it to appear in Mormon apologetic discourse with increasing frequency.

An Apologetic Case Study: Where is the Hill (or Hills) "Cumorah"?

As an apologetic case in point, consider a Mormon classic - the so-called “two Cumorahs” theory. This explains why Joseph Smith received the golden plates from which he said he translated the Book of Mormon at a hill he called “Cumorah” in upstate New York, while scholars have now shown that this hill is an extremely unlikely candidate for the events that are believed by Mormons to have literally occurred there. Since the alternative to finding a second location for these events was to admit that the Book of Mormon is fictive, Mormon apologists have brought us the “two Cumorahs theory”, as described at <http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=jbms&id=98>. This is closely connected to another masterpiece of improbability known as the “limited geography theory” of the Book of Mormon (see <http://farms.byu.edu/publications/bomgeog.php>).

These theories contradict nearly two centuries of Mormon prophetic statements, and would tell us that the Book of Mormon events were played out in area of Central America that:

- is small enough that it has not yet been discovered;
- large enough for battles that killed millions of people to have been fought there;
- large and rich enough to have maintained a civilization that enough muster armies like that;
- was the most scientifically and culturally advanced place in the Americas for most of 1,000 years.

It is possible – but barely – that such a place may exist. And then the story becomes even less probable. God moved the gold plates that told the history of this people to New York where Joseph Smith could find them without telling Joseph about on this, leaving him to believe and teach as God’s revealed truth that the epic described in the Book of Mormon was played out across the length and breadth of America and that all Amerindians as well as Polynesians were the literal descendents of the people the Book of Mormon says immigrated to the Americas from Jerusalem.

Joseph Smith’s teachings about the Book of Mormon were a large part of what motivated, among other things:

- millions of Amerindians and Polynesians to become Mormons (I served my mission to Peru in the late 1970s and know how aggressively this sales approach was used and how successful it was);
- many thousands of Amerindians to be removed from their homes through the Indian (later “Lamanite”) placement program (in which my family participated – my alcoholic Amerindian “brother” still calls me when he needs something); and
- many of these same people to hopefully watch their own skin color (as well as that of their descendants) to see if it was becoming lighter as promised by the Book of Mormon to faithful Mormons, and as noted by some modern Mormon prophets as they observed faithful Amerindian Mormons. The whiter, the more righteous, the more blessed, the and of course, the better. It is hard to imagine a more backward, perverse teaching.

Though it hardly seems possible, this story becomes more bizarre yet. Recently Mormon apologists have taken license from the two Cumorahs theory and are extending its reasoning from Central America to Malaysia (see http://www.sunstoneonline.com/magazine/issues/131/30-34_a_Olsen_book%20of%20mormon%20lands.pdf). That’s right – three Cumorahs, and one of them in Malaysia. And who knows how many more before we are through.

Were this a joke, it would be funny, as are the fringe Mormon classics that find credible evidence of Near Eastern linguistics in Dr. Seuss books and Book of Mormon civilizations on islands in Utah lakes. However, rather than treating us to a good laugh, the Malay Cumorah theory illustrates the principle that those who play fast and loose with reason put themselves in a position where nearly everything is “provable”. The corollary of this principles is that when everything is provable, nothing is. For example, if our definition for the word “dog” is so unclear that any animal can be made to fit within it, this enables those who want to prove that horses are dogs to do so, and at the same time prevents anyone who think that horses are not dogs

from proving his position. Our definition is, hence, useless. In rational discourse, we want definitions and tests of knowledge that will allow us as much certainty as possible as to what we are dealing with.

What Do the Prophets Say?

One can be forgiven for wondering why literalist religious leaders, who generally exercise as much control as possible over their followers, would allow the kind of shenanigans just described to go on. This question is particularly compelling in the Mormon case where the leaders are believed to be God's own prophets – His only authorized representatives on Earth. One would think that they would have something to say with regard to questions like “how many Cumorahs are there?”, particularly in light of the fact that the credibility of Mormonism's founders seems to be at stake.

Religious leaders in general and Mormon leaders in particular have surprisingly little to say these days about anything specific. There was a time when they would wade into almost any issue. Brigham Young and other early Mormon leaders were notorious for this (see http://www.i4m.com/think/history/mormon_history.htm), and their successors are wiser. Hence, they keep quiet. This is the trend across the religious world. Religious leaders have seen hard lessons learned by those who make statements that may eventually be contradicted by science or history. So most try not to expose themselves to the chance that they may be made to look foolish at some point down the road. Much can be explained by remembering that rule and thinking about the needs it creates.

For example, religious leaders will tend not to say anything that may be contradicted by science. And yet they need to be in charge. And the forces of science and scholarship need to be resisted in order for them to stay in charge. Someone has to do that. So, the apologists are called upon to play this and other crucial roles.

This also explains why Mormon leaders, ironically called “prophets”, stay as far away from prophesying as possible. Instead, they focus on the kind of platitude that made Gordon Hinckley's “Standing for Something” useless to anyone who did not venerate him, while defending when they must the positions prior prophets took before the foolishness of the prophetic approach sunk in.

And what about the extensive use Mormon leaders make of polling data that I used to hear about while I was a bishop and in other LDS leadership positions? I heard enough about these to believe that Mormonism's highest leaders took seriously the job of marshalling data from which to forecast at least certain kinds of behaviour, particularly when it came to the effect of advertising programs, missionary programs, and encouraging greater meeting attendance and payment of tithes and offerings. But while I heard about those studies, I never saw them and to my knowledge they have never been made public. I would be willing to bet that there are many other studies of which I have not heard that relate to issues of concern to Mormonism's highest leaders, as evidenced by what they speak about when broadcasting their most important messages. These would include personal bankruptcies, female depression, spousal violence, divorce rates, sexual behaviour of various kinds, tax evasion and other forms of dishonesty, the reasons for declining missionary and activity rates, etc. Why would this useful information not be made available to the average Mormon leader or member? The essence of being a prophet is access to privileged information. If God no longer reveals such information (or if the current state of human knowledge no longer permits the illusion of information of this kind to persist)

then perhaps a reasonable substitute can be created to preserve at least some of the information differential that defines prophethood.

The Mormon leadership system and mindset, however, imposes limits on how much wisdom Mormon leaders should be expected to create or be able to use. The larger and more diverse the group that works independently to solve a given problem, the more quickly and accurately information is likely to be produced relative to its solution (see James Surowiecki, "The Wisdom of Crowds). Groups of this kind will almost always outperform their smartest members. Apologists tend to work under conditions that are the opposite of those shown to enable groups of people to produce accurate information. Mormon leaders are even worse. They are as far from diverse in their point of view as possible; they speak by order of seniority on all important matters; they are required to follow tradition; and unanimity in a group of 15 very old men whose primary virtue is conservatism is required to change anything of substance. Science and some other scholarly pursuits, on the other hand, are designed with the principles of sound group decision making and learning in mind, so that over time error should be reduced as fruitful new ideas come forward. The track records of science, religious apologetics clearly indicate which should be trusted, and which not.

Most Mormon apologists are connected in some way with the Mormon Church. Most are either employed by BYU or the Church Educational System (CES). Hence, they are financially dependant on the leaders of the Mormon Church, who have on many occasions fired BYU professors who do not adequately toe the line. The most recent is Darren Smith, an African American Mormon who refused to stop speaking and writing about race related topics relative to Mormonism. He departed BYU earlier this month.

So, while it would not be fair to assume that Mormon leaders approve of everything their BYU based apologists do, it is fair to assume that they do not take strong exception. This is important regarding issues like the two Cumorah theory that literally overturns countless "prophetic" pronouncements. Why would Mormon authorities not protect their turf from something like this?

Religious leaders may wish to say the kind of ridiculous things I outlined above regarding the two Cumorah theory, but they restrain themselves because of the risk that they will be proven wrong at some point in the future and lose credibility as a result. So let the apologists have at it. If they are shown to be wrong, so what. They were just "intellectuals" playing the intellectual game. And in the meantime, they will have the effect of slowing down the defection rate and maybe even helping to earn converts, though the issues that the apologists address are kept as far under wraps as possible during the conversion process.

By allowing the apologists to forge ahead in areas such as "how many Cumorahs are there?", the religious leaders have the ability to gauge the reaction of their followers. If the apologists provoke a firestorm of protest, they can be told to stop. In fact, they could be publicly rebuked in a show of religious authority that will make it clear who is in charge. However, the apologetic palliative often eases the pain that shattered belief causes in one generation while another grows up with an entirely different set of teachings. This is what happened when polygamy was abolished in a series of painful, halting steps between 1890 and 1904. A combination of information suppression, obfuscation and apologetics got those who believed in polygamy through this crisis while causing their children and grandchildren to be raised with little understanding of the prior state of belief and affairs.

And perhaps more importantly, by floating ideas some of which grow roots in the Mormon community, apologists assist in the development of both theology and social practise. A

negative example of this relates to the diminution of respect for rational thought, science and scholarly pursuits in general that is coming to characterize Mormonism. This is caused by the apologetic tendency (discussed in some detail below) to disparage anything that questions sacred Mormon dogma regardless of how rational or scientifically rigorous the critique may be. Those who accept this approach are likely to be unreasonably sceptical of the entire scholarly enterprise. The structure of BYU itself is a large part of this problem. While studying there students are taught both by real scholars in the sciences and some arts, and by apologists masquerading as scholars who teach an anti-rational, anti-intellectual approach to knowledge and reality. This breeds a compartmentalized form of thinking – one kind of reasoning for religion and another for everything else. This compartmentalization breaks down, however. The emotional basis for religious “knowing” (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 7) tends to slop over into other areas, likely resulting in bad financial decision making, for example. This could explain why Utah leads or nearly leads the US in unflattering categories like financial fraud, personal bankruptcies, tax evasion and multi-level marketing participation.

How Do Apologists Deal with Evidence that Contradicts Dogma?

Most people believe that the facts are important and that we should compare the evidence we find to what the theories we accept predicts, and if the theory does not match the evidence this is a serious problem. Either the theory, or the evidence, must be incorrect.

Since this is the kind of people apologists seek to persuade, we can predict how they will approach their task. In the case of conflict between “truth” and evidence, either the truth must not be what we thought it was, or the evidence must have been misunderstood. There is no where else to go.

The Short Version

I will first summarize the apologetic defence process using a framework provided by one of my Internet friends.

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

- Emphasize Feelings – bear testimony based on feelings. This shifts the argument out of the objective into the subjective. Facts become relative to perspective. There can be no rational argument on this basis.

The two Cumorahs/limited geography theory is a great example of how this works. We will use it to analyze the key apologetic methods more closely. They are, change the truth, ignore probabilities, hide in a post-modern fogbank, and emphasize the primacy of social and emotional experience.

Change the Truth

This is easier than it sounds. If other people misunderstood what the truth was, the truth has not been changed. So, apologists routinely change “sacred” truth without batting an eye. In the case of the “Cumorah” problem, the apologists say that two centuries of Mormon prophets, including Joseph Smith, simply misunderstood reality and what God had communicated them, and consistently misled their followers by statements about where Book of Mormon events occurred, who was literally descended from Book of Mormon peoples, etc. Opps. Why would God allow that to happen? To test us maybe?

The apologetic logic works like this. Prophets make mistakes. The Bible shows that. So, we should expect prophets to be wrong about some things. However, we must assume that in every case where a prophet has not been proven wrong that he is still right (he was speaking God’s own truth) regardless of how many times we have found him to be unreliable or even flat out lying to us.

This denies that a basic rule of human behavior applies to our religious experience. That is, when people are found to be generally unreliable, we don’t trust them or even take them seriously. And it does not matter in some ways whether they are lying to us or simply mistaken. We don’t follow the advice of unreliable people. Our religious leaders and their apologists tell us that this rule does not apply to them. And, given how deeply the need to remain with our dominant social group is engrained in us, we tend to accept propositions like this when they are put forward by representatives of our dominant social group, but not otherwise.

Recent examples of Mormon truth changing are first the two Cumorah/limited geography theory. As noted above, it overturns countless Mormon prophetic statements. However, this has not yet been endorsed by Mormon leaders. They say that they take no position on “the facts” for reasons I have already outlined. The second case concerns what was once one of Mormonism’s most important ideas – that man can become like God. This was attributed to Joseph Smith, and Gordon Hinckley is on the public record several times during the past few years to say that he doesn’t understand what this means; it is not taught by Mormons; etc. (see http://www.i4m.com/think/leaders/Hinckley_dontknow.htm). This Mormon belief was creating a lot of friction between Mormon leaders and scholars and the evangelical Christians with whom they were trying to dialogue. It is likely that Mormon leaders foresee the day when they, like the Reorganized LDS Church, the Seventh Day Adventists, Mennonites and many others will de-emphasize their distinctive beliefs and join the conservative Christian herd.

So for generations the truth was taught by Gods prophets to be X; lives were planned, lived and sacrificed on the basis of X; and then suddenly one day we are told that X was never true. Why would God put us in such a hard position? Life appears to be full of such tests for the faithful, of all stripes it turns out, when you start looking at how other religions work. Many of these “tests” are even contradictory from one group to another. This is another painful irony.

I bet people who are gullible enough to swallow ideas like this get taken advantage of a lot. Let's check the data. Sure enough, Utah hosts more con artists per capita (as measured by rates of financial fraud and multi-level marketing companies) than any other US state.

The Evidence Does Not Disprove the "Truth"

If the evidence is stacked against an apologist, he can be counted on to claim that the truth he is protecting has not been "disproven" regardless of how slim the probabilities in its favor appear to be. This is the basis of the Mormon defence of the two Cumorahs and limited geography theory, as well as their defence against the current tidal wave of DNA evidence that questions the Book of Mormon in other ways (see http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/magazine/feature_article/2004/09/22). The requirement of complete proof contradicts our usual and instinctive use of probability theory to make decisions, as well as Occam's Razor (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occam's_razor). We do not make other important decisions on this basis, and it is not rational to make decisions relative to our religious beliefs this way either (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.apologetic%20mind.pdf>).

Duck into a Post-Modern Rabbit Hole

It is not easy to apologize for beliefs like the Mormon, Muslim, JW, young earth creationist in a fashion that will be acceptable to even a conservative community that badly wants to continue to believe. Hence, as already noted, the nature of the task requires smart people with a taste for labyrinthine argument. And it is no surprise that apologists can be counted on to come at the most simple of concepts from odd angles in order to show how hard to understand they "really" are.

For example, take the proposition that the Book of Mormon, like so many other similar pieces of religious literature, was made up to look ancient so that it would be more persuasive. There is an extremely high probability, once all of the relevant evidence is considered, that this is the case (see <http://www.i4m.com/think/history/Book-of-Mormon.pdf> for example). Non-Mormon scholars who study in this area believe that this is as incontrovertible as the idea that the Holocaust occurred more or less as the mainstream historians say it did, or that many well intentioned people are deluded in their belief that they have been visited by aliens.

However, to admit that the Book of Mormon was not an ancient record would be fatal to the apologists position, and so they can't do this. One way to question a straightforward approach to a question like this is to take the position that scientific and historical analysis are unreliable. The fringe of post-modern theory provides useful tools in this regard (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 15). No evidence of wheels, horses, steel, etc. in the Americas? How can anyone be certain about things like that? And maybe the "most correct of any book on Earth" (see <http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=review&id=550&mp=T>) used a kind of complicated code to communicate its sacred and all important message. "Steel" really meant "obsidian" or "copper". "Horse" really meant "tapir". Etc. Or maybe God is testing us?

I need to stop thinking about this for a minute. My head is starting to hurt and I know that the going is about to get tougher.

Since some facts will be proved beyond doubt, the apologists are ready with the questions like, "What does a 'fact' mean?"; "How can we ever know anything except what we experience in the moment?"; and "If what our experience means is subjective, how can 'reality' be interpreted by anyone other than the person who experiences it?". This destroys our ability to critique any religious belief or experience. It puts all religious experience beyond scientific analysis and understanding. So, if you feel good about your experience, you should not change what you believe or what you do as a result of your beliefs. Using this theory, it is possible to chase one's tail down any number of post-modern rabbit holes and find oneself having an earnest conversation with the Queen of Hearts, or Joseph Smith for that matter. And, one might ask, on what basis do Mormons justify doing missionary work if this is their view of reality?

Without batting an eye, Mormon apologists will use tools like this in their own defence while Mormon leaders, members and missionaries tell their friends and anyone else who will listen about the absolute truth they possess. When based in ignorance this is sad, but understandable. When done with knowledge, it is immoral (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/come%20clean.pdf>).

It is both comic and tragic to see science and history denying post-modern ideas walking arm in arm down the street with the Mormon position that Joseph Smith received God's exclusive authority and absolute truth from God and all humankind who hears this message must either accept it, become Mormon and start to obey Mormon authority or miss countless blessings both while living and after death.

The use of extreme post-modernism is the friend of anyone who wants to resist the tide of evidence against her position. It was invented after all, by humanities profs who were sick and tired of the way the "hard" sciences were talking over the academic and cultural world. Alan Sokal showed those guys (see <http://www.drizzle.com/~jwalsh/sokal/articles/weinberg.html>). Something similar would be good medicine in the apologetic community.

Phenomenology: The Primacy of Emotional and Social Experience

Mormons have always been told to trust their feelings about religion and have faith in that; that God communicates through the heart instead of the mind; The study of phenomenology has helped some Mormons find a rational justification for this approach to life (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenomenology>). In simple terms, phenomenology says that our perception of our own experience in each moment is self-justifying. Hence, if I feel good about my Mormon experience that is all I need to know about it. This approach, of course, justifies virtually any belief system, and hence can be used to falsify none of them. Count on this approach not to be mentioned in Mormon missionary discussions anytime soon.

It is well established that the emotional range of human experience often dominates the rational. This is thought by some scientists to be due to the fact that there are many more neural pathways leading from the brain's more primitive, emotional equipment (the hippocampus, amygdala, etc.) to its more recently developed, rational equipment (the cerebral cortex, etc.) than the other way around. Hence, when the brain is subjected to stimuli that ignite its emotional structures, reason struggles to be heard. (See "Fear Not" by Rudiger Vaas, in "American Scientific Mind" vol. 14, no. 1, 2004, p. 69). This is particularly the case when dealing with phenomena that are not well understood. The feedback system from the rational to the emotional structures in the brain can calm us if we are confident that we "know" what is going on. Think, for example, of the terror an eclipse of the sun at one time caused. But when our emotions are excited, and we don't "know" why, we are engineered so that emotion usually

trumps reason. When this happens, we generally resort to what seems most safe. This is part of our preservation instinct. Staying with the group and doing what it does is one of those things that is assumed to be safe.

Joseph Campbell, C.G. Jung and others have emphasized the role that fear, and its close cousin desire, play in all emotional forces. Campbell noted the teaching central to Buddhist theory that fear and desire are the two primary forces in life that cause us trouble. And, desire is really for the most part an aspect of fear since when we want something, what motivates us largely is fear that our desire will not be satisfied.

One of the most ancient and powerful of all human drives is to seek certainty and hence security. We are all vulnerable to those who offer to sell us this in a plausible manner, and can be counted on to actively resist ideas or things that might be of great use to us simply because they upset the status quo and hence make us feel insecure.

There is tremendous inherent uncertainty with respect many important aspects of life. What happens when we die? Why do people suffer? Etc. Religion deals with these questions and offers certainty. There is much more to religion than that, but much of its appeal is that simple.

Given what I have noted, it is not surprising that the psychologists tell us that emotions reign in the decision making that occurs respecting religious matters. This means that it is more likely that religious decisions will be made on the basis of what the surrounding group does, or what some persuasive authority figure says. It also means that the more certainty members of religious groups feel respecting their faith (that is, the more blind their faith is), the more cognitive dissonance (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance) they will experience when their beliefs are challenged and hence the more their subconscious mind will suppress any discomfiting evidence by which they are confronted.

So, knowing how vulnerable we are to emotional forces when trying to decide what is “real” or “true” or “right” about our religious belief, we should expect the apologists to give us a hard push in this direction. This has been, and will continue to be, their most powerful tool.

A Catholic Counter-Reformation Case Study

Apologetics go back to at least the ancient Greeks, and so there are many examples that can be examined to put Mormon apologetics in context. I review some of the Catholic apologetic response to the counter-reformation at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.apologetic%20mind.pdf>. This illustrates how apologists in a different time used the tools at their disposal to solve a problem similar to the one Mormons now face.

Attachment Theory: The Worse the Alternatives Look, the Fewer Will Leave

Did I mention that I feel dizzy when I venture into any apologist's lair? This is because much of the apologists' effort is directed in the manner already indicated toward making any alternative to their cherished dogmas hard to understand and fearful, so that people will not change their beliefs or behavior. Attachment theory (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attachment_theory) explains why this strategy is a good idea for religious organizations who want to survive and prosper.

Many religions cause their believers to become dependant on ideas and social groups, and then makes all alternatives look as risky and dangerous as possible. What is hard to understand is easy to make look risky and dangerous. The fear this causes triggers our attachment instinct, which drives us into the arms of the people and institutions to which we have become attached as a result of our life experience to that point. This explains the bizarre combination of abuse believed with apparent love that we find in many dysfunctional intimate relationships as well as at the heart of many religious communities.

There are no evil gnomes sitting around and planning this stuff. It is just how human groups function. Nothing is clearer from a reading of religious and political history than this. Human groups are organisms that to a degree act in a fashion of which none of their members are conscious. That is, they seek the resources they need to survive, and defend themselves against threat. Apologists are part of the defence system.

Another way to understand this process is to remember that science became what we think of as science when it began to test ideas against evidence. Tycho Brahe (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tycho_Brahe) was one of the leaders in this regard. He measured the position of the planets and stars more carefully than anyone before him, laying the groundwork for the revolution of our understanding the universe. While careful measurement of the world around us sounds like common sense, it was an earth shaking innovation in his day. Until then, the unencumbered-by-evidence use of premises (basic ideas) assumed to be true and logic dominated well-educated discourse and enabled the smartest people on the planet to reach pretty much any conclusion they wanted about religion, cosmology, or anything else. This caused questions like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin to occupy an amazing amount of scholarly time for centuries.

Even today, the Mormon belief system makes almost logical sense if you accept the basic idea that there is a God of a particular kind who created us and had us come to Earth as the Mormon Plan of Salvation indicates. Here we find the reason for drilling certain premises in so deeply that they are unlikely to be questioned while maintaining the social group in ways that will further reduce the likelihood of questioning. This imperative explains a great deal of Mormon behavior such as the emphasis on daily rituals like prayer; the memorization from childhood up of songs and scriptures; and why those who disbelieve but do not speak out are accepted, while those who insist on their right to openly question while still believing (such as Michael Quinn) are excised from the Mormon body and branded as cancerous agents that the faithful should avoid.

Where is Mormon Apologetics (and Mormonism) Headed?

The Internet and Persuasion

Apologetics is all about persuasion. What it takes to persuade a group of people depends on the state of their knowledge related to their subject, how many viable courses of action they have relative to the question at hand, and a variety of other things.

The Internet has become such a pervasive influence in our lives that it is the place to start if we wish to predict where Mormon apologetics, or Mormonism itself, is headed. As a result of the Internet, Mormons see their beliefs against a much broader set of information than ever. And this information set will continue to expand. Hence, the kind of naïve faith that has sustained most Mormons to this point will become increasingly rare, and will have to be chosen instead of being the usual case. Consider, for example, what has happened during the past few years regarding DNA research as it concerns Mormonism. The necessity of dealing with increasingly

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

And now, I will prophesy. Unlike Mormon Prophets, I do not fear being wrong, and can comfortably express myself in probabilistic terms. I will then forget about this until someone reminds me years from now either how right, or how wrong, I now am.

In the Internet age, more believers are going to get to know their apologists and the line between apologist and believer, along with countless other lines, will be blurred. This does not mean that Mormons will suddenly become adventuresome and head for the border of their faith community in droves. Rather, it means that the border is moving toward them. It is no longer at some distant frontier. Rather, it is a vast area accessible at the click of a mouse, spilling out of news headlines, beckoning from Oprah's magazine and, in areas where Mormonism is a significant social force (like most of the Western US), being talked about by co-workers over coffee.

Apologists are those who have seen beyond the border of their belief system and feel compelled to defend it. It used to be necessary to make a long journey in the company of a few elites to the place where this could be done. Now a wrong turn at the end of the driveway and bang – there you are in the middle of No-Mans-Land. And if you catch a glimpse of more than a few of the carefully hooded faces in the crowds teeming there, you are likely to be surprised by someone you know. They will be either muttering and shaking their heads in astonishment, or more surprising yet, saying things that imply a breadth of knowledge and heterodox belief that you could not have imagine in them. People will go to the borderlands to relax, learn, express themselves, be themselves. You may even run into Mom or Dad; Grandpa or Grandma there, checking out the new, speaking openly about what they think or chatting with far flung friends.

The New Apologists

I predict that a new kind of LDS apologist will result from democratization of knowledge and influence that the Internet is causing within Mormonism as elsewhere. This apologist will not be on average as extreme or strident as her predecessors. There will be many more "hers" in this genre than ever. And there will be a far broader range of apologetic opinion than we have seen. Institutions like BYU and FARMS will continue to be influential, but the "blogosphere" and whatever emerges from cyberspace next will play increasingly important roles in defining the opinions that matter within Mormonism and what springs up to trouble Mormon leaders from the grassroots. Increasingly, what makes sense will be repeated first in whispers and then openly and then will have to be dealt with somehow. The leaders power will decline. The people's influence will increase.

This trend will create a new form of *de facto* Internet based group of General Authorities whose ideas will be quoted but for a while yet not attributed to anyone, or perhaps to some vaguely referenced "general authority" or "the scriptures". What they say makes so much sense that it must be in the scriptures somewhere; or surely someone in authority said this. These faceless authorities might be called the Quorum of Plenty.

The rule that lessons and talks given in Church must use as their only information sources the scriptures will be flagrantly, consistently and quietly broken. But the scriptures will generally, at least for a while, be the only sources quoted.

The coming apologetic influence will probably take Mormonism down a path well worn long ago by Jews, Catholics and various Protestant groups. While travelling this road, apologetic theories like two (or however many) Cumorahs will quickly become laugh (or shiver) getters even at faithful Mormon gatherings on the rare occasion that they are mentioned at all. And they won't be mentioned to non-Mormons at all by the few who are aware of them. Kind of like marrying other mens wives and ankle to wrist length wool garments designed to enable sexual intercourse without removal (shiver).

The Internet Crowd Will Be A Tougher Sell for Apologists

This new crowd of apologists will quickly and of necessity focus on themes that make sense to the average Mormon and his non-Mormon acquaintances since he will be increasingly likely to need to defend the weak spots in his belief system while doing his missionary duty or chit chatting around the water cooler about the latest LA Times (or whatever) piece regarding how little sense Mormonism "used to make". That was the "old way of thinking about Mormonism".

This dynamic will change what flies and what does not in the apologetic world. No longer will we have a small group of elites speaking from their ivory tower to a few of the faithful below who are terrified about what they have just heard concerning Joseph Smith's sexual predations or the Book of Mormon's rickety historicity. The bafflegab that has dominated Mormon apologetics to date worked when preaching to those, and only those, who wanted to believe. But try that stuff around the water cooler or during a potential "missionary experience" and see if your buddies can keep a straight face. This is the force that will reshape Mormon apologetics.

I refer again to Surowiecki's "The Wisdom of Crowds". He makes a compelling case for the way in which a large, diverse group with access to abundant information quickly tends to produce the most efficient solution available to any problem. So, remembering that necessity is what causes most evolutionary change, let's restate the apologetic problem in its Internet context and think about what the relatively well-informed non-Mormon crowd that will be interacting with their Mormon friends about the legitimacy of Mormonism is likely to cause.

As stated above, Mormons have their beliefs, they know that they are true, and recognize subconsciously at least that the very nature of their community depends on these truths, which confirms the idea that they must be true. And now those beliefs are being challenged by allegations that Joseph Smith was untrustworthy, the Book of Mormon seems less and less likely to tell a real story, and Mormon leaders past and present seem more error and deception prone the closer we look. What to do?

More and more Mormons will be disturbed by the cold reception theories like "two Cumorahs" and "limited geography" get from their acquaintances. "If it is probably not true, then why do you believe it?" will be the repeated and increasingly troubling question from well-meaning friends and relatives. The crowd will sniff this out in a heart beat. And the crowd will not be impressed with the credentials of religious studies "scholars" at BYU, and after just a little googling will find all kinds of unflattering things said about them by other religious studies scholars. And not just the usual scholarly sniping, but allegations that they are not scholars at all. Their peers – respected people like Douglas Davies of England's University of Durham – will say that some people from BYU are merely evangelists pretending to be scholars. And after hearing about two (or three) Cumorahs, that won't be a hard sell for most non-scholars.

Which Approaches Are Likely to Work?

So, what are the alternative approaches to this problem? As noted above, various kinds of post-modernism could be used to say that we can't really know anything. The crowd will instantly turn that one back on the poor Mormons, with a perhaps polite but nonetheless stinging recognition of its hypocrisy. "If nothing is certain, how can you be certain enough about your beliefs that I should pay any attention to them?" Next.

It is a surprising small step from "nothing is certain" to "everything is metaphor", and given how many respectable religions have already gone that route, that is where I expect a large slice of Mormonism to end up. I was recently advised of a Stake Conference in which the members were told that when praying about the Book of Mormon, they should not ask whether its facts and details were literally true, but rather whether the message it teaches about Christ is true. I heard of another Stake Conference at which Joseph Smith's polyandry was discussed, and the members were told that this was Joseph's Abrahamic test – that he went to the beds of the many women who offered themselves sexually to him with the same kind of heavy heart that Abraham mythically bore as he carried Isaac to a presumed sacrifice. That is, Mormon leaders are beginning to assume that the members will know of the troubling aspects of Mormon history, and are beginning to create a narrative that will explain troubling facts in a way that the members may be prepared to accept. I expect to see and hear more of this kind of thing.

I note as an apologetic aside regarding Joseph Smith's alleged Abrahamic and sexual test, that this kind of excuse has a long pedigree. For example, in the 1600s a Jewish rabbi names Sabbetai Zevi rose to prominence (see <http://www.conncoll.edu/academics/departments/relstudies/290/judaism/zevi.html>) and due to his charisma and many signs and wonders that were perceived by his followers to accompany his ministry, he was accepted by many as the Messiah. As 1666 approached, one of the many years during history that Christians have predicted for the second coming of Christ, Zevi travelled to Turkey and said that the Sultan would give up his throne to him because he was the Messiah. Instead, the Sultan threw Zevi into jail and told him that he had three alternatives. He could prove his claims by performing a miracle, convert to Islam or suffer death. Zevi promptly proclaimed his allegiance to Allah. His followers, for a time at least, held onto their faith on the basis that Zevi was descending into the darkest pits of hell to redeem the last sparks of light that might reside there before ascending to his throne of Messiahship. They waited, with waning hopes, until he died for him to do something that would merit his former claims to Messiahship. After his death, some still believed on the basis of increasingly metaphysical claims.

Faith, false or not, dies a slow, hard death. I don't doubt that with a bit of scratching around we could find those who still believe Sabbetai Zevi's claim to Messiahship.

In any event, there is a halfway house between Mormon literalism and metaphor that will be filled for at least one, and likely two to three, generations. This will be required to allow those who have the virulent, literalist form Mormon belief in their bones to die off as their children and grandchildren mature without it. This is the tricky stage, but Mormonism handled it with regard to polygamy's revocation (or was the suspension? – I am still confused) and can handle it here as well.

For the halfway house to work, there must be as little talk as possible – pro or con – about literalist Mormon beliefs in order to allow time for them to be forgotten. I regularly run into one approach now that with a bit of a push would do this. It is a variant on the "experience trumps all" idea described above. It would work like this.

Instead of refusing to talk about how many Cumorahs there are or what Joseph Smith's lying means in terms of Mormon foundations, these would be deemed childish, unimportant questions and would be ignored. Those who insist on asking them would be labelled "superficial" and "naïve", and pointed to the Catholics, Anglicans, Jews and others with disastrous histories while being reminded that many people in these communities live satisfying lives that are enriched by the religious belief and community involvement despite a problematic religious history. The only questions would dealing with would concern how we can better experience and enjoy life today; how various Mormon community functions and rituals (yes, including the temple rituals) correlate to Buddhist and other healthy individual and social-psychological habits, and how other similar habits can be incorporated into Mormonism since all truth belongs to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These issues would be made to attract as much as possible of the attention Mormons, post-Mormons and non-Mormons have to dedicate to Mormonism.

The good news regarding this approach to Mormon apologetics is that it will likely cause Mormons to lose, eventually, their "one true church" arrogance. Again, this is a well trodden path. History beat this idea out of most Catholics and Jews ages ago.

I don't expect Mormon leaders to get on this bandwagon. They will still ask for, and take, all of the time, energy, money and obedience they can from their faithful. However, a larger percentage of the faithful as time passes will use their religion instead of being used by it.

Many Mormons will for a long time suffer from the rationalization that will be required to answer temple recommend questions and behave in a manner that does not conform to temple covenants (like the one that requires 100% obedience to Mormon authority). However, once fully on board the metaphor train, this can be done. And many Mormons will have no trouble rationalizing this the best of available alternatives. It is still my view that it is morally corrosive to treat in metaphoric terms questions that are stated literally and understood to be intended literally by the person asking them. But again, for Mormons this will be for the most part considered to be the lesser of evils to the extent it is considered at all. Eventually, both the nature of the temple recommend questions and temple covenants will be toned down. But that is likely decades if not generations away.

Mormon Youth Strategies

In order to minimize the rate of change, I expect the Mormon Church to continue to pay special attention to its youth. For example, I expect to hear that young Mormons are overtly and covertly pressured to spend time exclusively with other Mormons so that they can be more effectively indoctrinated and conditioned. This will involve attendance at more and/or more professionally run, meetings and events (like "Especially for Youth") where they can "feel the spirit" or as a sceptic might suggest, have their emotional buttons pushed and be conditioned.

I also expect young Mormons to spend more time learning the distinctive history of their people, and being taught to behave in ways that make them a socially distinct group. A General Authority once told me that that was what the Word of Wisdom was all about. It has nothing necessarily to do with health. It is a social marker. See Pascal Boyer, "Religion Explained" for a review of how social markers help to define and hold together groups of people. And, I expect young Mormons to be rewarded and punished in various ways for engaging in socially distinguishing behaviour (distinctive dress; distinctive eating or drinking habits; distinctive leisure activities; etc.) and for avoiding things that could challenge their beliefs, such as the Internet and certain other communications tools and forms of entertainment.

What Do Faithful Mormons Say?

After writing the initial part of my apologetics forecast, I decided to test it by reviewing posting patterns at LDS blogs and bulletin boards. This indicated that the Internet is bringing many newly troubled Mormons into contact with the boundary between belief and unbelief in the fashion just indicated.

Here are a few posts as www.nauvoo.com, a bulletin board restricted to believing Mormons, that are typical (see http://www.nauvoo.com/ubb/forum/ultimatebb.php?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=002582) and confirm the pattern I expected to find. Each paragraph represents a different person:

“People sometimes fail to realize that it's ALL interpretation. A hyper-literal reading of scripture is interpretation. A conclusion drawn from scientific fact is interpretation. Everything we believe is constantly being filtered through our imperfect human minds, and in the end, nobody has a perfect grasp of "the facts". Nobody. All we can do is trust our consciences about what is right, and where we should be, independent of the ebb and flow of doctrinal and scientific arguments.”

“I never go to anti-mormon sites. I have found over the years as I have studied personally and tried to find doctrinal answers to my questions through prayer, study of approved LDS materials and the general authorities that there have often, as you state, been discrepancies and moments of shock when my neat little perceptions and testimony about "Mormonism" has been challenged. The question I ask myself is do I still believe or do I throw everything I have ever believed out the window. I choose to do as [another poster] has suggested - I rely on faith and try to humble myself. I do not trust trite and easy answers but seek to feel the spirit to help me find my way. I focus on the Saviour and the clear and simple knowledge I have that He lives, that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a prophet. I also rely on the many significant instances in my life when I have received witnesses by way of answers to prayers, experiences and blessings which also bear witness that the path I am on is the right one. Do I struggle from time to time? Yes. But I also cling to the fact that it is living the gospel and having faith in the gospel that brings me the most complete happiness, peace and joy. I have had two friends leave the Church over intellectual discoveries and discrepancies. One of whom I consider a very spiritual person. I don't believe her decision to leave was simple or trite but I am not sure that she was willing to keep searching for answers. Bottom line is that it is Heavenly Father, the Saviour and the Holy Ghost that ultimately provide the answers. Not men.”

And here the one that hits the nail most squarely on the head:

“I should add that I do believe the gospel is true. But, I lean much more heavily on faith now than I ever did before. I used to be very confident that I "knew" that Joseph Smith was a true prophet, that the Book of Mormon was the word of God, etc. I am more humble now. I have faith that the feelings and impressions I have and believe to come from the Spirit, really do come from the Spirit. I have faith that the good things that happen to me in my life are answers to prayers and blessings from God. I have faith that the transformation that takes place in me is the result of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. I believe these things while acknowledging the possibility that my perceptions and way of organizing my experiences could be mistaken.”

The reason I like this is that it shows what I believe will be the critical transition for many Mormons. Ever since I can remember Mormon leaders have been telling us that what we believe from a religious point of view is a matter of faith, not intellect. So, just believe. However, most Mormons do not understand what that means. I certainly didn't. As our friend above said, "I used to be very confident that I "knew" that Joseph Smith was a true prophet, that the Book of Mormon was the word of God, etc." Me too.

The transition to humility just described is what is required when the rickety foundations of Mormon history and social practise come into view. That is where a bit of post-modern theory, plus a focus on current experience and how a person feels about that will become crucial. And the emphasis on current feeling and de-emphasis on history will eventually take it our of the discussion entirely. A few decades or generations after that, Mormons will be comfortable discussion their beliefs on a purely metaphoric basis while acknowledging that their history does not provide a factual basis for literal belief.

Religions mature very slowly.

So, I expect Mormon leaders to continue broadcast their message as they have, but with the necessary additional twists that will be required to get average Mormons over the hump this man describes. That is, the leaders will include enough allusion in their speeches and writing to post-modern and phenomenological (the overriding importance of present) terms that the apologists will be able to take it from there.

The way in which people like those whose words I have just quoted perceive Mormonism and the rest of their lives related to it makes the apologists' job both more important and trickier. And more importantly, it will redefine the apologetic community.

This Is Progress

The changes that I see coming represent an improvement. This pleases me despite the fact that I would prefer to see Mormonism simply disappear and feel very happy with my decision to leave it. I think that the probability of a complete Mormon collapse (or over substantial collapse) is so small that it is not worth spending any time on. I am a pragmatist.

When all is said and done, there are only so many fingers to plug holes in a rapidly expanding dyke that restrains an even more rapidly rising information tide. Thus, for the next while, despite the efforts of apologists, cultural change within Mormonism will occur more rapidly than ever in the ways noted above. This will particularly be visible between generations as a result of the way in which children seem designed to reappraise their environment in fundamental ways. In reaction to this, a gradually shrinking percentage of the Mormon population will become ultra-"faithful". They will become the equivalent of the Ultra Orthodox Jews, or Taliban, and will be subject to all of the dangers each of those groups carry with them. And, an increasing number o these will continue to flee the secularism that they will see "infecting Mormonism", and become fundamentalists of one kind or another. Regrettably, Mormon history and theology favors polygamist fundamentalism.

An Invitation to Mormon Apologists

This is not an invitation to join the Dark Side, but an acknowledgement that most if not all Mormon apologists who read this will dismiss my point of view, likely on the basis that I am evil,

stupid, naïve or all of the above. Before relegating me to the trash bin, I ask that they engage in the following thought experiment.

Think about the ideas I have outlined as they apply to apologists for religions other than Mormonism. If you are a Mormon apologist, apply what I have said to the Young Earth Creationists or JW's, for example. Decide how well I have described their difficulty in perceiving obvious realities, and the reasons I offer to explain those difficulties. Then, distinguish the Mormon apologetic position from the Young Earth Creationists or JW's. All have similar problems with evidence. All base their claims on a form of knowledge that can't be tested and is created by a combination of powerful emotional experience and justification of the what that experience means in terms of reality (the Book of Mormon is real history; Joseph Smith received real authority from God, etc.) by agreement with other members of their dominant social group who report a similar experience and interpret in a similar way.

I don't believe that a difference between these cases can be rationally justified. And as we have already seen, if you wish to use irrational means of justification, you can prove anything and hence nothing.

This is both the apologists' irony and dilemma. Apologetics is required because of dogma. Dogma is by definition certain. The apologetic defence of certainty requires the use of tools that create uncertainty with regard to all competing theories and evidence. And yet somehow, this uncertainty must be prevented from spilling back into and overturning the certain truths that the apologist defends.

This is not an easy tightrope to walk.

What Would the Bishop of Occam, or Don King, Say?

I was reminded of the apologetic approach to life a short time ago while reading an entertaining piece in Sports Illustrated - a summary of a recent New York Friars Club roast of the fight promoter Don King. For King, it was said, the simplest truth requires at least a three rail bank shot. I would say the same of the apologetic enterprise. There are three, four, five rail bank shots galore – so many balls flying around that it is impossible for most people to see if any actually drop in a pocket. And that is the point of the exercise.

While Occam's Razor is not a hard and fast rule, I think it is fair to say that when you run across people who serially, flagrantly and consistently violate it, you should keep one hand on your wallet and use liberal amounts of salt before ingesting anything. Nowhere is this truer than when around religious apologists of any stripe.

Conclusion

Though religious apologetics only directly influences a small percentage of believers, it is from the peripheral exercise many understand it to be. The apologists are a crucial part of the defence system around certain dogma based social organisms that are often religious in nature. They are also part of the systems by which these organisms explore their environments and test the strategies available to them as they compete for resources and protect themselves against threats.

The Internet has dramatically changed the game for Mormonism and many other religions which until recently depended on information control to maintain their influence. This will increase the

nature and influence of the apologetic community within Mormonism, and has already expanded its numbers far beyond what Mormon leaders can control.

If at one time Mormon apologists were a “thin blue line” around a football field that restrained ever threatening chaos, it is now yards thick and will become nothing but thicker for the foreseeable future. This will blur distinctions between who is in authority and who is not; will open up countless new avenues through which counsel can be sought and given; will create new opportunities to express faith and doubts; and will create, confuse, clarify and confound countless other issues.

This will continue to trend seen in many social groups in the developed world toward a decrease in institutional power and increase in individual choice. Mormonism, as a conservative social group, will continue to lag in this regard thanks in large measure to the apologists who will continue to do what they can to protect their inherited culture. However, the winds of change will continue to blow within the community of apologists, and that is a good place to watch for those who are interested in the state of change within the Mormon community.