

Why We Believe

**The Edmonton Sun Spirituality Series
A Critical Review**

April 25, 2006

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

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My religiosity consists in a humble admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we, with our weak and transitory understanding, can comprehend of reality. Albert Einstein

The tendency to turn human judgments into divine commands makes religion one of the most dangerous forces in the world. Georgia Harkness

Introduction

A few weeks ago I gave a long telephone interview and several email interviews to Jeremy Loomer, the writer at large for the Edmonton Sun. The Sun is part of a large chain of daily newspapers in Canada known mostly for their daily, scantily clad "Sunshine Girls" and "working man's" journalistic style. Loomer persuaded his editors to allow him to try a more intellectual style of journalism than was usual for the paper, and the positive readership response resulted in him being given free rein. My interaction with Loomer was part of the research he was doing for a five day, two full pages per day, series on spirituality.

Loomer summarizes the series as follows:

Day 1: THE GURU AND THE GIRLFRIEND. An Edmonton based guru promises the path to inner truth. But to some, John de Ruiter is the latest in a long history of people substituting psychobabble and self-worship for spiritual growth.

Day 2: LOSING HER ILLUSIONS. Joyce De Ruiter's time as the wife of Edmonton spiritual guru John de Ruiter taught her that being enlightened isn't always what it's cracked up to be. But plenty of others still disagree.

Day 3: GOD ON THE BRAIN. For every person who's had a spiritual awakening, Dr. Andy Newberg has a message: we're all the same when we have God on the brain. Newberg's research may revolutionize how we view faith.

Day 4: LATTER-DAY DEBATERS. This is the story of two Albertans named Bob, both lawyers, both smart and, as bookends in the debate over the roots of the Mormon Church, proof that faith can affect how anyone interprets facts.

Day 5: TRANSFORMING RELIGION. In Chicago and across the U.S. and Canada, formerly orthodox Jews are reinterpreting their faith and concluding man created religion, not God. But they're also among its biggest fans.

My intent with this essay was to critically review Loomer's series. However, it evolved into an excuse to pull together some thoughts regarding spirituality in general – its upside and

downside – that I have been toying with for some time. I will do this by reviewing Loomer's series day by day, and adding my thoughts.

Loomer said that of the many people he spoke to while preparing for this piece, I was among the most helpful in terms of bringing spiritual issues into focus for him. And the structure of his series reflects much of the information I summarized for him, and people I suggested that he call. For example, I introduced him to Andrew Newberg's research (see Day 3) and told him I was sure that Andy would be pleased to speak with him¹. And, I told him about David Oler's secular humanist (that is, atheist) Jewish synagogues that are headquartered in Chicago, and introduced him by email to Oler – see Day 5.

Day 4's two lawyers are Bob White, who when last I heard was a Mormon Area General Authority² whom I have known for over twenty years, and me. Loomer told me that I would likely be disappointed with the way day 4 is reported. He was correct for the reasons noted below rather than the ones he expected.

Loomer used Day 4 to illustrate how two relatively bright, well-educated people can review the same evidence and come to radically different conclusions. I will use it to illustrate how the Mormon institution defends itself. Day 4 became another in my series of pieces that analyze how Mormon apologists do their work³. Bob White is a classic Mormon apologist in most ways.

I should also say that I had the pleasure of lunching with Jeremy Loomer a few weeks ago in Edmonton after he had finished writing the articles. I was impressed by the amount he had learned about religion and the social science related to it since we first spoke. He ingests and processes information at a rapid rate, and taught me a number of fascinating things during our interaction. He also told me that doing the series had changed his view of literalist religious people – he understands them now far better than before writing the series, and his respect for them has increased.

While I hope that this essay puts spiritual issues in an understandable context for people considering (or reconsidering) their relationship to Mormonism and other literalist religious

¹ I spent a week at a conference with Newberg last summer. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.star%20island%20overview.pdf>.

² Mormonism is governed by a system of "local" and "General" authorities. Local authorities include "Bishops" (the ecclesiastical and administrative head of a congregation, which is called a "Ward"), "Stake Presidents" (the ecclesiastical and administrative head of a group of congregations, which is called a "Stake"). All local leaders are laymen who donate their time, and who are subject to the "General Authorities". General Authorities have authority to one degree or another over the entire church, are drawn from the ranks of the local authorities, and in many cases are paid substantial salaries for the work they do for the Mormon Church as well as for sitting on the boards and holding executive positions with the many commercial enterprises the Mormon Church controls. The "First Presidency" is a group of usually three men. They govern Mormonism in conjunction with the "Quorum of the Twelve Apostles". This relationship is complicated enough that I won't try to describe it here. Beneath them are various quorums of "Seventy". As the Mormon Church has expanded, its system of linking the General Authorities to the local authorities has changed a number of times. Bob White was, when I was last in the loop where these things are known, an "Area General Authority". This means that he was not a member of a quorum of Seventy, but rather occupied an administrative position between that office and the local leaders. He was a Bishop and Stake President, as well as holding a variety of other offices, during his local leadership days.

³ See also <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.apologetic%20mind.pdf>, <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.daniel%20peterson.pdf> and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf>

traditions, two sections may be of particular interest to Mormons. The first is titled “Leaving the Fold” under Day 3, and the second is titled “Faithful History” under Day 4.

At this writing, the full text of each day’s articles can be found on-line at the following sites:

Day 1 - <http://www.edmontonsun.com/News/Edmonton/2006/04/16/1536247-sun.html>

Day 2 - <http://www.edmontonsun.com/News/Edmonton/2006/04/17/1537340-sun.html>

Day 3 - <http://www.edmontonsun.com/News/World/2006/04/18/1538669-sun.html>

Day 4 - http://edmsun.canoe.ca/Lifestyle/Columnists/Loome_Jeremy/2006/04/19/1539827.html

Day 5 - http://edmsun.canoe.ca/Lifestyle/Columnists/Loome_Jeremy/2006/04/20/1541502.html

Days 1 – 3 are only accessible by payment. For some reason, days 4 and 5 are free.

Overview of Principles

Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair. G.K. Chesterton

This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness. Dalai Lama

I thought Jeremy Loome did a great job of summarizing many of the critical issues related to spirituality. The forces that drive our behaviour in this regard are so deep that they are hard to understand. I don’t think that it is reasonable to expect those of us who were raised in literalist religious communities to understand them without a lot of help from people with a much broader perspective than our experience tends to provide.

The purpose of this segment is to set out the broadest principles related to spirituality, and so provide context for the excellent points Loome make.

Perspective

How many people would come to the conclusion, by only looking at the Sun move across the sky, that the Earth is spinning at high speed as it orbits the Sun? Our perspective does not allow us to understand phenomena that are so much larger than we are. Without tools like telescopes and people to help us interpret what we see through them, we should be expected to believe that we are the center of the Universe.

Our relationships to our social group, the god our parents and neighbors worship and other foundational elements of our worldview are similarly hard for us to understand. How can the cell understand the body, or the ant the hive? Both cells and ants process vast amounts of information and hence are intelligent. However, they are not self conscious. Our self consciousness seems to create in us an unwarranted sense of knowing – a conceit – that causes us to believe that we understand much more than we our behaviour indicates we do.

From a position inside a social group, that group’s beliefs about god and other abstract concepts will tend to seem logical. However, this often changes radically once beliefs can be seen in context with the beliefs of many other groups, and most importantly, the way in which

other people experience their beliefs. This is similar to what happens when non-scientific people⁴ are introduced to telescopes, models of the solar system, etc. That is, once we understand that many other people who are at least as smart and well educated as we are hold their “weird” beliefs just as certainly as we hold our “logical” beliefs, and justify their beliefs on the basis of the same kind of emotional experience as we do, it gives pause for thought. This sometimes gives rise to the question “Maybe our beliefs are not certain to be true?”. And once we have formed this question, the mental floodgates often open.

I suspect that for many people, Jeremy Loome’s series of articles on spirituality will have performed this function. I hope their experience will be similar to the one I had when this picture came into focus for me a few years ago. Everything changed. I lost my perception that my people and our way of living was better than all others. I became aware that my beliefs had caused me to separate myself from those who did not believe and live as I did, and to look down on them in subtle ways. I felt immediately more connected to the world around me and all kinds of people; both those with whom I lived and worked and others all over the globe whom I will never meet. My feeling toward those of different races and sexual orientations changed most dramatically. I became immediately more liberal in my political views and more ecologically oriented. I was reborn at numerous personal and social. And ironically, I found that humanity’s most important sages have almost all pointed toward this kind of renewal. Jesus of Nazareth (if he existed) was merely one of many who did this, and has become for me a choir member instead of our greatest soloist.

With that background, here are the main pieces in the spirituality puzzle that are relevant to Loome’s discussion of spirituality.

First, “What attracts us to spirituality or religion?”

Second, “Why is there so much passionate disagreement about religious belief?”

And third, “Where do we go from here?” That is, what options do those of us have after finding their inherited belief systems to be inadequate?

I will answer these questions as I review Loome’s work, but want to sketch the big picture before starting on the details. This will provide a framework for my review of Loome’s work.

What Attracts Us to Spirituality or Religion?

The answer for many people is “nothing”. That is, the evidence is increasingly clear that people do not need religion or traditional spirituality to live well⁵. Consider the Scandinavian countries, for example, where social problems are minimal compared to most of North America and belief in God is extremely low. However, the evidence is also clear that where religion is a social force people tend to make use of it and believe that it is an important part of their lives. The United States, for example, is the most religious of the developed nations⁶, and that is the perspective

⁴ I prefer this term to the often used “primitive people” to describe those who have grown to adulthood in any of humankind’s social groups that exist outside our science and technology dominated societies.

⁵ See, among many others, Michael Shermer, “The Science of Good and Evil”, Robert Wright, “The Moral Animal”, Loyal Rue, “Religion is Not About God”; Pascal Boyer, “Religion Explained”; Martin Seligman, “Authentic Happiness”, Jon Haidt, “The Happiness Hypothesis”; Marvin Levine, “The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga”.

⁶ See www.worldvaluessurvey.org, click on “Introduction”.

from which I am writing. So, the question becomes, “What is it about religion or spirituality that make them attractive in a North American context?”

We are small herd animals, and so have been programmed by our evolutionary experience to seek security and meaning within small groups of people⁷. Loomer profiles various of religious groups in this context. From an evolutionary point of view, our connection to a small social group was immensely important. Without our group, survival was extremely unlikely. So we evolved to accept the authority of our group and to reject information that might break our group up or cause us to be thrown out of it, or even marginalized. Our biology changes slowly, and so even though we no longer depend on the group as much now, we continue to instinctively defer to group authority and to misperceive the legitimacy of most evidence that challenges our group’s foundational beliefs, regardless of how bizarre those beliefs may seem to outsiders. The more closely knit the group, the more bizarre its beliefs may be. Consider the beliefs of the Hare Krishna, Jonestown, the Moonies, Mormon fundamentalists and others of an extreme nature as examples. Larger groups such as mainstream Mormons, Jehovahs Witnesses and Young Earth Creationists also use close-knit communities and their own intensive educational systems to maintain beliefs that contradict some of the most basic ideas of the scientific ideology to which North American society generally subscribes, and to which they say that they subscribe.

In our relatively transient, commuter oriented modern society, religious groups in many cases meet the need for small group association. The feelings of deep satisfaction that result from this are commonly attributed by religious believers to the god-ordained nature of their group when in fact they are part of the glue that binds all forms of human society together.

We are distinguished from other small herd animals by our self awareness, and our awareness of how other humans feel about themselves. That is, we can empathize – walk in another’s moccasins, to an extent at least – and our ability to do this lies at the base of many of our most important social behaviours. For example, the golden rule (“do unto others ...”) is an important part of virtually all long lived social structures. However, our limited self awareness tricks us. Social psychology and neurology show us a picture of ourselves that many find disturbing. We are slivers of consciousness floating on vast unconscious seas, the waves and currents of which are the result of evolutionary and social processes that we can only dimly perceive.

Jon Haidt’s⁸ metaphor of the “rider on the elephant” is useful, though I prefer the image of a massive but unknown beast since the point we are trying to make is that we don’t know much about the forces that comprise us other than that they are far greater than we are. We, the conscious riders, perceive ourselves to be in control until we become self aware enough to feel our beast of unseen proportion and tremendous power. We become aware that we, the conscious riders, evolved to serve our beasts and that shockingly, the best way to understand this relationship is that “it” includes “us”. That is, most of “us” is unknown and for the time being (as well as likely forever) is unknowable. This is one of life’s most fundamental paradoxes – we cannot know ourselves, and it is only our increasing self awareness that makes this insight possible. As usual, the gateway to wisdom is the admission of ignorance.

Hence, our control over ourselves (when the beast is included) is mostly illusory. We only control the beast insofar as we help it to get what it has been conditioned by genetics and long

⁷ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 119.

⁸ See “The Happiness Hypothesis”.

conditioning to want. The rider loses all contests in which the conscious will is pitted against the unconscious beast.

We consistently act as though our most precious natural gift – our consciousness – is a burden. That is, some of the most attractive experiences in the human realm involve a loss of a consciousness – a return to something that is more like our primitive mental state – the state in which other animals now live. For example, in Day 3, Andy Newberg describes the powerful and extremely attractive feelings that result from deep meditation and the loss of the sense of self; the sense that we are separate from the rest of reality. Similar feelings are created by being part of a huge crowd, experiencing sudden relief from angst, being in deep sleep, or being absorbed by a task at work or play. The word “absorbed” indicates this loss of consciousness. Our attraction to certain kinds of recreational and therapeutic drugs is also largely attributable to the altered (usually diminished) sense of consciousness they create. Newberg and others tell us that these feelings are to one degree or another biologically comparable to what occurs when we make love – the ordinarily perceived boundaries between us and the world dissolve⁹.

Many of the ancients noted this force and how it has been used from time immemorial for many purposes. One of the common denominators of this genre of human experience is a longing to be less conscious than we are; to temporarily shed the burden of being conscious of ourselves. Leaders of human groups of all kinds throughout history, and now, have regularly used this inclination to bring in followers and bind their groups together. In some cases this results in individuals losing the ability to make their own decisions to one degree or another. And for countless other people these feelings are simply part of the miracle of life that they attribute to spiritual phenomena, patriotism, love of family, being “in the zone”, etc.

Human groups develop rituals, histories and cultures that become important parts of both individual psychologies and social infrastructures. We each grow around these symbolic aspects of our environments¹⁰. Many of these symbols are related to our religious or spiritual experience. Some groups now want to honour and preserve this aspect of their culture and history while rejecting most literalist religious beliefs. For example, in Day 5 we hear about David Oler and his synagogues of Jewish atheists. Many other groups are likely to develop that will use ritual and cultural elements of traditional religions while advocating naturalistic and pluralistic¹¹ belief systems.

We need to feel connected to a larger purpose of some kind, and need to feel secure. Hence, we tend to believe tall tales about the unexplainable aspects origins, death, suffering, justice, etc. Individuals and groups usually draw their sense of meaning from the usually certain answers they provide to these most uncertain of questions. For example, nothing is more uncertain that what will happen after death, and yet this tends to be one of the things about which people are the most certain based on religious belief, and life’s meaning is often derived from the things one must do during life in order to obtain certain rewards after death. This is

⁹ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 105.

¹⁰ See Terrance Deacon, “The Symbolic Species”.

¹¹ For a summary of the naturalistic point of view see www.naturalism.org. It basically says that science rules within the realm of its competence, and outside that realm, we should give uncertainty its due rather than holding beliefs that cannot be empirically supported to the same degree of probability that we attribute to them. For example, if I cannot show that there is a pink unicorn hiding behind the moon and controlling the universe from there, I should not believe with certainty that such an entity exists. Monism is the idea that there is one “true” religion or belief system. Pluralism is the idea that it is not possible to justify a single belief system that is “true”.

another illustrations of humankind's rejection of its own consciousness. We tend to take refuge from the obvious (it is impossible to know what will happen after death) by accepting the most specious of explanations.

The tendency to believe the most uncertain ideas with an unjustified tenacity and certainty is a characteristic of most human social groups. This is likely due to the foundational role such beliefs play in the formation and maintenance of human society. For example, ideas like "our god is the most powerful god", "the one and only god has chosen our people as his own special people", and "only those who obey our god will receive wonderful blessings after death" are useful in this regard. Likely for this reason, these ideas are often foundational to social groups.

In an ironic way, the difficulty of proving or disproving beliefs of this kind is fundamental to their social roles. That is, any idea that can be categorically proved can also be disproved. And beliefs that are used to support the innate superiority of particular social groups and that are testable tend to be proven false. Hence, the ideas that work the best in this regard are those that are most difficult to test. For this reason, as religions have matured they have moved away from claims that are testable. Religions have consistently lost their contests with science. For this reason, I expect that we will see religions increasingly adopt consistency with science as an express belief. Many religions now pay lip service in this regard while attempting to reject science where it contradicts important beliefs. The Young Earth Creationists are a notorious example of this kind of belief¹². The Mormon attitude toward the science related to the historicity of the Book of Mormon runs along this line as well¹³.

However, there are many kinds of purpose that provide meaning in life and have nothing to do with religion. One that is attracting attention lately is the ecological state of our planet. Others relate to things like fighting cancer, politics, or more local issues like reducing crime, improving our schools or running kids sports programs. We don't need huge purposes to live well. But we do need to feel connected to something beyond ourselves and feel that we are contributing toward making the world better in some small way. As former literalist religious believers become acquainted with other ways of living, they generally do not have trouble finding meaning in many activities. One of the fecund doors through which we can walk in this regard kills two birds with one stone. By using meditation and other techniques that break down the sense of self in ways that are satisfying in the ways Andy Newberg describes in Day 3, we can come to understand our connection to all humanity, and all life and reality beyond that, and find meaning in the enhancement of our planet's ecosystem¹⁴. Many scientists believe that if a large percentage of the human population does not soon embrace this ethos, the continuation of human life as we know it is unlikely.

Why Is There So Much Passionate Disagreement About Religious Belief?

Our minds tend to suppress certain kinds of information that threaten what are perceived to be the foundations of our world, such as our connection to an important social group or our most basic understandings of how the world works. Or put another way, our theories about how the world works limit our ability to perceive our surroundings. And, our beliefs tend to align with the

¹² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Young_Earth_creationism.

¹³ See for example Simon Southerton, "Losing a Lost Tribe"; <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.dna%20controversy1004917.pdf>.

¹⁴ See Loyal Rue, "Religion is Not About God" (a Loyal Rue podcast can be accessed at <http://faculty.juniata.edu/braxton/Loyal%20Rue%20SCE%201-8-06.mp3>); <http://www.brianswimme.org/> (an audio of Swimme's views can be accessed at www.meaningoflife.tv).

things that are important to us. For example, loggers, Brazilian slash and burn farmers and oil rig workers tend not to be environmentalists. And people employed by the Mormon Church, or who derive much of their social status from it (as does Bob White), tend not to find the agnostic¹⁵ position attractive.

Few of us justifying going our own ox, even when this badly needs to be done. This has nothing to do with the truth or falsity of our beliefs. False beliefs, firmly held, affect our ability to perceive information as surely as do true beliefs. This is like looking at the world through distorting lenses. The lens determines what will be seen, but do not change reality.

For example, if I have been raised to believe that Mormonism is God's only true religion, I will tend to interpret what I experience in a manner consistent with this. So, the feelings of elation, connection to my group, purpose, etc. described above would all seem like confirmation of my belief that Mormonism is "true". However, a Jehovah's Witness would have similar experiences in her group and would interpret them to mean that her beliefs were true, as would an Evangelical Christian, alien abductionist, agnostic, etc. This explains most of the difference between Bob White and me – our most basic beliefs are radically different. This also explains many of the other people Loomer contrasts – believers and non-believers in John de Ruiter and various other forms of New Age spirituality, for example.

As we become aware of information that is inconsistent with our most important beliefs and this information is screened as just indicated, "cognitive dissonance"¹⁶ builds. This is the tension between what our unconscious has observed and suppressed, and our consciously held beliefs. For example, a battered spouse may consciously believe that her husband loves her while the difficulty of breaking off her relationship with him, among other things, may cause her unconscious mind to prevent her from seeing what is obvious to all her friends – that she is being abused and should leave her husband unless their relationship radically changes.

Different people can endure varying amounts of cognitive dissonance before undergoing a change in perception, which usually causes a change in belief. There are many factors that seem relevant to why we respond in different ways to similar situations in this regard. These factors can all be boiled down to genetics and personal history, but include things like personality type, the nature of family and social relationships related to the belief system in question, stage of life, degree of independence, etc.¹⁷ Loomer describes several people who passed their breaking point and experienced a radical change in worldview. I am one of them.

The scriptural wisdom that only those who "have ears" can hear seems to apply¹⁸. That is, our subconscious sometimes protects us from information we cannot handle while at the same time helping us to rearrange our lives so that we will be in a position to deal with something that is coming our way. If we are forced to confront threatening realities about our most basic beliefs before we are ready, our attachment¹⁹ to a group and its beliefs is so deep that this will cause a fear so primal that our flight or fight systems are activated and we will often lash out in anger or go into hiding. It is as if our existence has been threatened, which during most of our evolutionary history would have been the case if the foundation of our small group was attacked

¹⁵ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnosticism>.

¹⁶ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 51.

¹⁷ See Michael Shermer, "How We Believe".

¹⁸ See Mark 4:9.

¹⁹ See Lee Kirkpatrick, "Attachment, Evolution and the Psychology of Religion".

or we were threatened with expulsion. Our visceral reaction is likely the result of this aspect of our evolutionary history.

This behaviour is seen wherever our most foundational beliefs are under discussion. These include issues related to how our country should be run (politics), what we believe about god (religion), and issues that may affect our ability to earn a livelihood (economics, politics, ecology, free trade, etc.).

In the end, as already noted, social psychology and neurology show us a picture of ourselves that many find disturbing²⁰. We do not understand, let alone control, the beasts ride. To see even a small part of this shakes our conceptions of “free will”²¹ and “self”. However, as we live with these ideas we find that they – like so many disturbing notions before them (remember Galileo?) – become routine; part of our wallpaper.

As we understand more of the forces on which we ride and how they are likely to influence us, we see ourselves in them. The boundary between “us” and “all the rest” becomes increasingly porous²². This adventure toward self understanding is almost as old as human history, and as exciting now as it has ever been²³. And the most reliable high priests (and increasingly priestesses) of this new spirituality tend to be scientists who have wedded the empirical with the spiritual²⁴. Andrew Newberg, who is featured in Day 3, is one of this breed.

The Way Forward – Seeking the Good Life

The prospect of changing fundamental aspects of how we live terrifies most people²⁵, for the reasons already reviewed. However, the foundational stories of most societies encourage change, and tell us to walk through the fear we feel as we let go of the known and walk into the “dark forest” or some other symbol of chaos. Those who do this are cultural heroes, and while in the chaotic unknown on their quest they are reconstructed, find new life or power, perform critical functions for their social group, and return in a reconstructed and more useful state. The story of Frodo in “The Lord of the Rings” and Neo in “The Matrix” are classic myths of this sort. Older stories in this tradition include the adventures of Gilgamesh, Hercules, Moses, Jonah and the Whale, and Homer’s Odyssey. Virtually every culture has stories of this type, as chronicled by Joseph Campbell in his classic “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”. The essence of Campbell’s thought in this regard can be found in “The Power of Myth”. Those of us who adventure to the borders of our inherited faiths can draw great strength from these stories and the universal tale of challenge and renewal they tell.

In the leaving the fold process, the act of letting go of what seems certain requires what feels like a destructive element in most cases. That is, false ideas must be rooted out of our lives; unhealthy relationships with people and authority structures must be changed; etc. in order to create space where more healthy mental and social constructs can be built. Doing this requires that many things that were once perceived as good must come to be perceived differently. For

²⁰ See Quartz and Sejnowski, “Liars, Lovers and Heroes: What the New Brain Science Reveals About How We Become Who We Are; Paul Ehrlich, “Human Natures”.

²¹ See Daniel Dennett, “Freedom Evolves”.

²² See Joseph Campbell, “Thou art That”.

²³ See Karen Armstrong, “The Great Transformation” (2006).

²⁴ See Ursula Goodenough, “The Sacred Depths of Nature”, reviewed at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.the%20sacred%20depths%20of%20nature.pdf>; www.naturalism.org; www.religiousnaturalism.org; www.iras.org.

²⁵ See Thomas Moore, “The Dark Night of the Soul”.

Mormons, this takes reading a lot of what feels like negative material about Mormon cultural heroes, and reframing many historical events once considered certain, and sacred. In the course of doing this, we develop the broader perspective noted above. This is an essential “ground clearing” exercise that precedes new construction.

Once the pain this destructive phase causes has passed, most people look back on it as a positive aspect of their life experience, but few who can see it from the apparent security of their Mormon beliefs, or who are in the throes of chaos, are attracted to this part of the process. In fact, I don't know anyone who has told me that they chose this path. What I hear is the challenge, or difficulty, or adventure, found them. My theory is that this perception is the result of that sea of unconscious forces on which we float. I think that the much larger part of us that is, or is connected to, those forces guides us to junctures where the transformative events we are ready for can enter our lives. The Star Wars notion of “the force”, and allowing oneself to be connected to and guided by it, is a useful (if loose) metaphor in this regard. This popularizes a variety of Eastern and Western notions with regard to how deep wisdom is found. However, rather than simply trusting our instincts (which are unreliable guides to reality for the reasons noted above) we should treat these deep impulses as suggestions that should be checked using as many objective and expert points of view as possible.

But after all of this, life is good and getting better for those of us who leave the cloister and enter a wonderful world that to us seems new and more hopeful than anything we have experienced. Many guides offer to show us to the good life. Loomer profiles a number of them.

The unreliable guides seem to have a number of things in common. They weaken their followers, though the followers have a hard time seeing it that way. This is one of the many areas in which it is best to trust those who can observe our behavior and whose advice has proven trustworthy. Their observations are likely worth more than our own²⁶.

The unreliable guides often profess much more wisdom and strength than is reasonable. They purport to know what none of the sages have known, and countless charlatans have pretended to know. That is, knowledge that cannot be tested is not knowledge. Anyone who pretends to know what cannot be demonstrated as knowable is an unreliable guide. And the more stridently they insist that they know what cannot be known, the more unreliable and dangerous they likely are, and the more attractive they will appear to people who have not learned to stand on their own. For example, the unreliable guides promise to deliver wonderful things, often after death or of such an ephemeral nature that it is impossible to prove whether it has been delivered or not. It is not the reality of delivery so much as the certainty of the promise that many seem to find attractive.

Here again we run into the fascinating idea that we often try to shed our consciousness. The more conscious we are, the more aware we become of life's uncertainties. The way in which many gurus proclaim their certain knowledge of life's mysteries or power over life's arbitrariness²⁷ is attractive to those who are uncomfortable with the uncertainty consciousness creates. The resort to drugs, excessive meditation, literalist religious communities, the guidance of powerfully charismatic and supremely confident gurus, etc. are all motivated in part by our impulse to reduce our consciousness of life's inherent uncertainties.

²⁶ See James Surowiecki, “The Wisdom of Crowds”.

²⁷ See <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1998/11/12/MN85578.DTL> and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.what%20the%20bleep%20do%20we%20know.pdf>.

Karen Armstrong²⁸ has convincingly made the case that during the last few decades, the increasing access to media, and particularly the internet, has forced information into many literalist religious communities that undermines basic, sacred beliefs. This is causing those beliefs to change, and in reaction, the most conservative forces within those communities are fighting influences that threaten their most sacred values. This, she explains, is why we have recently seen increasingly strident and violent movements with the most literalist branches of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

The reliable guides are also easy to spot²⁹. They combine the wisdom that science can deliver with the humility to admit what we cannot know, and an ability to wonder at the mysteries of life and help us to appreciate the beauty and goodness in this wonder. Their wisdom mostly helps us to place our experience in the perspective of what other people experience, and so to come to know ourselves – to become more conscious and deal with the uncertainty and fear this creates (at least initially) in most of us. In this they harness ancient teaching as well as the best of what modern science has to offer.

They demonstrate the wisdom in principles such as forgiveness, work, long term relationships and explain using the repeatable experience of other people like us why these things constitute the good life. They explain why money, nice clothes, good looks, great intelligence and the other superficial accoutrements of life do not define the good life, though they can be part of it. In the end, the formula is pretty simple and accessible to almost all of us. Here is my summary of it:

- Get enough rest, exercise and healthy food.
- Spend a number of hours each day absorbed in the kind of activity that makes time disappear for you. These are “flow” activities.
- Spend some time each week in creative “right brain” space that will cause the generation of our most creative, intuitive selves³⁰. That is, get involved in drawing, flower arranging, singing, dancing, creative writing, etc.
- Dedicate part of yourself to an intimate relationship, the longer term the better.
- Dedicate part of yourself to small group relationships to which you contribute something that the other group members value. Again, the longer term the better.
- Find causes larger than yourself to which you wish to dedicate some of your time. They may be “big” causes, like resolving the tension between the secular and religious worlds, or saving the planet from consumerism, or “small” ones, like coaching a local kids sports team or raising money for new computers at the high school.
- Live the golden rule and avoid those who don’t after having been invited a few times to change their ways.

²⁸ See “The Battle for God”.

²⁹ See for example Martin Seligman, “Authentic Happiness”, Jon Haidt, “The Happiness Hypothesis”.

³⁰ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.art%20therapy%20for%20recovering%20mormons.pdf>.

- Make peace with your eternal longing for something more. This is your creative wellspring. Be grateful that you will never be satisfied for long, and enjoy the adventures your need for novelty will inspire.

And if that list is too long, all we really have to remember is to make time each day to laugh, learn, love and sweat.

If this doesn't work for you, that just means that you are not in the mainstream. Rest assured that by casting around a bit, you will probably find things that will work to make you happy. Sometimes this involves medical treatment, but most often not.

And think about how much more straightforward this way of life is than the tightrope Mormons are taught they must walk to get to the Celestial Kingdom. I believe that, and other similar tightropes, are designed to persuade us that living the good life is so difficult that we need the help of religious leaders to do it. This is mostly accomplished telling us that our dreams for peace, love and joy can become real after death, but only if we pay an enormous price during life for the help we need to walk the tightrope. This is the ultimate confidence scam. The goods never have to be delivered.

Thankfully, life is not that complicated though humans of all stripes do their best to make it so. A Zen parable captures this beautifully. During the Tang dynasty an important man went to visit a Buddhist monk renowned for his wisdom, intending to discuss matters of the deepest import. Upon being ushered into the monk's presence, the man asked what was the most important teaching of Buddhism. The monk replied that:

"It is the teaching of all enlightened ones to cease doing anything evil, to promote goodness, and to purify one's own heart."

The visitor was disappointed to have received such pedestrian advice and complained that:

"This is what any child of three summers is familiar with. I desire on the other hand what is most abstruse, most essential, most vital in Buddhism."

To this the monk replied:

"Every child of three summers may know what I said now, but even a silvery-haired man of eighty winters finds it difficult to put the Buddhist instruction into the practice of everyday life."

The important man is said to have bowed reverentially and to have gone home wiser. The Zen master Soyen Shaku summarizes by telling us that while speculation and endless talking of abstraction has its place in Buddhism:

"We, plain ordinary Buddhists, will keep on removing selfishness, seeking the light that is everywhere, practising loving kindness that does not contradict or discriminate. Says an ancient sage, 'The Way is near, and thou seekest it afar.' Why, then, shall we ever attempt to walk away from the path which extends right in front of us, so wide and well paved?"³¹

³¹ See Soyen Shaku, "Zen for Americans", pages 87, 88.

Perhaps the most important message about those to whom we may look for guidance is that we should not rely too heavily on any of them, even those who have proven themselves to be the most reliable. We must become our own guides, weak though we are. This is what the process of individuation is largely about – coming to trust ourselves as our own primary guides. For those us who leave authoritarian religious tradition, this takes work but is one of life’s most exciting experiences.

During the first six months after I left Mormonism I came to know what it means to “hunger and thirst after righteousness”³². I awoke most days before 6 am with ideas whirling through my head and hurried to the computer to jot them down before they dissolved, as some had done. I read late most nights after work and used virtually all of my weekends and some of my working days to wrap my head around the basics of science, philosophy and most importantly, epistemology³³ (how we know things). This resulted in the creation of a somewhat crude statement of what was then my worldview, which can be found at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf>. This document is not important because it is great writing or contains wisdom. It is not even an accurate current reflection of my beliefs now. It is important because it illustrates the process of reforming a worldview, and how immensely satisfying and exciting that process usually is. And, it is important to me because it is a piece of my soul.

Having a worldview shattered is a terrifying experience. However, it puts us in a position where we need to do something, and that often involves acting as our own mid-wives as a new soul is birthed. We bring ourselves into being. To experience this is to witness a miracle.

While the past four years have been difficult for me in many ways, I do not hesitate to recommend the road I have travelled to anyone who is capable of understanding enough about it to wonder what it would be like for them. It is so otherworldly that only those who have walked something similar are capable of understanding my weak attempt to describe what I have seen, heard and felt there. The best I can do is simply recommend this experience, steep hills, breath taking vistas, potholes and all.

Day 1: THE GURU AND THE GIRLFRIEND

Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous. David Hume, Treatise of Human Nature, 1739

Religion is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism. William James

Jeremy Loome starts his analysis of spiritual issues by considering a notorious examples of how spirituality can run amok – John de Ruiter – who resembles Joseph Smith³⁴ in many ways. I will review Loome’s articles by annotating his text. My comments appear at the margin. Loome’s text is indented.

Man of Vision, Or ...? Some think John de Ruiter’s teachings are dangerous

The people are looking for answers, but don't show it yet. On a warm Saturday night, the 400 or so who file into a west-end auditorium exhibit no anxiety or curiosity.

³² See Matthew 5:6; Enos 1: 3,4.

³³ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology>,

³⁴ See <http://lds-mormon.com/jsmith.shtml>.

Grandmas mix with middle-aged professionals and little kids. People mill between the seats, surrounded by 40-foot marble pillars and a roof accented by crystal chandeliers. It could be a church five minutes before service, though there's no pulpit on stage, just a table, some flowers and a chair.

The people who run this building would tell you John de Ruiter is a "philosopher," not a guru or religious cult leader. His website, which trumpets the recent construction of the \$1.7-million building on 177 Street, even cautions he's not there to solve problems, just to offer "core-splitting" truth.

The best way to understand religious or spiritual phenomena in general is to put them in the broadest context possible. This counteracts the human tendency to believe that there is something unique about our particular experience, our relationship to god, etc. In general terms, this is done by the scientists who study the social sciences related to religion and anthropology.³⁵

For example, there are many parallels between John de Ruiter and Joseph Smith. By studying contemporary phenomena like de Ruiter and how he has built his following we can better appreciate how our ancestors could have been expected to fall under the thrall of someone like Smith and why successive generations of Mormons have stayed with Mormonism as it has changed³⁶.

One way to look at both of these men is as the traditional "shaman" or "spirit person"³⁷ or even artist, that has played a pivotal role (for good and ill) in most social groups throughout human history.

Mircea Eliade³⁸ tell us that shamans are:

"... those individuals who stand out in the respective society by virtue of characteristics that, in the societies of modern Europe, represent the signs of a vocation or at least of a religious crisis. They are separated from the rest of the community by the intensity of their own religious experience. In other words, it would be more correct to class shamanism among the mysticisms than with what is common called a religion."

Eliade "further refines the definition [of shamanism] by including within shamanism certain aspects of mysticism and magic such as 'mastery of fire' and 'magical flight,' making the important distinction that 'the shaman specialized in a trance during which the soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld'. Logically, the shaman is capable of soul travel and of seeing the world in ways that are utterly imperceptible to those

³⁵ See for example, Pascal Boyer, "Religion Explained"; Scott Atran, "In Gods We Trust" (<http://www.sitemaker.umich.edu/satran>); and Loyal Rue, "Religion is Not About God"; Michael Shermer, "The Science of Good and Evil", "How We Believe" and "Why People Believe Weird Things".

³⁶ See Stephen Prothero, "American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon".

³⁷ Marcus Borg, in "Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time" casts Jesus in this role as well. William James definitive work "The Varieties of Religious Experience" was written in an attempt to understand the experience of this kind of person. Whether Joseph Smith was a pious fraud is a question that will likely never be answered. However, this is more than enough reliable evidence about his life to conclude that he was a charismatic, spiritually oriented person of the type described by Borg, Eliade and James.

³⁸ See "Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy", Princeton University Press, 1964, at page 8.

without such abilities and is thus able to convey tales of his or her inner travels upon return to the mundane world.”³⁹

And, a great deal of research now links the “otherworldly” traits exhibited by shamans, as well as religious leaders such as Joseph Smith and John de Ruiter, to neural phenomena like mild temporal lobe epilepsy and other forms of psychosis.⁴⁰ However, there is no denying the force these people exert on those around them. They often exude human energy, and their certainty of vision and will to cause things to happen draw others to them.

Once any human group reaches critical mass, social theory explains in general terms how and why it will evolve. Human groups are like ant hives in some ways. The collective has characteristics (like certain kinds of intelligence) that none of the individuals has⁴¹. The market is a classic example. None of the “knows” when she wakes up in the morning what the price of hogs will be that day. Rather, the price is determined by the interaction between members of the group as the day progresses. Massive amounts of information are communicated in different ways between different parts of the group as this occurs. No member of the group has all of the relevant information. The group is smarter than any of its members, and can do things none of its members acting alone can do. And no one is controlling or even coordinating this activity. It happens as a result of the interaction between members of the group based on the rules and natural attributes of the group that determine how information is disseminated. These rules largely determine how “smart” and functional a group will be.

Market intelligence and other group characteristics of this kind are emergent properties⁴² that are governed by complexity theory⁴³. Many characteristics of biological organisms are governed by the same laws. And close-knit human groups above a certain size display many of the characteristics of biological organisms. They seek resources (people, their energy and money etc.). They defend themselves against threats and to the extent possible, adapt to counter threats and take advantage of opportunities created by their changing environment⁴⁴.

Returning to John de Ruiter and Joseph Smith, once they set up groups and helped them to reach a certain size, a process was in motion that was far larger than either of them. And once the leader dies or is replaced, the process of change tends to accelerate.

Another parallel between Smith and de Ruiter is that each of them got an organization to critical mass using a sales approach that made sense in their context. de Ruiter is a New Age guru who uses a mix of folk psychology, eastern philosophy and self help literature that is common in that genre. This works, or not, based on the guru’s salesmanship skills and personal charisma. This is what our age calls for.

³⁹ See Greg A. Hill, “Norval Mourisseau: Shaman Artist”, at page 27. I note as an aside that Mourisseau was well known for his sexual adventures, and indicated that his shamanic role gave him license in this regard. In this he resembles both Smith and de Ruiter.

⁴⁰ See http://www.psi-researchcentre.co.uk/article_1.html and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 101.

⁴¹ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 44; Steven Johnson, “Emergence”; Philip Ball, “Critical Mass”; James Surowiecki, “The Wisdom of Crowds”.

⁴² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergence>.

⁴³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complexity_theory.

⁴⁴ For an analysis of religious institutions as social organisms and related topics, see: Philip Ball, “Critical Mass”, E.O. Wilson, “Sociobiology”, David Sloan Wilson?, “Darwin’s Cathedral”, Pascal Boyer, “Religion Explained” and Loyal Rue, “Religion Is Not About God”. I will not here further explore this theme.

Smith, on the other hand, gave the marginalized people of his day what they craved. Alexander Campbell, writing during Smith's life, said that Smith answered most of the burning religious questions of his day in the Book of Mormon.⁴⁵ And Smith lived in one of the most intensely religious places in the world.

Smith's "market" was not well-educated or well to do. Mark Twain described early Mormons in the following terms: "Let it be borne in mind that the majority of the Mormons have always been ignorant, simple, of an inferior order of intellect, unacquainted with the world and its ways; and let it be borne in mind that the wives of these Mormons are necessarily after the same pattern and their children likely to be fit representatives of such a conjunction ..."⁴⁶ The appropriateness of Smith's story must be judged in that context. He was not trying to persuade New England society. He was trying to persuade mostly hard scrabble frontier-folk who craved hope for something better.

Given the difference between the markets to which Smith and de Ruiter were pitching their wares, their differing messages are expected.

It doesn't stop people from seeking advice, as they've done for a decade. They fly from across the globe to pay homage - and cash - to de Ruiter, a Jesus type in a suit. His outing by media as a marital cheat five years ago didn't visibly dent his popularity.

In the crowd is "Anne." A few months back, her boyfriend would've sat next to her. But he returned to the U.S. West Coast alone and spends his time trying to coax her back. He has proposed, but no longer thinks marriage is realistic. But he tries because he loves her. Dave thinks John de Ruiter's teachings could be dangerous. He isn't alone.

Health problems and curiosity brought Dave to Edmonton, common among de Ruiter's followers.

This is a common pattern in those who join new religions. A need of some kind usually brings them to the door, or encourages them to listen to recruiters⁴⁷. This is why Mormon missionaries (and members) are encouraged to look for people who have just had a baby, experienced a death in the family or moved into the neighbourhood. They are in vulnerable positions of different kinds, and are statistically more likely to be ready to consider a change in belief. Young people are another primary market for all growth religions since during their formative years people are more willing to consider new religious points of view.

He'd seen de Ruiter at a U.S. meeting, one of dozens around the world annually. "It was almost like there was an energy radiating from him," Dave recalls. "He didn't seem to really say anything that made much sense, but he just had this presence that made you want to come back and figure it out."

This kind of memory is often created to justify belief. The experience many Mormons and Scientologists have in their highest, most secret religious ceremonies illustrates this. A recent Rolling Stone article⁴⁸ described the Scientology experience as follows:

⁴⁵ See <http://lds-mormon.com/campbell.shtml>.

⁴⁶ See Mark Twain, "Roughing It", at ?.

⁴⁷ See Robert Levine, "The Power of Persuasion" and Steven Hassan, "Releasing the Bonds" and <http://www.freedomofmind.com/>.

⁴⁸ See http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/9363363/inside_scientology.

“Those who have experienced OT III [the highest and most secret Scientologist ceremony] report that getting through it can be a harrowing experience. Tory Christman, a former high-ranking Scientologist who during her tenure in the faith reached the near-pinnacle of enlightenment, OT VII, says it took more than ten years before she was finally invited onto OT III. Once there, Christman was shocked. “You’ve jumped through all these hoops just to get to it, and then you open that packet, and the first thing you think is, ‘Come on,’” she says. “You’re surrounded by all these people who’re going, ‘Wow, isn’t it amazing, just getting the data? I can tell it’s really changed you.’ After a while, enough people say it and you’re like, ‘Wow. You know, I really feel it.’”

The experience many Mormons report regarding their temple experience is similar. And, research as to how memories are formed is consistent with this way of perceiving and then remembering important events.

We don’t record an accurate record in our minds of what has happened to us. Rather, as we pass through life each new experience influences how we recall our past⁴⁹. Hence, those who are committed to a religious group tend to remember their initial experiences as being more compelling than they were. And, people who have rejected a particular experience as divine will tend to remember it in less impressive terms that were originally registered.

Dave had supported other charismatic spiritualists. “Vincent Bugliosi, the lawyer, once said of Charles Manson’s followers that if you looked into their eyes, you could tell they were true believers. That’s kind of what it was like,” he says. “The people, they hung on John’s every word.”

I have spoken to people who have attended de Ruiter’s sessions who rave about his ability to “look right through you”, to “bring a peace like no other by looking into your eyes”, and to provide amazingly insightful personal advice without knowing much of your life’s story. Those who study cult leaders indicate that the ability to create this kind of feeling is a common cult leader attribute. It is easy for some people to learn hypnotic techniques involving silence and staring into the eyes of a follower that induce a state of mind calculated to produce just the feelings described.

Cult leaders do not go to school somewhere and learn how to do this. Some people with powerful personalities find through trial and error that they have this power over people, a small percentage of them end up like de Ruiter, and an even smaller percentage, largely through the accidents of history (martyrdom; moving to a place where a religious monopoly can be created; etc.) found organizations like Mormonism, the JW’s, the 7th Day Adventists, Islam and other similar religious movements. A study of the founders of each of those, and many other, religious organizations reveals striking similarities. Likewise, the study of the leaders who come after the charismatic founders shows that they are bureaucratic types who create stable and much larger organizations out of the founders’ creative thunderbolts.

Some of those who describe Joseph Smith’s presence do so in glowing terms similar to those used regarding de Ruiter.⁵⁰ Others met Smith and could not understand what the fuss was about. The same is true of de Ruiter. I have spoken with three people who have attended his

⁴⁹ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 92 and <http://faculty.washington.edu/eloftus/Articles/sciam.htm>.

⁵⁰ See <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/REC-JS.html> for representative examples.

services. Two continue to be his followers, and felt he had something special. The only person to whom I spoke who is not a follower felt he was a fraud.

In general, only a small percentage of the people who interact with a person like Smith or de Ruiter will become a follower. But if the guru interacts with enough people, a small percentage is all it takes to reach the social critical mass I described above.

I have attended several hypnosis presentations and used hypnotherapy myself during a series of five sessions several years ago. There are many parallels between the techniques hypnotherapists use and those used by charismatic religious leaders. This likely explains why Mormons are discouraged from engaging in hypnosis, as well as attending the kind of intense therapy sessions that are used in some counseling systems to break down personal barriers and prepare a person for fundamental change. These are powerful forces that can break down the Mormon control system, or cause its influence to be diluted. Hence, Mormon leaders discourage contact with these processes.

Some people are more “suggestible” than others, and hence more amenable to being hypnotized and able to make use of hypnotherapy. In a similar way, and likely due to similar personality and neural qualities, some people are more inclined toward feeling the kinds of things that would make them recruitable to movements like de Ruiter or Smith’s. This has little to do with intelligence. The research regarding the people who join cults like the Hare Krishna and the Moonies makes this clear⁵¹. It has much more to do with social needs not being met, and a propensity to feel “the spirit”. Scientists have identified a part of the brain that is active during experiences of this kind⁵² - the “god spot”. Some people have a more active god spot than others. Anne, described in Loomer’s article below, is likely of the active variety.

Once the connection to a religious group is made and remains in place for a period of years, we tend to develop social dependencies that produce denial when beliefs that are foundational to our social relationships are challenged. As we marry, have children, form business relationships etc. within the religious community, these dependencies multiply. Those who lead the community and have testified in public countless times of its truthfulness create additional psychological barriers to recognition that the evidence does not support their beliefs⁵³. The Mormon community is set up to maximize the number of people who publicly testify for precisely this reason – saying causes believing.

Anne was one of the most devoted, he says. They hit it off immediately, and a relationship followed. "I felt like I'd maybe found some of the answers I'd been looking for my entire life and the woman I loved at the same time." Weeks later, Dave was beside himself. He'd given up his life to devote it to a man he thought could be a prophet. He'd asked questions, but the answers to him and others from de Ruiter seemed garbled, useless. He felt he had nothing left. "There wasn't any substance to him, but she insisted on staying. I listened and he talked. People asked questions and he talked, or he'd just sit and ignore them. But nothing he said ever made much sense."

De Ruiter was a Catholic as a child but joined the Lutheran Church in adulthood and studied to become a pastor. Known within the church as having an uncommon fervour, de Ruiter once gave testimony - an accounting of religious experiences - to the church's

⁵¹ See Levine and Hassan, above.

⁵² See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 102.

⁵³ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 86.

board of directors for nine straight hours. A few years earlier, at 17, he claimed a revelation. De Ruiter has said he was overcome by bliss-like peace that led to a full year of happiness and certainty. In an effort to reclaim the sensation, he started studying alternate religions and philosophies, and eventually left Christianity.

Here we have another parallel. Both Smith and de Ruiter were marked from youth as intensely spiritual people.

By 1994, the shoestore worker met Boots Beaudry, an ex-army medic and clerk turned spiritualist. Beaudry saw de Ruiter's effect on people, and believed his claim of tapping a wellspring of inner truth.

She'd hidden her interest in mysticism while in the army for fear of ridicule, but opened her Whyte Avenue clinic to de Ruiter for public meetings. His following grew to hundreds. Larger, rented venues followed. He also started lecturing outside Alberta, charging hundreds of dollars for four-day "retreats" and attracting followers - some quite wealthy - who moved to Edmonton. One couple, businessman Peter Von Sass and his wife Ilona, moved to the city from Calgary to be near de Ruiter and invited their daughters, Benita and Katrina, into the fold. Others came from Britain, Germany and Australia.

Initially, de Ruiter denied to his wife, Joyce, that he was sleeping with the sisters. Eventually he admitted it and sought her acceptance, she says, claiming his "ultimate truth" had OK'd it. Many followers accepted it, but Joyce publicly rejected him. Five years later, the bitterness continues.

de Ruiter teaches that he can achieve a special kind of spiritual communion with some of his followers (all female as far as I know) by becoming sexually intimate with them. He started to preach this publicly after his wife found out that he was sleeping with some of his female acolytes. de Ruiter says that he "knows" who the women to whom he has this special bond are as he becomes familiar with his followers. He is the charismatic alpha male of his community, and he makes the rules as to what is morally acceptable. Some people left him in disgust when his wife went public with her concerns about his sexual practices. But most accepted this new "leaf" in his theology just as the American people continued to accept Clinton after his indiscretions, and most Mormons continue to accept Joseph Smith's prophetic role when they find out about his unusual sexual behaviour⁵⁴. Here we have another striking parallel between de Ruiter and Smith.

These case studies are an indication of the power of our allegiance is to those whom we perceive to be crucial to our group. This is one of Pierre Bourdieu's areas of specialty⁵⁵. We seem to believe that our basic moral standards are more dispensable than anything that threatens the foundations of our group. I recently read a book about Hitler and Mussolini⁵⁶ that thoroughly explores this theme in that context.

"What John talks about is staying within what you know to be true," says Beaudry. We're in a diner near her clinic. She's out of the inner circle, but still reveres de Ruiter. "Let's

⁵⁴ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.does%20mormonism%20cause%20irrational%20belief.pdf> pages 38 – 41.

⁵⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourdieu.

⁵⁶ See Robert Paxton, "The Anatomy of Fascism".

say you're in pain. If you stay within what you know to be true, that means you don't make it more than what it is and you don't make it less than what it is. You just let it be."

Beaudry joined up with de Ruiter after leaving the military. She'd been a medic during the Edmonton tornado in 1987 and decided the military was not a safe occupation.

With just three years left until her pension, she opted out. At the same time, she believed she could see forms of energy around people. New-age healing beckoned.

She says de Ruiter's philosophy is to look for answers within, a capital-T "Truth," uncluttered by human convention or experience.

The suggestion that Truth is just out there, independent of human experience, is a dangerous pipedream. This makes it easy to justify doing whatever we want to do.

She supports his contention his inner truth told him he wasn't cheating when he slept with the sisters, even though he'd counselled his followers against infidelity.

Smith's mentor was Sidney Ridgon who, like Beaudry, was eventually dismissed from the inner sanctum.

"I don't think it's right, some of the stuff that he has done, but that doesn't mean to say it's not true," she says.

What does this mean? It is not right, but it is true? This is the kind of double speak Orwell used in "1984". It reminds me of the fog Mormon apologists put out⁵⁷. It invites the justification of whatever a person wants to do. Those who adopt this kind of concept as a sword need to remember that it can be used by others as well, and that it comes with no shield. That is, if this kind of principle is accepted there is no rational means by which any other approach can be justifiably critiqued. Anything goes.

I suggest that listening only to your heart without considering others could be a recipe for selfishness. "Ah, but if you're walking with a hardness of heart towards yourself or anyone else, it just doesn't work," she says. "When you're walking with an open hand, it's like ... it's like with Benita: I knew that was coming long before it actually happened, and long before I talked to him about it. "And I said to him, 'This is not right.' And he said, 'This is not what you think it is.' He didn't say whether he was messing with her. He's talking from the inside, from that place of honesty. Honesty and truth are not the same things as morality."

Joseph Smith was famously relativist in his morals. Lying was OK as long as the ends, in his view, justified the means⁵⁸. After being refused by one of the many women he propositioned, he told her that what is wrong (sex outside of marriage) in some circumstances is right in others⁵⁹. Michael Quinn, one of Mormonism's leading historians, assesses Smith's ethical character as follows:

⁵⁷ See <http://www.fairboards.org/index.php?showtopic=14328&st=0&hl=>.

⁵⁸ See <http://www.mormonalliance.org/casereports/volume3/part4/v3p4c21.htm> and http://www.mormonismi.net/pdf/lying_for_the_lord.pdf.

⁵⁹ See http://www.i4m.com/think/history/smith_letter.htm.

"Smith remained aloof from civil office, but in November 1835 he announced a doctrine I [Quinn] call 'theocratic ethics'. He used this theology to justify his violation of Ohio's marriage laws by performing a marriage for Newel Knight and the undivorced Lydia Goldthwaithe without legal authority to do so... In addition to the bigamous character of this marriage, Smith had no license to perform marriages in Ohio.

Although that was the first statement of this concept, Smith and his associates put that theology into practice long before 1835, and long after. Two months later Smith performed marriage ceremonies for which neither he nor the couples had marriage licenses, and he issued marriage certificates "agreeable to the rules and regulations of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." Theocratic ethics justified LDS leaders and (by extension) regular Mormons in actions which were contrary to conventional ethics and sometimes in violation of criminal laws.

This ethical independence is essential for understanding certain seemingly inconsistent manifestations in Mormonism. Some had already occurred - reversals in doctrine and divinely revealed procedures, and the publication of unannounced changes in written revelations and historical texts. The Knight marriage was a public example of Joseph Smith's violation of laws and cultural norms regarding marriage and sexual behavior - the performance of civil marriages by legally unauthorized officiators, monogamous marriage ceremonies in which one or both partners were undivorced from legal spouses, polygamous marriage of a man with more than one living wife, his marriage proposals to females as young as twelve, his sexual relationships with polygamous wives as young as fourteen, polyandry of women with more than one husband, marriage and cohabitation with foster daughters, and Mormon marriages of first cousins, brother-sister, and uncle-niece. Other manifestations of Mormonism's theocratic ethics would soon begin in Kirkland and continue intermittently for decades - the official denials of actual events, the alternating condemnation and tolerance for counterfeiting and stealing from non-Mormons, threats and physical attacks against dissenters or other alleged enemies, the killing and castration of sex offenders, the killing of anti-Mormons, the bribery of government officials, and business ethics at odds with church standards."⁶⁰

Isn't "honesty," at someone else's expense, selfish? I ask.

"Yes," she says simply. "But it's a wonderful selfishness. And we should all be more selfish. If I'm paying more attention to what someone else wants or what they believe is true to them, then what about what I want?" Selflessness, she says, is a waste of time. "What good will you do? You're not going to change anything. The people who might've been hurt will still be hurt by something else."

This is hedonism. It runs against the grain of most of what social science says humans tend to believe, and have believed since well before Christ. The golden rule is not merely something Christ taught. It is the single most common multicultural behavioural standard. And this idea violates it. However, if you tell people what they want to hear they will follow you. There will always be a fraction of the population that will want to hear the gospel of hedonism.

De Ruiter's claim of offering philosophy, not guidance, is considered even by some supporters a legal manoeuvre. At least one, a B.C. man with pre-existing mental health issues, committed suicide prior to de Ruiter placing warnings on his website.

⁶⁰ See "The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power" at page 88.

There's no suggestion that attending the meetings played any role in the man's death, but when a man's allegedly answering some of life's great questions, it pays to be careful.

"People reveal their souls to him, their deepest secrets and their greatest anxieties," says Dr. Stephen Kent, a cult expert at the University of Alberta. "And he responds in ways that give direction to them.

"The practical consequence of his teachings is that people will continue to bond with him, first and foremost. So people who support him date together, live together, socialize and party and bring the kids.

Religious belief is most persuasive when coupled with a communal relationship that brings to bear various forms of social proof and authority bias⁶¹ in favor of the religious beliefs. Religious leaders who wish to maximize their influence hence tend to form communities around themselves. The behaviour of others within the community becomes a major tool for recruitment, retention and behavior modification⁶².

"Despite the fact that his teachings have a highly individualistic dimension, the practical consequence is that he's building a community around himself.

"What's interesting about John's message is that there doesn't seem to be an emphasis on social action. I've never heard anything about helping to develop a sense of self by doing charitable work, by helping society."

Though Kent says that could be dangerous, he also notes that people might find enough comfort in the procedure of opening up to de Ruiter to stave off problems for a while.

It's a lucrative trade-off. Beaudry concedes de Ruiter's following - which happily purchases his dozens of DVD and audiotape lectures - has raised a lot of money.

"People would hand him envelopes stuffed thick with cash. He talked about building a community where people could explore philosophical truth together, getting a big piece of land where people could build homes," says Beaudry. Then she laughs.

"I told him 'John, make sure you don't call it Jonestown' and he just laughed at that," she says. "I think some of the others were offended but I've never worried too much about them. I told him, 'Don't go serving any Kool-Aid.' "

To the outside observer, Anne's loyalty and Boots's certainty may seem puzzling.

What would compel people to drop everything and follow a man claiming to embody truth without proof? To give him money, adoration and support?

But it's not uncommon. In fact, science may soon explain why humans seem compelled to support spiritual beliefs despite overwhelmingly contrary evidence that they are irrational.

⁶¹ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 67.

⁶² See Levine and Hassan, above.

Over the next four days this series will explore why we ridicule others' beliefs but hold on to our own, why such beliefs can be both beneficial and dangerous, and why, ultimately, human beings will nearly always be able to accept what comforts them over harsh realities.

Silence is golden – for gurus

Back to Loome.

The meeting has gone on for just a few minutes when a perceptible shift occurs: the audience is no longer fidgeting. In five minutes on stage, John de Ruiters has said nothing. Initially, some in the audience seemed uncomfortable or merely bored. But now, they seem enraptured.

This only works where the majority of the participants are believers and use their influence on the minority to pull them in. Those who have attended the Mormon temple will understand this. The feeling of reverence and peace in the Mormon temple is the product of the extreme respect and hence the reverence people there show to the place and the experience it offers. We all tend to mirror the behaviour around us. A new-comer to the Mormon temple is hence impressed by the unusual reverence all there display and acts the same way. This is an otherworldly experience, and purposefully so.

Silence, stillness and reverence are unusual states for most human beings. And for most of us, this sense of calm, control and power is attractive. Persisted in for long enough, this will break down the sense of self – our consciousness – in the attractive way described above.

We like being in the presence of power that is aligned with our interests. This makes us feel powerful by extension, and hence safe. Power in the human context is largely conferred by agreement. In de Ruiters' case, the group in audience with him agrees that he is worthy of their silence and reverence. For him to maintain a long silence is to emphasize his power. Many people would find that impressive. Jeremy Loome, who seemed to me to be at the ADD end of the spectrum and is a sceptic, would not likely find it impressive. And indeed that is what he reports. de Ruiters and his silence were singularly unimpressive from Loome's point of view.

A man asks de Ruiters to analyze a dream. De Ruiters waits for a full minute before saying anything. Then de Ruiters asks a question. Then another. Then another, with prolonged silences between each. The man's answers become disjointed and he starts to analyze the dream himself, occasionally pleading to de Ruiters to accept his analysis as correct.

Each time, de Ruiters answers with another question or vaguely refers to the man's need to answer from his truth within. His voice is cavernous yet soft, reverberating across a sound system controlled by three technicians at computers.

Thus again de Ruiters emphasizes his power by maintaining silence and withholding knowledge. And by making the acolyte work for his own revelation, he is following many ancient wisdom traditions as well as modern counselling practises.

For example, Karen Armstrong summarizes the Hindu wisdom on this point by recounting the myth of the enlightenment of Indra, one of the most powerful Hindu Gods, as he studied for 101

years with Brahman⁶³ personified as Prajapati, who taught largely through elliptical statements and questions that seemed impossible to answer⁶⁴. During the course of his study, numerous times Indra thought he had understood and left Prajapati. In each case, Prajapati let him go. Other students also left under a similar illusion of enlightenment or perhaps better put, superficially enlightened, and did not return. And in each case, however, Indra realized on his own that some of his questions remained unanswered and returned to Prajapati. Armstrong tells us that:

“Finally, Prajapati told Indra that the enlightened person had to learn to look beyond his mind and his body before he could find the inner self that was independent of all his physical and mental functions.”

And Prajapati summarizes the ultimate truth that Indra grasped, which will seem like an impossible conundrum to the unenlightened:

“The one who is aware: ‘Let me say this’ – that is the self; the faculty of speech enables him to speak. The one who is aware: ‘Let me listen to this’ – that is the self; the faculty of hearing enables him to hear. The one who is aware; ‘Let me think about this’ – that is the self; the mind is his divine faculty of sight. This very self rejoices as it perceived with his mind, with that divine sight, these objects of desire found in the world of *brahman*.”

Thus Prajapati distinguishes between the self and the functions that the self somehow performs. We are more than what we do, is the message. Indra had grasped this deep truth, and was enlightened. Armstrong concludes:

“The story illustrates the long process of self-discovery. The teacher could not simply give his pupil the answers, but could only lead him through the stages of introspection. Just when it seemed that they had got to the root of the matter, the student discovered for himself that this was not the end of his quest, and that he had to go still deeper. Even the mighty Indra took 101 years to discover the atman that gave the gods immortality” and is also the most basic attribute of each human being.

The principle illustrated by this lovely Hindu teaching is that self revelation is the most persuasive, enjoyable and in many ways useful kinds of revelation. This became the foundation of the Socratic method⁶⁵ and is the basis of many modern therapeutic techniques. By adopting this approach, de Ruitter aligns himself with centuries of experience that is proven to provide a powerful pedagogical as well as emotional experience. There is as much of the divine in this as in the use of hypnotic technique to entertain, or for therapeutic purposes.

And by using this self revealing pedagogy in public, de Ruitter adds adrenalin and voyeurism to the experience thus enhancing its appeal to a certain type of person. This is radically different from the Mormon model, but it is easy to see how it would be likely to be attractive to a segment of the population.

While I was a practising Mormon I regularly had powerful emotional feelings related to my beliefs. I am an emotional person. I feel deeply, and as a speaker I can project at least a little of what I feel. This made me an effective missionary and LDS church leader. I was not faking. I

⁶³ The all encompassing ground of being, or god, in Hinduism. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman>.

⁶⁴ Karen Armstrong (2006) at page 137.

⁶⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_method.

am not capable of faking this sort of thing. I was projecting in the most sincere fashion possible what I felt. This moves other people. I would listen to emotionally powerful music and to other people express their beliefs, emotions, etc. and this would ignite mine. I would then express my emotions, igniting others.

I don't suggest that de Ruiter is a conscious fraud. My bet is that he is, as Joseph Smith was, high on himself and the power has to move other people. This power for many people is self justifying. If you can do it, it must be the right thing to do. Right? This idea has ancient philosophical roots⁶⁶. And as indicated above, this is precisely the philosophy that de Ruiter teaches. I had a similar feeling while a Mormon Bishop. That fact that people came to me for advice, accepted my advice, and thanked me profusely for it left me with the impression that I must be doing God's will. This kept me going as a Mormon for a long time, and was a large part of what prevented me from considering the compelling evidence contra my beliefs.

I read a while ago in one of Canada's national newspapers (The National Post) of something called "ultrabass" - bass notes that are off the bottom of the scale of human hearing, but register in the subconscious. These are made by old houses, big trees in the wind, etc. and are linked to feelings of the paranormal – angels, ghosts, etc. The particular paranormal feelings experienced by a given individual tend to be culturally based. That is, Mormons might feel the presence of Jesus, an angel or a dead faithful Mormon ancestor while Catholics would feel the Virgin or a Saint, etc.

Upon reading this, I wondered if the bass pipes in the Mormon Tabernacle, Conference Center and other big league religious edifices are capable of producing ultra bass sounds. I seem to recall hearing that the Tabernacle organ has a sound range that goes off the human perceptive spectrum, but can't recall that for sure. Being in the presence of thousands of people who are worshipping together and are moved as a group in a predictable fashion by ultra bass sounds would likely produce a powerful emotional experience. And this would then be assumed by most to be proof of the divinely inspired nature of whatever other experience (listening to the "Prophet") that went along with the occasion.

I have also read about consultants who specialize in helping evangelical congregations in the US set up the sound and lighting systems for maximum emotional effect, as well as to design marketing programs that will help to bring in the sheep. They use things like ultra-bass. I would be interested to find how much of this technology de Ruiter, and modern Mormonism, use.

Cult expert Stephen Kent of the University of Alberta has studied de Ruiter's movement. Along with colleagues, he's developed a theory that de Ruiter compels support. "The silence enables the followers to attribute superhuman status to de Ruiter," he says.

This is consistent with my power theory, as noted above.

"They create their own illusion of him during these times. He says something esoteric and the silence gives them time to reinterpret it in ways specifically relevant to the particular needs that they have. "I also noticed it being used as a punitive function. Someone would challenge John or call him out on these esoteric things and say, 'Please explain this, I don't know what it means.' "Then he would remain silent and he would glare. And if the person in the chair breaks down and starts pleading for answers, then it

⁶⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Wilhelm_Friedrich_Hegel.

becomes a demonstration to everyone in the room that wow, this guy is amazing and powerful."

There's research to support the contentions, he says. "Another controlling factor is the intimacy of silence. You know how when you just meet someone, it's very awkward to have silence with them? When you're used to them, you're comfortable with it."

The use of silence of this type is also part of standard hypnotic technique.⁶⁷ And, note the connection between the kind of angst de Ruiters silence produces and the feeling of bliss described by Andy Newberg in Day 3. In that regard, see my explanation of my own testimony creating experience⁶⁸. The production of angst and then relief often produces a powerful emotional experience that is easily mistaken for an encounter with the divine. de Ruiters does precisely this.

See <http://www.globalseve.net/~sarlo/Yjohn.htm> and <http://www.rickross.com/groups/ruiter.html> for more information re. de Ruiters. If you want to read about John de Ruiters as he and his followers like to present him to the world, see <http://www.johnderuiter.com/>. A number of pictures of him appear there. de Ruiters is a good looking guy, which helps in the religion business. His image is front and centre for that reason.

People like Jeremy Loomer and the scholars he quotes in his article see Joseph Smith and John de Ruiters as peas in a pod. Most people who are not associated with either religious leaders would agree. And yet faithful Mormons dismiss this out of hand. This reminds me of the abused spouse who thinks that her family and friends just "don't understand him!". The same psychology is responsible for both reactions⁶⁹.

Day 2: LOSING HER ILLUSIONS

Religion is for people who are scared to go to hell. Spirituality is for people who have already been there. Bonnie Raitt

All religions are founded on the fear of the many and the cleverness of the few. Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle)

Tapping Into Inner Happiness – The Message of the Gurus is Oddly Similar: Joy and Peace Follow Enlightenment

In this piece Loomer provides a take on religious experience that will seem foreign to many Mormons because of its emphasis on relativism, lack of authority, and the feeling of "absolute unitary being". However, when we dig down a bit, we find that this road leads to more or less the same place as the Mormon road – a relatively large group of people ends up under the control of a small group or a single leader.

When John de Ruiters went looking for inner peace, he tells people he discovered "inner truth." What he may have found is what scientists call the 'absolute unitary state'.

⁶⁷ See <http://www.pranks4u.com/hypnotist.html> and http://www.healingstory.org/articles/web_of_silence/fran_stallings.html.

⁶⁸ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> at page 77.

⁶⁹ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>.

Some religions characterize the out-of-body sensation as being one with the universe or with God. The Edmonton guru's spiritual awakening is, in point of description, virtually identical to one described by others working what is known as the "international guru circuit."

Bestselling authors Eckhart Tolle, the maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Byron Katie and even Deepak Chopra all started teaching after such an experience. Similar descriptions crop up in transcendental meditation, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and just about every major religion, along with related practices such as chanting and yoga.

Scientific research suggests the ability to feel as if transcending time and space while simultaneously at peace or joyful is hard-wired into people, and that while all "gurus" or religious leaders may feel they've had a unique experience, they're probably wrong.

Australian Peter Sumner holds classes in the city of Fremantle, similar to de Ruiters - a process known as Satsang, from two ancient Sanskrit words meaning "truth gathering." Although he believes de Ruiters' unfaithful behaviour marks him as a false teacher, he tries to teach the same message: that they can tap an inner wellspring of truth and happiness.

"The person who has awakened to the truth about themselves (and the whole world/universe) will be liberated from (feeling the) need to add 'more' to themselves in order to establish and strengthen their 'egoic identity'. They will also begin to be freed from mind-made suffering and will cease causing suffering to others," he says.

"In other words they will begin to behave less 'unconsciously' and ... more 'consciously' which means more in accordance or alignment with the loving, joyous, peaceful essence now recognized as their true or unborn nature."

For Sumner's perspective on true consciousness to be universal, everyone who experiences it would be left with a nature that is "loving, joyous, peaceful." It assumes they're all benevolent, a leap of faith researchers aren't yet willing to take.

I agree with Loome's take on this point. In general, most of us can benefit from learning to dissociate – reducing our attachments to people, things, etc. and learning to accept both ourselves and others as they are. This tends to reduce the stress we experience and make us more patient with ourselves and others. This is one of the main messages, by the way, of Buddhism and Hinduism. However, the overuse of dissociative techniques like transcendental meditation can be used to control us, and can weaken us in a variety of ways. This can become a way of escaping our consciousness, much like the overuse of alcohol or drugs. And, it has addictive tendencies that are similar to some drugs.

De Ruiters' ex-wife Joyce used to assume his perspective was benevolent. Then he admitted in front of his followers he'd cheated on her. Now living in Europe, she has moved on to study theology and cults, and found history full of people who gained power by turning the curious into believers, often by describing a similar spiritual experience.

"What is fascinating is that when one studies the history of other 'gurus,' one often finds similar history. I used to say it is a potent combination of strengths and weaknesses. There is no doubt John (and the others) have these qualities. They are charismatic,

extreme, radical, perhaps fearless. There is also deep need, pain and perhaps dysfunction."

She asks herself a lot of questions about her faith and why she had so much faith in the intangible.

"Critical thinking is the first thing to go, and the last thing one realizes has left," says Joyce. "Critical thinking was discouraged. Since most of the discussion is based on abstract theology and constructs, there really is hardly any way to disprove or prove any of it. Today, I do trust my critical thinking. I do have faith, but I worked hard to earn this back."

de Ruitter, Smith and others like them depend upon personal charisma and their ability to teach people how to feel something deeply satisfying. This creates the trust that causes some followers to hand over a large degree of control, even as they deny being controlled. This is another characteristic of modern cult leaders – the followers make what appears to be a voluntary decision to be controlled⁷⁰. As noted above, the way in which the followers are encouraged to make this decision varies, but some elements of the process tend to be similar.

de Ruitter's technique was described above. Smith's had more to do with the kind of thing that make séances attractive to those who believe in them. He put on a show. He pretended to have golden plates, to speak with angels and god, to be able to translate Egyptian hieroglyphics, etc.⁷¹ He found old bones and told elaborate stories about white Indians, massive civilizations and battles in which those bones had participated when clothed with flesh⁷². He said that Jesus was coming right away, and that those who cast their lot with Smith (including keeping his secrets, lying for him as necessary, etc.) would become Princes in God's Kingdom on Earth, of which Smith would be King⁷³. And, he offered those of his inner circle the divinely appointed right to sex outside of marriage.

The gurus tend to be rule breaking social critics. They gain a following on the basis of their observation that something is deeply wrong with the mainstream of society, and that they offer a better way. And in particular, they offer strong leadership in uncertain times. They render their followers passive; they discourage independent thought through various means. As a result, they often end up taking advantage of many of their followers.

Most Mormons are unaware that Joseph Smith's teachings near the beginning of Mormonism bear little resemblance to what Mormonism teaches now. Smith was a seeker⁷⁴. Early Mormons believed that the Book of Mormon was a special revelation from God, and that beyond what it had to say, most of what was important would be worked out between the individual and God.

Early Mormonism was also profoundly charismatic. Speaking in tongues, spontaneous prophesying and other manifestations of spiritual power were common. Women engaged in this behaviour as well as men. My great grandmother gave many blessings that looked much like

⁷⁰ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.are%20mormons%20free.pdf>.

⁷¹ Grant Palmer, "An Insider's View of Mormon Origins".

⁷² See <http://lds-mormon.com/zelfh.shtml> and a comic take on this chapter in Mormon history, see <http://www.bookofzelfh.com/>.

⁷³ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf> at pages 27 – 33.

⁷⁴ See <http://www.signaturebookslibrary.org/seekers/Introduction.htm>.

Mormon priesthood blessings now do. These forms of ecstatic release cause something similar to the state of “absolute unitary being” Newberg describes in Day 3. As noted above, this is a powerfully attractive state. It is most of the engine that powers the expansion of the Christian evangelical movement from a standing start about 100 years ago to over 300 million members today. However, this form of energy is harder to control than the organizational form Mormonism eventually adopted.

As Smith’s following became larger, he systematized (to a degree) his thinking and developed an organizational structure that required rules and regulations of a mostly democratic nature. After his death, the bureaucratization of Mormonism continued, as has been the case with countless religious and other organizations before and since. It takes a powerfully charismatic spark to start a social movement, but once the group reaches a certain size it can evolve as required to survive.

Mormonism has passed through a number of critical changes since its origins. One involved the gradual reduction of democratic rights, which culminated in Brigham Young’s attempt to establish a theocracy in Utah⁷⁵. Another involved a massive theological and social transition when polygamy was shut down by the US government in the late 1800s.

Smith’s status as prophet evolved during early years of his religious career. In the beginning, his role was restricted to translating the Book of Mormon. Some have suggested that this points to Sidney Rigdon’s role as Mormonism’s master mind⁷⁶. The theory is that Rigdon set Smith up to play the role of the finder and translator of ancient records who would present to the world a purportedly ancient record that taught a version of Christianity consistent with Rigdon’s beliefs. This record was cobbled together by Rigdon and fed to Smith. Once it was published, Rigdon appeared on the scene to turn the rag tag group Smith had created into a viable church. This is why Smith’s role was originally restricted to translator while Rigdon played a role similar to that of Aaron to Moses. While in this role, Rigdon wrote many of the foundational “revelations” that now comprise the Mormon “Doctrine and Covenants”, considered by Mormons to be scripture on par with the Bible and the Book of Mormon. However, Rigdon underestimated Smith. Once things were up and running under Rigdon’s supervision, Smith used his perceived connection to God to redefine both their roles, relegating Rigdon permanently to second fiddle.

As Smith’s role strengthened, he asserted greater authority. After his death, the authority of Mormon leaders continued to strengthen. This required that members surrender an increasing proportion of their critical thinking to Mormon dogma. And here we find more overlap with de Ruyter’s current approach. Both suppress critical thought.

That is the point – the mental destination for literalist religious leaders. Through one means or another, critical thought must be suspended so that the leader’s wishes are more likely to be fulfilled. In a democratic society, few religious leaders will present themselves as a dictator. Their followers must make a free will choice. And that choice will be much more likely to go the way the leaders wish if critical thought is suppressed. The trick is to find a means to persuade followers to hand over the keys to the mental vault.

Particularly in uncertain times, a percentage of the population will find a fearless, charismatic leader attractive. If when they gravitate to him he offers an experience that dissolves their fears into a state of bliss that feels more stable than anything they have ever felt we should expect

⁷⁵ See Michael Quinn, “The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power”.

⁷⁶ See <http://mormonstudies.com/criddle/rigdon.htm>.

that some will believe that they have found a conduit to god himself. This is how the initial followership is formed. Loomer provides a number of contemporary examples of how this has happened. de Ruiter is a small fish compared to the others. In the early Mormon case, add to what I just described the promise of life after death with your family and a big role to play in the imminent second coming of Christ, and you have more than enough motivation for some people to sign up, and eventually to give Smith all of their property as well in some cases as sexual privileges with their daughters and spouses.

The flexible nature of de Ruiter's teaching encouraged "'being OK with everything' and a form of passivity. I think this in some ways can be positive. It enabled me to be flexible, less rigid, less stressed about challenging situations," she says. "On the other hand, I now have to fight to understand the balance as to when to 'give in' and when to 'confront' or to fight for what is right."

Medical experts who help people recover from being in cults describe the same experience and blame it on a process called "dissociation," in which the mind withdraws from reality based on cues and no longer connects properly to such tasks as consciousness, memory, identity and perception.

Utah, with its 70% Mormon population, has among the highest fraud, personal bankruptcy and multi-level marketing rates per capita in the United States. This is not necessarily because Mormons are dishonest, but rather because they are naïve and easily susceptible to emotional manipulation, and hence attract scam artists from all over the world. Mormon leaders have conditioned their followers to be controllable, and thus have rendered them vulnerable to manipulation by others as well.

It can come about from achieving the "absolute unitary state" too many times. At its best, it can lower blood pressure, reduce anxiety and stress and offer practitioners a renewed sense of purpose. At its worst, it can cause extreme mental illness and even symptoms of related multiple-personality disorders.

Utah also leads the US in the consumption of anti-depressants.

For a man preaching passivity, she notes, de Ruiter will pick a fight. Since she left, he has sued two former members to get back film and video of him, including former CBS News reporter Jeanne Parr-Noth.

He also sued a potential landlord for not promptly returning financial records. Joyce says she's been in and out of court with de Ruiter since she left. "I have agreed to not do anything 'that is potentially harmful to his earning potential.' "

Therein lies one of the big criticisms of modern gurus: they make an awful lot of money for people who have already achieved perfect spiritual balance and happiness.

The Mormon Church has assets and revenues that would put it, were it a corporation, near the 200 mark of the Fortune 500 list of the world's largest corporations⁷⁷. One of the surest ways to

⁷⁷ See Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling, "Mormon America: The Power and the Promise", Harper San Francisco, 1999, 454 pages, ISBN 0-06-066372-3, reviewed at <http://www.irr.org/mit/Mormon-America-review.html>.

make money these days is to start a successful religion. As L. Ron Hubbard is reputed to have put it, "I'd like to start a religion. That's where the money is."⁷⁸

De Ruiter charges daily fees for his weeklong seminars of \$25-30, with as many as 500 attending.

He charges just \$5 a head for regular weekend sessions, but has four, and again draws up to 500 people.

He has more than 30 days of week-long retreats scheduled overseas this year alone, to go along with a massive collection of merchandise for sale. And none of that takes into account the cash that followers just donate.

Other gurus are similarly organized. Vancouverite Eckhart Tolle's books are in 20 languages. Byron Katie speaks across North America.

Dr. David Hawkins has his own publishing company, pushing the combination of spirituality and applied kinesiology.

When transcendental meditation's maharishi Mahesh Yogi started charging whole course fees in the 1970s, they cost \$75. Now, it's \$2,500. One study found TM was bringing in in excess of \$6 million per year just from its \$125 entry fee.

The maharishi now runs health spas, a university, lobby agencies, a natural herbal supplement company and more spinoffs than you can shake a stick at.

Deepak Chopra, the maharishi's former disciple and business associate, once appeared on Oprah and within hours sold 138,000 copies of a book in which he claimed the ability to fly.

As with de Ruiter, the TM movement is based around the concept of connecting with a sense of universal consciousness, although it suggests this can be done in multiple stages. Its websites boast that it can "increase immunity to disease, reverse the effects of aging," and allow you to "radiate an influence of harmony to your surroundings."

It's such a popular message that it claims six million supporters worldwide and has made international guru stars out of Mahesh and Chopra.

The combination of TM practices, Hindu rituals and forms of ancient East Indian ayurvedic medicine made both men multimillionaires.

But according to studies, some of its claims are outlandish.

No one has proven, as both Chopra and the maharishi have claimed, that TM can make you fly, or that it can influence the community around you.

In fact, a 1982 TM-sponsored study purporting to show crime levels dropping in five states due to meditation was debunked for using phoney stats. A similar survey in 1993

⁷⁸ See http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/9363363/inside_scientology.

in Washington, D.C., claimed success, only for it to be later revealed the year was a statistical anomaly and crime was actually higher during the meditation period.

That same year, The Journal of American Medical Association revealed that both men had promoted studies showing benefits of ayurvedic treatment without revealing business connections that allowed them to profit from the study via product sales. They sued the journal unsuccessfully.

That's another problem with spiritualists: critics such as Quackwatch, the American Medical Association's unofficial vanguard against snakeoil salesmen, note that scientific analysis is rarely part of the packaging.

TM has at least learned that to be accepted, it will need scientific support and has spent the decade since those debacles building a huge database of independent scientific support for its benefits.

But for every movement willing to back up its claims, there are plenty who will not. De Ruiter, Chopra and Hawkins - along with several followers of each - all refused to comment on their critics, their practices and their sales.

'New-age nitwits' – When media repeats a bogus story, it easily becomes 'fact' – online skeptic

More often than not, modern spiritualism and its health benefits are a mixed bag – a few provable benefits and many others under debate.

The Mormon word of wisdom was once trumpeted as a health related rule, and this as evidence that Joseph Smith was God's prophet. However, it has become clear that much of what is in the Word of Wisdom is 19th century frontier folk wisdom, and that it was advocated by a minority of non-Mormons during Smith's day⁷⁹. For example, scientific data clearly indicates that red wine in moderate amounts and green tea are good for us. And much of the advice contained in the Word of Wisdom in terms of eating meat and grains at certain times make little sense in light of our current understanding of what is good and bad for the human body.

Mormonism's response to the falsification of the Word of Wisdom as a health code is that such was never its point. Rather, Mormon leaders now say that obedience to the Word of Wisdom is, and always has been, an act of faith that marks God's people. What else can they say?

The Mormon practise of blessing the sick has never proven been efficacious, and is supported by the same kind of anecdotal evidence that supports faith healing in religious communities of all times and places. And recently, the first comprehensive double blind study of therapeutic prayer has shown that it has no beneficial effect⁸⁰. There is no reason to believe that Mormon prayer or priesthood blessings have a different effect.

Ancient East Indian ayurvedic medicine and meditative techniques can be beneficial – numerous studies have shown TM can reduce stress and lower blood pressure, as well

⁷⁹ See http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2000_Up_in_Smoke.html.

⁸⁰ See <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/31/health/31pray.html?ex=1301461200&en=4acf338be4900000&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>.

as leaving the person with a clearer mind. And its holistic approach to treating each patient as an individual, instead of merely attaching the problem, is lauded by some physicians. But the extreme claims from some supporters are all a bit much for Dr. Stephen Barrett, of Quackwatch.com. "There are a lot of intelligent people who are quite deluded," says Barrett, who is despised by new age healers and spiritualists for insisting they back their claims with proof. "You have to, in fact, have a certain amount of intelligence in the first place to be deluded because it means you're looking for alternate explanations other than reality. Most of the people who are interested in this stuff are either responding to misleading publicity or want something beyond what medicine will give them."

For example, Deepak Chopra – who did not respond to interview requests for this article – has yet to explain why, when he claims he can reverse aging, he has visibly aged in pictures on his books. He has not reproduced publicly his alleged experience of "yogic flying." Spit and tongue scrapings have not been proven to prevent cataracts, despite his claim. And as Barrett notes on his website, Chopra once appeared on television with a testimonial by supporter Marian Thompson, whose breast cancer was in remission after chemotherapy and ayurveda. "Chopra asserted that his methods had played a major role in the woman's apparent recovery by strengthening her immune system. Thompson subsequently died of her disease."

Critics say it's a pattern of behaviour. "One of the very interesting things that happened with the tsunami was, no animal died," Chopra told CNN's Larry King last year. "The elephants. The monkeys. The rabbits. The birds. They were so tuned in to the forces of nature that they escaped."

It's a lovely sentiment. But as reported in Indonesia reported in newspapers around the globe, tens of thousand of animals died. People have short memories, and often don't distinguish between genuine benefits of spiritual exercises and the more outlandish claims, placing their faith instead in the charisma of the individual delivering the message.

"The media like paranormal stories, and so numerous media outlets repeated it without doing any fact checking of the source," says Richard Rockley, the online skeptic and blogger known as Skeptico and a frequent thorn in the Chopra's side. "Big surprise. Eventually the story mutates to 'animals are psychic', and this is picked up and repeated as fact by new age nitwits like Chopra."

In early Mormon history there were countless stories of paranormal powers exercised on behalf of Mormons. These stories are still believed to be true in Mormon circles, as are the New Testament miracles. And Mormons still believe that their blessings of the sick and other rites have real effects. But, most Mormon blessings are stated to be "in accordance with God's will". This means that if the person does not get well, it was God's will and so the illness had a divine purpose of some kind. Or death means that the loved one was needed by God on the "other side". The system is set up so as not to be falsifiable.

'A house of cards' – Dissociative bliss becomes addictive

Joe Kellett knows gurus. He says he was one.

For years, Kellett was a disciple of the transcendental meditation movement, then a teacher. He now runs an anti TM webpage. His problem is complicated by the fact that TM is based on – but does not mirror – 2,000-year old ayurvedic health rituals from India. That gives it credibility, as do studies showing it can be good for your health.

"When TMers say 'TM is not a religion' they are talking about the purely mechanical mental technique," says Kellett. "However, 'TM the technique' is never taught without introducing recruits to 'TM the religion' during three days of instruction following initiation. "Mahesh initially came out of India openly as a teacher of spirituality. Then in the early '70s he abandoned that approach and began disguising his message in the language of scientific analogy. But the core message is still the same under the semantic covers: do TM for long enough and you will become 'enlightened'."

You might have also have negative consequences. A compendium of 75 studies of TM technique in 2000 found that 63% of practitioners suffered long term negative mental health consequences from the repeated dissociation – or disconnection – with reality caused by going into a trance like state.

TM counters that by pointing out it can produce 600 studies showing the benefits to everything from high blood pressure and stress reduction to slowing the aging of cells, reducing mental fatigue and improving clarity of thought.

Health benefits or drawbacks notwithstanding, Kellett argues, TM teachers were tasked with withholding information from students until they were susceptible enough to accept dogmatic positions related to the maharishi's own Vedic Hindu background.

This is a well-known sales technique⁸¹. The first objective is to create a bond between the recruit and the organization. As that bond is created, the relationship will bear more weight and hence dogma that would have been a show stopper had it been introduced in the beginning can be safely taught⁸². And eventually, the strangest dogma becomes part of the ironic anchor that holds the individual inside the religious group. Having shared strange beliefs and practises, that experience has an effect similar to tribal initiatory rites⁸³ - those who have paid this “price” to be part of the group are less likely to leave and more likely to value their association with the group than those who are allowed to join without suffering discomfort of some kind.

"Dissociative 'bliss' is often an easily produced substitute for true personal growth," says Kellett. "As teachers we memorize almost everything we are to tell students. We were very careful not to tell them too much less they become 'confused' by things that they 'couldn't yet understand'.

"Only after they had the 'experience', could we start very gradually revealing TM dogma in easy, bit sized chunks, always after they had just finished meditation and were therefore likely to be still in a dissociative state."

Or as Mormon leaders say, “milk before meat”, and “stay away from the mysteries”. This is also in part why Mormons have for some years been strongly discouraged from using anything other than the lesson manuals and scriptures when giving lessons or speaking in church meetings.

⁸¹ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 81.

⁸² See Levine and Hassan.

⁸³ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/temple%20marriage.pdf> at page 20.

Mormon leaders do not want the rank and file reading what scholars have to say about Mormonism or Christianity. The reason they give for this rule is that when supplementary sources are used, people tend to become distracted by side issues instead of sticking to the core of the subject – that Mormonism is true and we should live good lives. Practically speaking, however, this rule means that Mormons have a reduced chance of encountering scholarly material that would raise doubt as to whether Mormonism is true.

When he left the group, Kellett took direction from cult deprogrammer Steve Hassan, who established a technique for what he calls "re establishing reality testing" – taking people who've been addicted to the sensation of dissociative bliss and making them critical thinkers again. "I realized that everything I had believed and experienced was based on the premise that Mahesh was truly an enlightened man with the highest spiritual teaching on the planet," he says. "When I abandoned that assumption, the whole thing fell like a house of cards."

In my case, the house of cards fell when I gave myself permission to ask the question, "What if Mormonism is not true?" Within hours of first allowing that question to form in my mind, I had falsified Mormonism. I then struggled for days to disprove what I had admitted to myself during those hours.

Day 3: GOD ON THE BRAIN

God has no religion. Mahatma Gandhi

The most beautiful and most profound experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms - this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness.
Albert Einstein

Faith chemistry: Research suggests link between brain function and spiritual experiences

I continue to be impressed by the volume of information Jeremy Loomer has summarized in these articles. Today's is the best so far.

Loomer first reviews the basics of Andrew Newberg's research as found in "Why God Won't Go Away"⁸⁴. This explains the state of bliss experienced in deep meditation. More importantly, in its milder forms it explains what induces Mormon testimony⁸⁵.

There's excitement in Dr. Andy Newberg's voice over research that might tell us why we have God on the brain. You'd almost say his pursuit of the big answer is downright zealous.

⁸⁴ See <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20011101-000030.html> and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 105.

⁸⁵ See My experience in this regard is summarized at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> starting at page 77.

Orthodox faiths may find him blasphemous. But the University of Pennsylvania researcher hopes once they see the evidence they'll accept spirituality is based in human brain chemistry, a scientific pursuit known as "neurotheology."

And Newberg is quick to state the research does nothing to invalidate the idea of a creator being, although it may well quash the concept that one religion is any more relevant than another.

And that is why many religious people, like Mormons, don't like Newberg's research. He shows that the powerful experiences many people have relative to religion are explained by neurology. This makes it harder to justify the idea that any particular religion has a special claim to God's authority.

"When people look at our research, if they come from a belief system where the material world is all there is, they're likely to frame the data as 'religious experiences are all in our head: our brain creates it, and that's the way it is.'

"But if they look at it from a faith perspective, they tend to see it as justifying their belief that there is more to religion than just man-made myths and fairy tales."

SPIRITUAL BLISS

Newberg and his late research partner Eugene D'Aquila found that by injecting a solution into the bloodstream of a Buddhist meditator just after the person achieved a state of bliss - which they dubbed an 'absolute unitary state' - they could follow it through the bloodstream and map how it was reflected in brain chemistry, using brain imaging machines.

They also found the rear of the brain, which helps us understand space and time, shuts down. The two front parts fire a chemical called endorphin, causing joy. We can also lose the ability to distinguish between an inner monologue and someone else talking, causing disembodied voices.

They've since repeated the work with Franciscan nuns and other people who meditate or pray, and Newberg is convinced that, regardless of belief, most human brains are hard-wired to be able to have the same "spiritual experiences." While his research may draw into question the many "spiritual awakenings" that led prophets to start religions, they still don't account for human consciousness.

The bliss Newberg describes can in some cases be utterly overpowering, and other cases simply attractive⁸⁶. Newberg's research does not suggest that the mystic experience is caused by a brain dysfunction. Rather, he has identified a brain function that has an important role to play in other aspects of human life. Sexual climax, for example, is one of the few times during which the same pattern of brain activity seen in deep meditation is also displayed. In that case, the outcome of the feelings related to that brain state are clear – a euphoria that enhances the probability of human reproduction. The loss of sense of self while in the embrace of another human being assists pair bonding that is crucial to the care of human infants during their lengthy period of dependence while their brains mature. As I type this, I am with a group of 15 year old boys (including my son Dallin) at a basketball tournament. They are wolfing down

⁸⁶ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at pages 105, 106.

pizza, laughing and telling stories while I type. As a result in part of their biology and in part the way we delay the maturation process in North America, these fine, entertaining boys are still miles from being able to care for themselves.

As Pascal Boyer explains in "Religion Explained", the main social and psychological features of religious belief are likely offshoots of individual and social functions that were developed for other purposes and are co-opted in the creation and maintenance of the religious institutions that emerged with the formation of complex human society. This was a relatively recent event in human history. For example, while it is possible that an infinite number of different types of god could be worshipped, relatively few are. The selection of these few is explained by human psychological and social traits that developed long before religious institutions and the notion of "god" arrived on the scene. That is, "god" neatly fits into the psychological boxes that evolved for other purposes, and in group after group god tells the people to do more or less exactly what is required to survive. For example, people who need to kill their neighbors in order to survive and told by their god to do so. And often it is the neighbors' worship of a competing god that is used to justify this.

So, when humans stumble across experiences that they can access on demand that put them into the a mental state similar to making love, why would we not expect that state to be accorded special significance? This is what happens through learning certain contemplative disciplines; engaging in group activities involving chanting, dancing, fasting etc.; engaging in individual activities such as those used by the Sufi whirling dervishes; using certain types of drugs such as peyote, cocaine or ecstasy; etc. We should also expect that kind of experience to exert a special influence over us.

Newberg suggests that the confluence of stress and relief (such as when being saved from disaster) will in some cases produce a euphoria or even the experience of "union with ultimate reality" of which the mystics speak. He says that the same thing can happen as a result of coming to a stress relieving mental conclusion. This could occur, for example, after worrying for years about an inability to believe as the rest of your community does and then finding what seems like justifiable intellectual means to do so. Thus, finally yielding to tremendous social pressure to believe in a particular way, regardless of how erroneous the beliefs in question, should be expected to produce a minor epiphany for the same reasons that eating after a fast should be expected to be pleasurable. That is, after having been starved of social acceptance for a time and feeling stressed as a result, sudden relief from this stress should produce a sense of profound relief and in some cases, euphoria. It was precisely this that led to my first Mormon "spiritual" experiences, as noted above. This also explains many of the spiritual experiences of which I have read, starting with Saul of Tarsus, moving through Aquinas and other early Catholic mystics and theologians, and continuing through every tradition with which I have become acquainted. These experiences go back almost as far as we have records of human activity. For example, Karen Armstrong⁸⁷ describes the Hindu tradition circa 700 BCE as follows:

"Instead of discussing the external ceremonies of the cult, as the ritual reformers had done, Yajnavalkya had begun to explore the psychological makeup of the human being in an attempt to locate the true self, the inner person that controlled and animated the 'I' of our mundane experience. We had to go beyond the 'I' and discover modes of being that were different from our normal consciousness, which was dominated by sense perception, common sense, and rational thought. Yajnavalkya taught his disciples to consider their dreaming state, when they

⁸⁷ Armstrong (2006) at page 131.

were no longer bound by space or time. In our dreams, we take the external world apart and create our own joys, pleasure, and delights. We become creators like Prajapati⁸⁸, bringing pools, wagons, roads, and teams of oxen into existence, and building up a whole new world by means of 'the inner light that is in our heart.' In dreams, we become aware of a freer and higher self, since for a short time, we are released from the constraints of the body. We also have nightmares, however, when we become acutely aware of our pain, fear, and desire. 'But in deep sleep, which is dreamless, the self is liberated from even those mental appearances of activity. In deep sleep, a person is 'beyond fear'. Deep sleep, Yajnavalkya believed, was not oblivion, but a state of unified consciousness. He compared it to the experience of sexual intercourse, when 'a man embraced by a woman he loves is oblivious to everything within or without.' He loses all sense of duality: 'There isn't a second reality there that he could see as something distinct and separate from him.'" Conscious only of the oneness, the self experiences *ananda*, the 'bliss' of brahman."

The mystics of many cultures have compared the experience with the divine to love making, such has always been its moving nature.

CONSCIOUSNESS

"Nowhere does it explain at which stage consciousness is inserted, or why," says Newberg. "I like to think part of how we might get answers is through an investigational plan that includes science on the one end and religion on the other."

Their research is battling the power of conviction. Studies show 95% of people will hold on to an irrational belief no matter what evidence is presented, according to Dr. David Wulff, an expert in the psychology of religion at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts.

"In fact I guess you could say that even more basic than their faith is the general stability of the human personality," says Wulff. "A lot of research suggests today that there are slight shifts on average in the human personality over a lifetime, but on the whole, people just don't change much.

"You can understand the reluctance: apostasy, in some traditions, is truly hazardous to your health. And to give up your beliefs means that you have a hole in your world view."

Newberg compares the strength of the hold to addiction:

- People are attracted to a message from a person who believes he or she transcends mortality and want to follow the lead;
- They group to support the objective and create a social safety net, giving a powerful feeling of peace and security;
- To a lesser degree, religious ceremony also stimulates the same pleasure-causing endorphin experienced during their "prophet's" or "saviour's" awakening.

This is an important point. Only 5% change irrational belief when presented with compelling, disconfirming evidence. That is, once we have established a basic belief pattern it is unlikely to

⁸⁸ Another name for Brahman, the ultimate Hindu god.

change regardless of how false it may be. Michael Shermer's extensive survey reported in "How We Believe" reaches the same conclusion. Newberg's explanation for this is convincing, and consistent both with Shermer's and others I have read. That is, all religions use a combination of a powerful, uber-confident leader, a supportive group, and the kind of other-worldly bliss noted above to attract converts and keep believers in the fold.

Because Loome is writing in the context of cultish behaviour (See Day 1 and 2 regarding John de Ruiter) and had the usual tiny amount of space with which journalists must work, he does not deal with the literature related to the conditioning that occurs once a person is in a group, and in particular, when one is raised from childhood within a group. This is how you can get Harvard PhD's in paleontology who believe the Earth is 6,000 -10,000 years old⁸⁹ and Mormon "scholars" who seriously argue that the word "horse" in the Book of Mormon really means "tapir" as well as countless other nonsenses⁹⁰.

BUDDHISTS

And brain scans of long-term practising Buddhists indicate the process can even permanently alter the individual's brain chemistry.

"If we look at basic elements of most religions and how they were founded, there is this fundamental similarity between all of them," says Newberg.

It's the same pattern that prompts people to support gurus like Edmonton's John de Ruiter, Vancouverite Eckhart Tolle and U.S.-based Byron Katie. Their brushes with universal consciousness may sound unbelievable in the modern scientific era but they exhibit the same behaviour as ancient prophets, along with a modern bent for self-marketing.

I spent a week with Newberg last summer and found him to be both charming and sharp. His personal belief is that there is perhaps something "out there" to which we connect when in the state of absolute unitary being, and perhaps this state of perception is the most real in our experience. However, he does not support any particular conception of god nor does he purport to understand god. And he is clear as to the difference between what he believes is supported by science, and what is at this point speculation.

I also note how ancient and universal this attraction to the absolute unitary being state is. The religious historian Karen Armstrong⁹¹ notes that in the ancient world:

"People usually experienced the sacred as an immanent presence in the world around them and within themselves. Some believed that gods, men, women, animals, plants, insects, and rocks all shared the same divine life. All were subject to an overarching cosmic order that kept everything in being. Even the gods had to obey this order, and they cooperated with human beings in the preservation of the divine energies of the cosmos. ...

Ancient religion depended upon what has been called the perennial philosophy, because it was present, in some form, in most premodern cultures. Every single person, or experience on earth was a replica – a pale shadow – of a reality in the divine world. The sacred world was,

⁸⁹ See <http://www.towersonline.net/story.php?grp=news&id=344>.

⁹⁰ See <http://lds-mormon.com/aa.shtml>, and Boyer, Ball, Rue et al above.

⁹¹ See Karen Armstrong (2006), at pages xv, xvi.

therefore, the prototype of human existence, and because it was richer, stronger, and more enduring than anything on earth, men and women wanted desperately to participate in it. The perennial philosophy is still a key factor today in the lives of some indigenous tribes. The Australian aborigines, for example, experience the sacred realm of Dreamtime as far more real than the material world. They have brief glimpses of Dreamtime in sleep or in moments of vision; it is timeless and 'everywhen'."

This is not far off what many scientists believe. Einstein taught, for example, that:

"A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'Universe'; a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest--a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely but striving for such achievement is, in itself, a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security."⁹²

And Meera Nanda, a scientist raised in the Hindu tradition, describes the deepest meditative state in these terms⁹³:

"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. It is not a coincidence that the teaching of Vedanta – "Thou art That" – has been interpreted by so many as implying that I (the enlightened one) am Brahman, that I am the universe, that my mind is the mind of the entire cosmos and by controlling my mind, I can control the cosmos."

And she goes on to note how frequently misunderstood this experience tends to be:

"[Beware of] the noetic, or intellectualist, trap that William James identified in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when he noticed how mystical experience has the quality of a profound knowing: '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'.

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 objective reality of what they have seen: what they see in their minds, they assume, must exist outside."

One of the traps into which religious believers of all stripes sometimes fall is precisely what James points out above – the bliss Newberg describes is taken as confirmation that the beliefs of a particular system are correct, even though there is little evidence to support them. Such is the emotional force of the experience of seeming to touch something beyond ourselves; seeming to become part of a larger organism or reality of some kind. We crave this as surely now as did our ancestors as far back into history's mists as we can see.

⁹² See Herbert, Nick, "Quantum Reality: Beyond the New Physics" (Anchor; Reprint edition; 1987) at page 250.

⁹³ See Nanda, Meera "Trading Faith for Spirituality: The Mystifications of Sam Harris" at http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_article.asp?9389.

And those who run religious groups use this craving to their advantage. They design truth tests related to their belief system so that universal experiences are taken as evidence that a particular belief system is “true”. And within the limited context of one belief system, this makes sense.

This is a classic illustration of the principle that ideas that are toxic when taken literally often work wonderfully as metaphor⁹⁴. Other examples include “man can become like God”, “all things were created spiritually before they came into physical existence”, “no unclean thing can enter the Kingdom of Heaven”, and “the Spirit speaks truth”. Taken literally, these ideas tend to breed egotism, perfectionism, abuse of authority, delusion and depression. Taken metaphorically, they can help us take greater responsibility for our actions and find our most creative and satisfying modes of existence. As we push from the known into the chaotic unknown, we will grow and hence become. I suggest that “Man becoming god” provides a wonderful metaphor for contemporary life as well as how the switch from literalism to metaphor can work.

I should add that for the most part, literalist religious leaders do not consciously scheme to deceive their followers. They generally believe that they have some kind of monopoly on the truth. Since this monopoly maintains their position, privileges, ego, etc. we should expect them to believe that they have it. And since a particular test seems to prove their position to be true, of course they use it.

The most dangerous of salesmen are those who innocently, and sincerely, sell falsehood. And those few religious leaders who understand that they are selling lies usually do two things. First, they rationalize the lies they tell on the basis that they serve a higher truth. That is, Mormon leaders have distorted their history⁹⁵ since near its beginning, and have done so on the basis that it was necessary to protect a higher truth – that truth at the core of the Mormon message. They are philosopher kings who tell noble lies⁹⁶. And second, they recruit innocent and sincere salespeople to do most of the dirty work. Thus, the vast majority of Mormon members and missionaries who teach a false story of Mormon origins do so with tears of sincere belief in their eyes.

In some cases, gurus have exhibited the same lapses in moral and personal behaviour outlined in traditional religious documents, proof-positive the experience is not fundamentally benevolent.

In the worst cases - Jim Jones, the Solar Temple, David Koresh's Branch Davidian and the Heaven's Gate cult would be modern examples - increasingly irrational behaviour can lead to mass suicide among members more comfortable with the security of an irrational belief than in facing reality.

⁹⁴ See Armstrong, Karen “A Short History of Myth” (Canongate U.S., 2005).

⁹⁵ See <http://www.mormonalliance.org/casereports/volume3/part4/v3p4c21.htm> and http://www.mormonismi.net/pdf/lying_for_the_lord.pdf.

⁹⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Philosopher_Kings; <http://www.uwmanitowoc.uwc.edu/staff/awhite/BILL.2.htm>; <http://groups.msn.com/AtheistVSGod/platosnoblelie.msnw>.

Leaving the Fold

By coincidence, a few days ago I received an email from one of Jim Jones' former followers – a man who left the Jonestown cult a short time before the mass suicide to which Loomer refers. I will conclude with a quote from his message to me that ties this all together:

"I grew up in the Peoples Temple. Jim Jones was my ...principal mentor For me as a child, teenager, and young adult, the Temple was the great citadel of hope and Jim, the man of the age. After I graduated from ***** ... I came to see the church more clearly. Naturally, my dedication waned and I found myself increasingly under suspicion. Even so, I wrestled ... with my growing disbelief but escaped ... before the Guyana massacre. My entire family and my community died in Jonestown. Jim, much like Joseph Smith, was a huckster pretty much all along."

I deal with the occasional huckster in my legal practice. One of the mental habits that characterizes them is the ability to rationalize. For many of them, exaggeration or outright lying is OK as long as it serves a greater purpose. For example, lying to get money from investors or banks is OK as long as you believe you will pay it back, and that everyone will be better off as a result of your lies. The improbable beliefs these people sincerely hold in this regard are the best testimony I can offer to the power of denial.

In the Jim Jones, Joseph Smiths, John de Ruiters and other similar types in the religious world I see this principle in action. And in the end, whether they believe what they say or not, and how much is "noble lying" (lies told for some higher purpose) and how much is honest mistake, does not matter. All that matters is how trustworthy these people are⁹⁷. Once we have decided that they are unreliable sources of information, we should dismiss them and move on. This task is made far more difficult when we have had our own experiences with the kind of bliss Newberg describes in a particular belief setting and under the influence of particular religious leaders. Worse yet, our family and social lives are often formed around a particular set of beliefs.

The first challenge is met fairly easily by learning how to have the same experience Newberg describes in other settings. I can induce this myself almost at will, in mild and what I consider to be healthy forms, by meditating, drawing, riding my motorcycle, etc. Loomer told me some stories about his avocation as a jazz musician that indicate the same kind of experience.

The second challenge – that posed by a tight knit social or family group – is much more difficult. We are existentially threatened by anything that might disturb important social relationships⁹⁸. The only way to deal with this is to go through the painful, terrifying process of pulling away from the unhealthy group and finding others that serve us instead of forcing us to serve them while distorting our view of reality. This birth canal is the most awful I have known, and what waited on the other side was more wonderful than anything I could have conceived as possible.

And, we usually do not need to fully disconnect from our important family and social groups to do this. Rather, after a period of turmoil and growth as unhealthy attachments⁹⁹ are broken, relationships continue on a more healthy basis.

⁹⁷ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/audio.htm>, "Was Joseph Smith Trustworthy?"

⁹⁸ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 119.

⁹⁹ See Lee Kirkpatrick, "Attachment, Evolution and the Psychology of Religion".

Here are a few factors that seem relevant to the kind of process one might expect when dealing with loved ones on the way out of Mormonism, or thinking about leaving ourselves:

- What are the personality types involved? This is a pretty good guide to what is likely to happen. Dogmatic type A people (and we have more than our share of those in my family, coming from genes on both sides) tend to produce much more heat than the more laid back types. Introverted people are less connected to the social group and tend to have an easier time leaving. Analytical people tend to have an easier time cutting through the material that explains why the religion is false. Highly social and emotional people, on the other hand, tend to have more connections and feelings that will be damaged by a change in belief, and hence have a harder time “seeing” the evidence that falsifies some beliefs.
- How well informed and capable of learning are the people in question? Our brains continue to format at a relatively rapid rate until our mid-20s¹⁰⁰. This means that being raised a literal Mormon fundamentally affects brain formatting. The neural growth required to deal with religious pluralism (that is, people who don't believe like me are often OK, are not necessarily going to a bad place after death, etc.) is much greater and hence more painful than for literalists than for liberal Mormons, for example.
- How "attached" are the people involved to each other and to Mormon institutions? Attachment theory¹⁰¹ and how different people attach in different ways explains a lot of the important dynamics in this situation. Some of my thoughts on this point are at http://www.aimoo.com/forum/postview.cfm?id=418550&CategoryID=121363&threadid=2394373&highlight_key=y&keyword1=philo. The attachment theory literature is full of ideas as to how people with dysfunctional attachments can deal with them.
 - Another way to get at this critically important issue is to consider how dependant the people in question are on Mormon relationships in the family, community and at work. This includes an analysis of how many non-Mormon relationships they have, and whether they make new friends easily.
 - Another way to look at the attachment issues is through the lens of "grief" theory¹⁰². We grieve as we break or fundamentally modify important attachments. This involves pain, denial, anger, etc. Until we are solidly in the acceptance stage of this process, healthy interaction with some others (those to whom we were most attached) should be expected to be difficult. The best analogy in this regard is likely the relationship change that occurs during and after divorce¹⁰³.
 - Another way to come at the same subject matter is through the co-dependency literature¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰⁰ See Quartz and Sejnowski, "Liars, Lovers and Heroes".

¹⁰¹ See <http://www.personalityresearch.org/attachment.html> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attachment_theory.

¹⁰² See http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change_management/kubler_ross/kubler_ross.htm.

¹⁰³ See <http://www.divorcetransitions.com/articles/grief.htm>.

¹⁰⁴ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codependency> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dependent_personality_disorder.

- To the extent I hope to change someone's beliefs¹⁰⁵, including my own, I must change their environment sufficiently to cause them to change. And the change will likely occur in a phase transition¹⁰⁶. For example, I am part of the environment of those close to me. When they know that I have changed my behaviours and beliefs, or I send them emails or talk to them about my ideas, etc. this changes their environment in small ways. In the context of a faithful literalist Mormon embedded in a family and social context of faithful literalist Mormons, it is unreasonable to expect the small changes I can cause in their environment to cause a change in their ability to perceive reality. That is, seeing reality is not as easy as we assume it to be. A thoughtful consideration of the conflict related to religious belief both now and throughout history should be sufficient to bring this issue into focus. The conceit required to hold onto the belief that my group is the only one not afflicted by the blindness I see around me still makes me shake my head. However, I can effect a dramatic change in the circumstances of my young children. I can take them places other than Mormon meetings on Sunday. I can introduce them to new friends - the children of my new friends. I can take them to Star Island¹⁰⁷ and let them meet wonderful people with a completely different point of view than the one they are used to. Etc. In a matter of months, these kids experienced a paradigm shift¹⁰⁸. Mormonism makes as much sense to them as Voodoo. It took much longer for my wife to change since her context was far more extensive, well formed and resistant to change. She feared change. Her Mormon friends called regularly for a long time. Some of them counseled immediately separation and divorce. She did not want to meet new friends, and for many months refused to do so. But eventually she started to come with me as I met new people, to read books that provided a broader context for her religious experience, etc. that her perspective changed. And there was a strong correlation between the decline in her attachments to things and relationships Mormon, and her ability to perceive the reality of Mormon history and social practices. The same kind of thing occurred with my older children. The more extensive the Mormon social and intellectual context in which a person is embedded, the longer it takes to change it, if it can be changed at all. And, this process is almost entirely a function of a willingness to change context, or that for a particular person for whatever reason, the context changes. This brings personality and, frankly, luck into the equation as large factors. Only a small percentage of us can go through this change on a mostly intellectual basis, and those who can do that tend to live life in a largely intellectual context, as I do. For most people, context has a much larger social element and it is this that must change in order to make the perception of evidence possible that would falsify the basis for the beliefs in question¹⁰⁹.
- In the context just outlined, how much change is reasonable to expect in the case of a particular individual? The idea of determinism is helpful to me in this regard¹¹⁰. Free will is mostly (perhaps completely) illusory. And yet we are unique, and our "determined"

¹⁰⁵ See Philip Ball, "Critical Mass".

¹⁰⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phase_transition.

¹⁰⁷ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.star%20island%20overview.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradigm_shift.

¹⁰⁹ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 119 for my take on how this works. Several university profs who teach psychology and other social sciences have vetted and approved the ideas this summary contains.

¹¹⁰ See Daniel Dennett, "Freedom Evolves"; <http://www.naturalism.org/freewill.htm> and http://www.aimoo.com/forum/postview.cfm?id=418550&CategoryID=121363&threadid=2416065&highlight_key=y&keyword1=philo.

actions are the unique outcomes of our histories and genes. And "deterministic chaos"¹¹¹ illustrates that it is impossible to predict this kind of determined outcome. Not just difficult. Impossible (as far as we can tell). Determinism is the best term we have for this kind of thing, but does not do it justice. In any event, I am much better able to forgive and accept my own foolishness, and that of others, in this context. Rather than blaming people for what they do, I accept that they are likely to act in particular ways as a result of the genetics and histories. And, with rancor I decide which influences to expose myself (and others whom I influence) to and which not. This is one of the things that has led me to for a time limit the contact I have with my parents and other family members. Some of these relationships were not working; I could not seem to fix them; I felt like I was banging my head against a wall; so without assigning blame I simply declined opportunities to interact for a while. I hope this will eventually open the door to a new way of interacting, and think it will. Life looks so much larger than it did before that all kinds of possibilities appear reasonable that I could not have seriously contemplated a few years ago. This is frightening, and I proceed slowly on all fronts since I don't feel that I can trust my judgement yet. But the world continues to open up for me and others in my family. And that feels wonderful.

- How do I deal with people I love who cannot be reasonably expected to change in a material way? I get rid of the attachments and "stages of grief" issues that cause me to engage in behavior that will likely hurt them more than help them, and I simply continue to love them and enjoy what remains of our relationship. We will not be able to enjoy the kind of intellectual or emotional intimacy that I can quickly reach with people I hardly know, but who share my passion for certain ideas. But I share a history with these loved ones that is important and touches me at a level that is beyond enjoyable or interesting or exciting. These feelings come from my genes impelling me to remain connected to my biological substrate. This reminds me of my Grandma McCue. I was her first grandchild, was she tended me when I was a child, and I lived with her and grandpa while I was in university for a year. She was an anti-intellectual whom I loved because she loved me so completely. As her intellectual powers (which were always dim) gradually declined to near zero (she died well into her 90s) there was progressively less of a relationship to enjoy. And yet I still enjoyed most of it, and visited her right up to the end. I see my relationship with some of my Mormon family this way.
- I would go overboard on expressing love and commitment to important relationships so that you make it clear that they are not contingent on the belief or behaviour of others. I did that well inside my immediate family, and poorly regarding my extended family and some friends because I did not understand how deeply affected my behavior was by the attachment and grieving issues outlined above. And I would enjoy what I can in each of my important relationships while being realistic about the degree to which I can become an agent for change in other lives. That is, I am such a small part of the context of my Mormon extended family and friends that the chance of my influencing them toward a change in their beliefs are slim to nil. And any effort I make in that regard is likely to be costly in a variety of ways. So, I am likely well advised not to try.
- I try to be as truthful and without pretence as possible. I am proudly and unapologetically a post-Mormon. I will not deal with those who cannot accept me on that basis, subject to an agreement (express or implied) that we not talk about religion. This

¹¹¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos_theory and <http://zebu.uoregon.edu/~js/ast123/lectures/lec05.html>.

means that if things do not go well in some relationships because my belief has changed, those relationships must end. Sometimes bad attachments must be broken, or starved, or whatever, so that the weeds that would otherwise choke our lives can be removed and more healthy plants allowed to grow. However, my newfound appreciation for life's many ironies makes me look carefully at the weeds before pulling them out. Some things I thought were weeds have proven to be among my most important life sustainers and recreation sources.

Perhaps the most important message to be extracted from my summary of issues related to leaving the fold is that good comes constantly mixed with bad. Our task – whatever our belief system happens to be – is to better connect our beliefs to reality so that we will not be taken advantage of by well intended (or other) people, and we will not inadvertently mislead others ourselves. We want to reduce the bad we ingest, and deliver, with the good. For example, I was talking to a friend the other day about the population and other problems in Africa, and he told me about a documentary he saw the other day in which a religious worker was interviewed in Africa. This person was doing all kinds of good things to relieve hunger and other terrible living conditions there. But, his organization would not educate regarding birth control or distribute birth control devices because that was against God's law. And so with the means of relieving Africa's terrible population problem right there, in the midst of the people, it is not delivered. This causes more babies to be born into a life of misery that will be relieved in a few cases by this man's efforts.

So, as we remodel our beliefs we will likely find much more than perhaps we can initially see in our inherited belief system that is worth preserving. This is Loome's primary message in Day 5, and so I will leave further analysis of it until then.

Science Seeking Answers

We return to Loome.

There's a whole field of religion trying to connect it to mainstream science and quantum physics, a move skeptical scientists consider apologist: the contention that science should accept religion if religion accepts science.

But Australian meditator Sam Blight, who has studied plenty of theoretical physics, says sometimes we let scientific method block out original answers to spiritual questions.

"It seems not to have occurred to many to consider the possibility that some aspects of how the brain functions might be more analogous to a receiver rather than being the source of our consciousness," he suggests, adding he believes the spiritual joy phenomena is similar to returning to our natural state, personalities uncluttered by social conventions, learned behaviour and other people's opinions.

"Science tries to explain it away in terms of phenomena but misses the marvellous actuality. It's not even unfamiliar - we started out there as children before we got sold on the view that we are really only what we appear to be to others."

Though Blight is an avid reader of scientific articles and research, he and other practitioners of "Satsang" - a term from the ancient language Sanskrit meaning "truth gathering" - contend the underlying nature of their experience is less important than the experience itself.

He says trying to explain consciousness via science's understanding of the brain is "a bit like trying to understand the plot of The Sopranos by studying the transistors in the TV set."

While this is true, the fact that science cannot explain consciousness does not suggest that we should accept the explanation of people like Blight. Rather, we should be content for the time being with our ignorance.

Blight is referring in part to the phenomenological tradition in philosophy¹¹². Many intellectual Mormons are taking this tack as well. That is, they take the position that all knowledge is uncertain; the experience in the moment is what is most important; if it feels right then the experience is self justifying, particularly if it causes one to obey Mormonism. This is a lot like the "testimonies are matters of the spirit not the intellect" approach Mormon leaders teach, and likely for this reason phenomenology has found a following in Mormon intellectual circles. This is considerable irony in this since phenomenology is a relativist idea. That is, it is generally used to say that there are many paths that are equally justifiable. And yet Mormons use it to defend themselves against science and other disciplines that question their beliefs, while for the most part still clinging to the idea that Mormonism is the most complete, or true, worldview on Earth.

I don't like this approach because its contradictory nature (as just noted) makes it impossible to apply consistently. It is generally used to selectively ignore evidence that contradicts literal Mormon beliefs while those beliefs continue to be held. Again, this is an immense irony – a philosophical concept that was designed to question the justification of beliefs is used to defend dogma.

If the phenomenologist approach is used consistently, then all knowledge must be treated as far more suspect than anyone I know treats it as a practical matter.

Another approach often seen in the New Age space is illustrated by the recent movie "What the Bleep Do We Know". It misuses concepts from quantum physics and elsewhere in aid of a New Age cult¹¹³.

Blight's colleague, Satsang teacher Peter Sumner, describes the transcendent meditative sensation - or absolute unitary state, in the scientific lingo - as being mentally uncluttered, free to reflect on the wonders of the world.

"The past and future now seem to have far less consequence for me and I'm finding that I tend to live more and more in the present moment," he says.

"When the outward institutions of government, science, medicine and religion fail to provide answers to questions like, 'Who am I?', 'What is the meaning of my life?' and 'What is really real?', then many former materialists wonder if the answers might be found in the neglected or overlooked spiritual dimension of life, and so they become spiritual seekers."

¹¹² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenomenology>.

¹¹³ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.what%20the%20bleep%20do%20we%20know.pdf> for my review.

How do we get from the admission that we don't understand how consciousness works to the conclusion that we are somehow connected to the most reliable knowledge of being by manipulating our consciousness? Newberg's explanation of how the feeling of unitary being is created reminds me of some drug induced states. Maybe the ancient shamans' technique of using peyote or other drugs to access what they thought of as the spiritual realm was the true way to ultimate being and consciousness. This has as much chance of being correct as deep meditation. Or what about the temporal lobe seizures that now seem likely responsible for some of humanity's most important religious revelations? These can be induced to a degree¹¹⁴, as the research of Michael Persinger and others indicates. Why don't we believe that this is the high road to ultimate reality and wisdom?

It is best to accept that we don't know what can't be tested. And my experience with Mormonism has demonstrated to my satisfaction the folly of assuming things that can't be proven to be real. One of my most important rules has become that I should give uncertainty her due, and be content with the mystery of not knowing. Humans are designed, it seems, to be overly certain. This has evolutionary utility. That is, it is often more useful from a survival and reproduction point of view to be certain and wrong than uncertain and right. I am surrounded by successful people in the business community who spend large amounts of time being certain, and wrong. As long as they are certain, put on a good enough show that people will follow them, and it is hard to prove them wrong, they seem to make out fine. Most successful religious leaders have a lot in common with the kind of business person or politician I have in mind.

And then Sumner follows the pattern of most faiths, attributing validity to his understanding of "inner truth" while pointing there's plenty with which he does not agree.

"Some of these will inevitably fall into the clutches of the new-age charlatans, but a growing number, I'm happy to say, are discovering and getting help from the new crop of genuine teachers of truth who have arisen in the West," he says.

Another regularity in the religious market place is that each leader will warn of charlatans while presenting himself as the honest Joe. Think of what happens when you go shopping for used cars. Have you ever wondered how every time you go out you have the amazing luck to end up in the only honest dealership in town? As Levine points out¹¹⁵, the sales techniques used by car salesmen, Cutco Knives etc. on the one hand and growth oriented religious organizations on the other have much more in common than most religious people think.

Achieving Meditative Bliss

We can argue about the roots of consciousness and its ties to spiritual joy and religion all we want. But that doesn't make it any less addictive, says Dr. Paul Martin.

Science terms belief in a behaviour that seems to work but hasn't been proven via proper study "practical fallacy." Martin, who heads the Wellspring Retreat for cult rehabilitation in Ohio, points out that while achieving the transcendent state may seem wonderful, it has serious downsides.

¹¹⁴ See <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.11/persinger.html> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/2003/godonbrain.shtml>

¹¹⁵ See "The Power of Persuasion" and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 81.

"That prolonged state of meditative bliss is, to make a long story short, something that can linger long after a person has repudiated the mindset of the group with which it was associated," says Martin. "In other words, even though they no longer support the individual through whom they acquired that sensation - whether it's a cult or just meditating - there can still be triggers that make them space off and go into a state of mindless bliss.

"Certain sights, sounds - sometimes even just getting worn down because of stress or a lack of sleep - all of these things can trigger this dissociative situation. There are certain procedures that are considered a hazard to mental health and should not be practised without the proper qualifications, and the mental dissociation that can occur with prolonged meditative bliss is one of those."

The conditioning that occurs during the Mormon temple ceremony and worthiness interviews is a bit like this. Mormons are required to bow so often to religious authority that this habit becomes hard to break. To this day, I find myself far more comfortable than I should be acceding to authority figures of different types. The Mormon experience produces a Pavlovian response to authority that is dissociative to a degree. "Bow your head and say yes" says the authority figure in the temple ceremony, and everyone does just that many times during each service. "You will answer these questions", says the authority figure performing the worthiness interview, and you do just that. This conditioning is hard to shake.

The literature referenced above relative to individuation, reforming attachments, breaking the co-dependency cycle, the stages of grief, etc. is all relevant to undoing the effects of conditioning of this type.

It can also be used unscrupulously, says Martin, pointing out people are extremely susceptible to suggestion while dissociative. Cult leaders use artificially devised punish-and-reward scenarios - often combined with informational and sense deprivation - to brainwash people into supporting them. The reward part can include reaching the bliss sensation, which allows the procedure to become self-perpetuating. The tie is strong enough that sometimes merely being in their guru or leader's presence or around something that reminds them of him will cause the brain to dissociate.

This comes close to describing the mechanics of my Mormon testimony experience¹¹⁶. Newberg says that a mild state of bliss – or absolute unitary being, as he labels it – can be induced by causing anxiety and relief to coincide. My testimony experience was induced by angst over not having a "testimony" when all of my friends said they had one and were committing to go on, or were leaving on, their Mormon missions. Relief was induced by my finally accepting that the Mormon Church "must be true". This amounted to a surrender to social pressure. Hence, the creation of extreme social pressure becomes its own proof of truth because the relief created by surrender to it causes bliss. The greater the angst one feels, the greater the relief upon surrender, and the greater the bliss. Hence, the "Saul to Paul" type of person should be expected to have the most powerful, blissful experience.

Every mainstream religion has tapped into the technique over the centuries, he says, either through direct meditation or through chanting, hymns and other mantra-like focusing techniques that can produce the same reaction, perhaps explaining why people

¹¹⁶ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> at page 77.

in evangelical church congregations see the same visions and have some of the same physical reactions as modern spiritualists.

"It boils down to agenda," says Martin. "With a cult, the flow of power is always towards the leader, and in a traditional religion, hopefully the flow of power is more evenly distributed towards the group."

There are important parallels between mainstream orthodox religions and cults, says Martin. In each, people become utterly subservient to the extent of giving up free will, in the hope of achieving a leader's "transcendent" state - whether that's explained by the leader or his supporters as going to heaven, knowing inner truth, being one with the universe, or other status elevating them to spiritual bliss.

Mormonism is not as bad a cult as many. If the Moonies are an 9 out of 10, Mormonism would be a 7 in my estimation. And Mormonism is less monolithic than the Moonies from what I can tell (that is, there is more diversity within Mormonism than within the Moonies). However, Mormonism will take as much as a person will give and will encourage her to give far more than is healthy, while being willing to accept lower levels of commitment than most hard core cults.

The key regarding religion is to determine who is using whom. If the religious institution or leader is using the believer, the relationship should be changed. I like the way Martin described this concept in terms of power flows. The question to ask is whether individual members are empowered by their relationship to the institution or leader, or whether the institution or leader is weakening individual members while aggrandizing themselves. Insiders are rarely able to see what is going on this regard.

The Matrix image of individual humans rendered unconscious so that their energy can be sucked out of them graphically illustrates the extreme of this concept. And Morpheus' crew is the opposing force – all about individual empowerment. The spectrum thus defined is worth bearing in mind, and so full of metaphor that it can be read in a wide variety of useful (as well as silly) ways.

"The mainstream evangelical orthodox groups are like movie directors who can't see the scene any other way," says Martin, who led a national orthodox Christian cult as a youth but whose program remains rooted in the Christian faith. "And now that I work with so many cult victims, I see that same scene, and I say, 'My God, I just don't see it that way anymore myself."

Mormonism uses these techniques as do most other religions. Another interesting form of group psychology exists in Mormon temples where the most faithful Mormons share a socially bizarre temple ceremony that amounts to an initiation rite¹¹⁷. Many studies have shown how enduring a painful initiation or paying a significant price of any kind to be part of a group increases commitment to the group. While the Mormon temple ceremony is not physically painful, it is so odd that few people who go through it could imagine their non-Mormon friends seeing it as sane. This makes it a bit of a dirty secret ("I actually do the things made fun of on the Simpsons – secret handshakes, bizarre costumes, etc."). This participation in a secret and socially odd ritual sets people apart and amounts to paying a price to be a group member. The group submission to authority, group movements and actions, long periods of silence, etc. in the

¹¹⁷ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/temple%20marriage.pdf> starting at page 20.

temple will produce a mild dissociative state – a connection to that “something greater” Newberg described – that many people find comforting.

"They're so shaped by a mindset that is so imbedded in their culture that it's just a warped, warped perspective."

The guru movement is only slightly different, with the addictive pursuit of spiritual elevation reflected by the faithful moving from one guru to another as each exhausts his or her credibility. Though they can change their minds and shed their faith, they can't shed their pursuit of bliss, he says.

"There's the sense of being a hamster on a treadmill. They're always thinking, 'Maybe tomorrow will be the day.' They become junkies, dependent on their beliefs."

Day 4: LATTER-DAY DEBATERS

The churches must learn humility as well as teach it. George Bernard Shaw

"Faith" means not wanting to know what is true. Friedrich Nietzsche

Prophet or Fraud? Views on Mormon Founder Joseph Smith are as different as black and white

Day 4 was mostly a summary of comments made by Bob White and me regarding various issues related to Mormonism. As I have noted regarding previous pieces in this series, I am impressed by the range of Loome's understanding of the spirituality question in general. He did another fine job here of outlining some of the important issues. Regrettably, as I will note below, he made some factual errors in his reporting of my interview that may diminish his credibility. However, these are minor in the overall context of what he was trying to say, though from a personal point of view they have caused me serious anguish. Such are the risks one takes when speaking with any reporter, even one as well-intentioned and talented as Jeremy Loome.

The important point of this piece is the way it illustrates what I expect will become an increasingly popular method of dealing with Mormonism's questionable historical foundation – the denial that Mormon history was ever suppressed. Bob's status as a General Authority, his intelligence and his regular contact with the Mormon hierarchy in Salt Lake City make it probable that the position Bob took when speaking with Jeremy Loome was at least informally sanctioned by Mormonism's highest leaders.

However, it is hard to imagine a more preposterous proposition than that the Mormon Church has not whitewashed its history, and does not continue to do so. This is akin to Baghdad Bob's¹¹⁸ vitriolic statements to the Iraqi media about the vile infidel being driven like dogs before Allah's wrath. As he spoke, Baghdad was falling to the US invasion and there is no reason to believe that he did not know this. His lies were propaganda designed to keep rank-and-file Iraqis marching in line. Truth is one of the first casualties in religious war as well.

I will also provide background information related to Bob that will put my comments in context. I expect Bob to read this and in one way or another respond to me, as has happened in several other similar situations. But since I have predicted this, he likely won't get back to me so that

¹¹⁸ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed_Saeed_al-Sahaf.

my prediction will be wrong. And since I have now predicted that, it is about a coin toss as to whether I will hear from him or not.

Bob White - Background

When Jeremy Loomer asked who he should speak with to get the Mormon Church's point of view for his series, I suggested that he call Salt Lake City and that he would likely be referred back to Bob White in Edmonton. It appears that I was correct.

Bob is a well-known Alberta trial lawyer who taught at the University of Alberta Law School while I was a student there in the early 1980s. The last I heard he was serving as a Mormon Area General Authority¹¹⁹. I had my "exit" interview with Bob¹²⁰. My Stake President, in consultation with Bob and other General Authorities in Salt Lake City, applied to me what I refer to as a "gag order". That is, they gave me the choice between agreeing to not speak of faith questioning matters (regardless of scholarly merit) to anyone outside my parents, siblings, spouse and children, or on the other hand, giving up my Mormon membership either voluntarily or through a visit to the ironically named "Court of Love"¹²¹. I have since found many other people in Canada and elsewhere to whom the gag order has been applied, or threatened.

While I did not take a course from Bob while in law school, he generously volunteered to teach a private "study skills" seminar to the LDS students in my class, and was friendly and helpful to us. I think that he was the silver medalist of his law class, and was well known for a hardball style of legal practise, cutting edge use of technology at his law firm, and his intelligence. He was at that time (circa 1982) an up and coming trial lawyer who had a young family and lots of LDS responsibilities. Taking an evening to meet with a few LDS first year law students would not have been easy. And the study skills seminar he presented was excellent. I used the concepts he taught us throughout my career as a law student, and have taught them myself to many people since then.

Bob was appointed Bishop of the student ward at the University of Alberta while I was still in Edmonton, and though I did not remain in touch with him I have been aware of his steady climb through the Mormon hierarchy. He was a Stake President well over a decade ago, and then became an Area General Authority.

While Bob was the Bishop of the Edmonton student ward, he was famous for the control he exercised over the student leadership within his ward and the statistical performance of the ward in general. For example, at the stake leadership meetings I attended in those days (I was a "Seventy" and "Stake Missionary"), each Bishop had to stand during each meeting and give a report as to the percentage of his ward leaders in attendance. As I recall, most wards were in the 50% range but in every meeting I can remember Bob stood up and said in his crisp, moderately detached way, something like "13 for 13. That's 100% President". I have heard many other stories about the discipline he exercised over the people in his Ward and Stake as

¹¹⁹ See footnote 2 above.

¹²⁰ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.resignation%20letter.pdf> at page 2.

¹²¹ Mormon leaders are apparently unfamiliar with George Orwell's "1984" - see <http://www.online-literature.com/orwell/1984/>. In the totalitarian society Orwell depicted, the "Ministry of Love" was responsible for espionage, torture and behaviour modification, among other things. In Chapter 7, Orwell tells us, "One did not know what happened inside the Ministry of Love, but it was possible to guess: tortures, drugs, delicate instruments that registered your nervous reactions, gradual wearing-down by sleeplessness and solitude and persistent questioning. Facts, at any rate, could not be kept hidden. They could be tracked down by enquiry, they could be squeezed out of you by torture."

well as young lawyers at his firm and his family. While I was still an active Mormon from time to time my friends in Edmonton and within the Mormon leadership cadre in Calgary told me that Bob, as Stake President and General Authority, was pushing some of the Mormon faithful to the near the breaking point.

Bob is very bright, well read, and pleasant company for the most part. He is one of the few people who raised concern regarding possible fraud in the Hoffman scandal¹²² well ahead of it being discovered. I think the others who publicly did this were the Tanners, but can't find the reference indicating that at the moment.

I will point out below the way in which Bob's comments as reported in the newspaper are consistent with his method of dealing with me and others I know he has attempted to persuade to remain connected to Mormonism, or at least keep their mouths shut after leaving the Mormon community. That is, though Bob is well read he does not hesitate to present a partial, misleading slice of the evidence if that will make his point of view more persuasive. Only if pressed will he acknowledge the existence of other sources of information that question his point of view, and will then attempt to cast doubt on that information. This is consistent with the "faithful history" policy, as described below. Honesty and fair dealing should not be expected of Mormon leaders in this regard, and this has long been the case.

"Faithful History"

Bob's position regarding the "faithful history"¹²³ aspect of Mormonism is to be expected of Mormon leaders. "Faithful history" is the belief that the only history that it is permissible to teach about the Mormon Church is that which will support the faithful of the average Mormon. So, if the most likely version of events is likely to cause some Mormons to question their need to continue to obey the Mormon leadership, the disturbing evidence should be suppressed or given the gloss necessary to support past and current Mormon authority.

Consider Joseph Smith's death. The most likely version of events is that Smith died in a gun battle during which several men who attacked him were also killed. This attack was likely the result in large measure of facts like Smith's decade long career of lying about his outrageous sexual activities, his destruction of a newspaper printing press while attempting to slow down the rate at which the public heard what he had been up to, his involvement in vigilante style violence committed by the Mormon paramilitary, and his secret ordination as "King of the Earth". The "faithful history" version of this story, which is the only one I heard until age 44 and one that I told countless times as a Mormon missionary and leader, is that Smith "went like a lamb to the slaughter"; that he was a defenseless prisoner at Carthage Jail on trumped up charges, and was killed in cold blood by a drunken mob who were motivated by nothing more than the forces of Satan himself that were attempting to derail God's only true church on the face of the Earth.

Virtually all of Mormonism's foundational events have a "faith" and realistic version. Mormons generally have between little and no idea regarding the history of their religion while having been taught that they are well informed. I say this illustrated a few days ago when I was with a family member and told him that Gordon Hinckley has been distancing himself for years from basic Mormon ideas like "As man is, God once was; As God is, man may become". He did not believe me, and so we looked up some of the various public interviews Hinckley has given along

¹²² See <http://www.utlm.org/newsletters/no60.htm>.

¹²³ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/come%20clean.pdf>.

these lines.¹²⁴ After some reading, this graduate level university student just shook his head, and noted that he still hears this idea taught as rock solid Mormon doctrine all the time. How is it possible, he wondered, that he had not heard about these things. We then started to talk about the power of denial, and how effectively the human mind screens information that would either threaten an important social group or the individual's place in it.¹²⁵

Faithful history casts a pall over Mormonism and the trustworthiness of Mormon leaders. Michael Quinn summarized of Smith's approach to morality in general and honesty in particular as follows¹²⁶:

"Smith remained aloof from civil office, but in November 1835 he announced a doctrine I [Quinn] call 'theocratic ethics'. He used this theology to justify his violation of Ohio's marriage laws by performing a marriage for Newel Knight and the undivorced Lydia Goldthwaithe without legal authority to do so... In addition to the bigamous character of this marriage, Smith had no license to perform marriages in Ohio.

Although that was the first statement of this concept, Smith and his associates put that theology into practice long before 1835, and long after. Two months later Smith performed marriage ceremonies for which neither he nor the couples had marriage licenses, and he issued marriage certificates "agreeable to the rules and regulations of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." Theocratic ethics justified LDS leaders and (by extension) regular Mormons in actions which were contrary to conventional ethics and sometimes in violation of criminal laws.

This ethical independence is essential for understanding certain seemingly inconsistent manifestations in Mormonism. Some had already occurred - reversals in doctrine and divinely revealed procedures, and the publication of unannounced changes in written revelations and historical texts. The Knight marriage was a public example of Joseph Smith's violation of laws and cultural norms regarding marriage and sexual behavior - the performance of civil marriages by legally unauthorized officiators, monogamous marriage ceremonies in which one or both partners were undivorced from legal spouses, polygamous marriage of a man with more than one living wife, his marriage proposals to females as young as twelve, his sexual relationships with polygamous wives as young as fourteen, polyandry of women with more than one husband, marriage and cohabitation with foster daughters, and Mormon marriages of first cousins, brother-sister, and uncle-niece. Other manifestations of Mormonism's theocratic ethics would soon begin in Kirkland and continue intermittently for decades - the official denials of actual events, the alternating condemnation and tolerance for counterfeiting and stealing from non-Mormons, threats and physical attacks against dissenters or other alleged enemies, the killing and castration of sex offenders, the killing of anti-Mormons, the bribery of government officials, and business ethics at odds with church standards."

And this was near the beginning of Mormon leadership lying. Carmon Hardy, a history professor at Cal State Fullerton who left BYU as a result of the road blocks that were put in his way there from a scholarly point of view as he attempted to study the history of Mormon polygamy, has written extensively about the tendency of the Mormon leadership to misrepresent both history and current reality in order to preserve their influence¹²⁷. Hardy notes the scholarly

¹²⁴ See http://www.i4m.com/think/leaders/god_was_man.htm for example.

¹²⁵ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>.

¹²⁶ See "The Mormon Hierarchy – The Origins of Power", at page 88.

¹²⁷ See <http://www.mormonalliance.org/casereports/volume3/part4/v3p4c21.htm> and http://www.mormonismi.net/pdf/lying_for_the_lord.pdf.

consensus with respect to some of the most damning facts, from my point of view, with respect to Smith and the Mormon leadership's deceptive ways. Michael Quinn's two books respecting the development of the Mormon hierarchy¹²⁸ are among the best scholarly sources of information in this regard.

During the last several decades, faithful history has morphed in to the careful suppression of information. And as is so often the case, the fundamentalist Mormons behave in similar, but more extreme fashion. This is worth mentioning since it often helps Mormons to recognize the reality, and dysfunctional nature, of their own behaviour when they see it in others.

In a recent Canadian news story involving the prosecution of Warren Jeffs, the leader of the FLDS Church¹²⁹, the Attorneys General of Utah and British Columbia (Mark Shurtleff and Wally Oppal) were discussing the difficulties of dealing with the FLDS community. At one point, the article quotes them as follows:

"The AGs talked about the difficulty of getting witnesses to come forward when they have been taught since birth that outsiders are evil and that it is okay to lie to police, lawyers, judges and attorneys-general. ... However, even forcing people to testify is no guarantee of prosecution, said Shurtleff, who describes trying to prosecute polygamists as "the most difficult cases you're every going to try. The FLDS, I tried to trust them," he said in a later interview. "But they are liars. They're taught it's okay to lie to people like me because we are monsters."

The FLDS learned this behaviour from the same early Mormon leaders who taught it to the mainstream Mormons. It comes down to what is most important. Most people justify deception when something important is pitted against something unimportant, or even worse, evil. For example, few people think twice about telling a person that she "looks nice today" when that is what she needs to hear, even if it is not true. And most people think that it is OK to lie if the Gestapo asks if Jews are hiding in your house. Asking an FLDS person for any information that might be used to take apart their polygamous system is the same kind of thing. Expect to be lied to.

So, the FLDS have been conditioned to believe that all law enforcement agencies are like the Gestapo, and that lying to them in order to protect the FLDS way of life is a virtue. Mainstream Mormons engaged in precisely this behaviour during the late 1800s and early 1900s while polygamy was being taken from them by the US Feds. When the LDS Church finally gave up its fight to keep polygamy that, as documented by Carmon Hardy¹³⁰ and others, resulted in over a decade of consistent lying by Mormon leaders, groups like the FLDS formed to continue the fight to keep polygamy, and so they continued lying.

The mainstream Mormon faithful history policy is a shadow of the more aggressive lying the FLDS still display, but is caused by the same dynamic. Mormon leaders believe that the protection of the myths related to Joseph Smith and early Mormon history is essential to the continued strength of the mainstream Mormon church. They don't lie as aggressively as the FLDS because this will be found out and will hurt them in other ways. The historical information

¹²⁸ See "The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power"; and "The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power".

¹²⁹ Daphne Bramham, Vancouver Sun, February 1, 2006, at <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/news/sports/story.html?id=9ea03a08-a951-4bf6-8c0c-8cf25f9ab2a7&p=2>.

¹³⁰ See <http://www.mormonalliance.org/casereports/volume3/part4/v3p4c21.htm> and http://www.mormonismi.net/pdf/lying_for_the_lord.pdf.

is out there, and this can't be changed. So, they have set up the system described below. Mormons are discouraged in as many ways possible from becoming familiar with information that would threaten their faith, and when they do become familiar with it and complain that they have been duped, they are told it is their fault that they did not find the information before. After all, it has been available the whole time.

Since it often helps to look at situations other than our own while grasping a principle, let's return to John de Ruiter. I referred above to three links that described different aspects of his character¹³¹.

Which of the stories in those links above do you think is most useful to people like those whose daughters have become sexually involved with de Ruiter or who have otherwise ended up under his influence – the story as presented by the de Ruiter organization, or that presented by the media?

If you are a faithful Mormon, how would you counsel people who are in de Ruiter's thrall? Assume they have personally felt his power and goodness. How could you explain that to them? How would you deal with their testimony that de Ruiter is God's agent, and that they have personal knowledge of this as a result of their feelings while dealing with him – that God has testified this to them through their own undeniable experience?

Imagine yourself going forward two hundred years and finding that the John de Ruiter organization has grown to many millions. Would you think it fair to those who base their most important life's decisions on the words of John de Ruiter if all information of the type described in the Globalserve article referenced above had been suppressed by then? Would it smear or somehow be unfair to the memory of John de Ruiter if people were made aware of his beliefs and practices regarding sexuality, if those had been expunged from the record? Would suppression of that information not create a misleading picture of the man whom many revere and near blindly follow? Would, perhaps, a more full understanding of how de Ruiter lived, how he made his decisions, how he treated his wife and other women in his life, etc. not place his words in a context essential to their understanding?

And most importantly, what if de Ruiter had lied for many years about his affairs with various women before finally going public with that story just as it was leaking out in any event, and then explained that he had lied because God commanded him to do so? Should that not make us legitimately wonder what else he had lied about because God had told him to? Should we trust such a man if he told us that God had revealed many things to him that required us to give up our time, money, daughters, wife, etc. to him (de Ruiter, on behalf of God)?

And since I have just described what Joseph Smith did, why should he be treated in a fashion different than de Ruiter?

Many who have felt the charisma of de Ruiter's presence trust him completely. As noted above, I have met two of them. When they speak of de Ruiter they remind me of Mormons talking of the certainty their feelings produce in them of the divine nature of Joseph Smith's calling and Gordon Hinckley's current authority. I also received a few days ago an email from one of Jim Jones¹³² former sons-in-law who describes Jones' influence in near identical terms. And the

¹³¹ See <http://www.globalserve.net/~sarlo/Yjohn.htm>, <http://www.rickcross.com/groups/ruiter.html> and <http://www.johnderuiter.com/>.

¹³² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Jones.

transcript of the tape left by the Jonestowners while they committed suicide is one of the most chilling things I have ever read¹³³. It is a Mormon style testimony meeting during which Jones is lauded as are Smith and Hinckley in Mormon meetings. It seems clear that these feelings of certain belief have nothing to do with truth.

As noted above, people like de Ruiter and Smith will appeal to only a small percentage of the population, but that is all it takes to build a large following. And once the following reaches a certain size, social psychological phenomena like the “social proof” and authority bias¹³⁴ take over, the group becomes a viable social organism and can travel in a short time far from the moorings its charismatic leader established for it¹³⁵.

For a great example of cognitive dissonance¹³⁶ read the FAIR thread¹³⁷ on which this analogy was discussed and see how faithful Mormons dealt with it there.

Bob White's Place in Faithful History

Bob White joined Mormonism as a young adult and says that he was fully apprised of the “contra” position before he joined. Numerous times while attempting to counsel me and a couple of other people who have told me they dealt with him in a similar situation, he has taken the position that it was our fault that we did not know the “real” story about Mormon history. A little context is necessary to understand this point.

From near Mormonism’s beginnings there have been critics, including former members (labelled “apostates” by the Mormon community) who have attempted to bring to light Mormonism’s flaws. This is to be expected for a number of reasons. First, Joseph Smith and the other Mormon leaders were lying about a lot of things, having sex outside of legal marriage under the secret guise of polygamy, and engaging in variety of other behaviours that should be expected to scandalize many of those who found out about it, and enrage those who were harmed. And, Mormonism grew rapidly in a few places and so threatened the earlier settlers. Even in the most benign situation, imagine how the residents of a relatively small city would react if it were suddenly declared the worldwide headquarters for the Moonies, and within a short time Moonies were in the majority and hence poised to take over political and other power structures.

So, from near the beginning of their history Mormons were accustomed to dealing with critics, some of them with inside information that was likely reliable to a large degree. And so the Mormon organism developed defence mechanisms early on.

For example¹³⁸, a young woman gave an affidavit indicating that when she arrived in Nauvoo and was immediately propositioned by Brigham Young, and then Joseph Smith took her aside and told her that if Brigham was too old for her or otherwise did not suit her, that Joseph would take her. She was pressured by both of them to commit to be what amounted to being a secret mistress before leaving or speaking about it with anyone. She quickly passed being overawed in the presence of God’s own anointed, to being confused, terrified and then disgusted. She refused to accept this bizarre proposition, and went back to her parents home in a state of

¹³³ See <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Tapes/Tapes/DeathTape/death.html>.

¹³⁴ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 65 and following.

¹³⁵ See Stephen Prothero, “American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon” for example.

¹³⁶ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 51 and following.

¹³⁷ See <http://www.fairboards.org/index.php?showtopic=14328&st=0&hl=de+ruiter>.

¹³⁸ See Arza Evans, “The Keystone of Mormonism”.

panic. Shortly thereafter she left Nauvoo, returned to England and eventually gave the affidavit noted above.

Mormon leaders responded by publishing affidavits of their own that attacked her character. She, it was said, threw herself at Brigham and Joseph and they refused her advances. Given how little was known at the time of their sexual practises, this would have been a persuasive defence in most quarters. It isn't now. They were sexual predators who used their position to divide the sexual spoils of Mormon leadership. An attractive, unattached young woman moving into Nauvoo would have been a prime target. When she resisted, and then went public on them, they had little choice but to do what they could to destroy her credibility and hence her character.

The Mormon affidavits were issued by people who probably did not know what was going on, and so honestly stated their opinion. And they were encouraged to be issued, and allowed to stand, by the few Mormon leaders who did know the truth of the matter.

Books by people like Alexander Campbell¹³⁹, Eber Howe¹⁴⁰ and John Bennett¹⁴¹ also attempted to debunk the Mormon story within a few years of its origin, relying on affidavit and personal evidence. So, Mormons have been well versed from near the beginning of their history in dealing with this kind of thing. This includes warning Mormons to stay away from those who are critical of Mormonism. These warnings include the following:

There are official denunciations of “apostates” in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine & Covenants, including some gruesome stories about how God punishes them and those who follow them.

The Mormon temple ceremony contains a covenant to avoid “evil speaking of the Lord’s anointed”, which is generally interpreted to mean avoiding hearing as well as saying things that question the validity, wisdom, etc. of Mormonism’s local or general leadership, past, present or future. That is, if a Mormon hears someone else starting to question Mormon authority, the right thing to do is attempt to shut the conversation down, and if that is not possible, leave.

The interview through which one must pass to get a temple recommend contains the following question: “Do you affiliate with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or do you sympathize with the precepts of any such group or individual?”¹⁴².

And finally, we have the so-called “faithful history” policy itself, articulated by Boyd Packer in the late 1970s to prevent scholarly teaching or writing about Mormon history. As noted above, Packer and others took the position that only aspects of Mormon history that would strengthen the faith of the average Mormon should be taught by Mormon educators. He referred to faith threatening information, regardless of its accuracy, as “cancers” and those who teach it as cancer spreading agents¹⁴³.

¹³⁹ See <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/tme/TME00A.HTM> and <http://lds-mormon.com/campbell.shtml>.

¹⁴⁰ See http://www.saintswithouthalos.com/b/howe_ed.phtml

¹⁴¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_C._Bennett.

¹⁴² See <http://lds-mormon.com/veilworker/recommend.shtml>.

¹⁴³ See <http://www.xmission.com/~country/reason/mantle.htm> and Michael Quinn’s response <http://www.xmission.com/~country/reason/mormhist.htm> which eventually led to his excommunication.

“Faithful history” was picking up steam while I was on my mission. When I returned home I entered the University of Alberta and became involved in the LDS Institute program there. I was the LDS Student Association President for a two year term, and so dealt extensively with Dale LeBaron, the Institute Director, and other institute instructors. Their message was clear – stay away from anything that questions Mormonism. It has all been dealt with before anyway. There is no upside in it. And, don’t bother with things like anthropology and sociology. They are so uncertain that their academic utility is questionable. And they are fertile ground for deceptive, testimony questioning material. Life is short. You have many other better ways to spend your precious educational time, like taking Institute courses.

I was a typical, naïve Mormon. I had been through two temple recommend interviews by that time and had been impressed during each with the question about whether I sympathized with “apostates”. I did not know any; had never seen any literature that questioned Mormonism; etc. So this question stood out to me as odd. “How many Mormons know, let alone sympathize with, apostates?” I wondered. “This must be a Utah thing” was the explanation I finally settled on.

I had been through the temple and promised not to question Mormon authority and to avoid “speaking evil” of Mormon leaders. I had been raised on the Book of Mormon stories of the evil Korihor, the D&C stories of people who questioned Joseph’s authority and later humbly repented, and other stories like how Joseph nailed someone who questioned his authority by saying this was a sign of adultery (something I had no idea Joseph knew so much about), and then having that immediately confirmed by someone else who jumped up and said that it was true – the man who questioned Joseph was an adulterer!

With all this in mind, when my Institute instructors – whom I had been raised to revere – told me that I should stay away from any literature that questioned Mormonism, I did not raise an eyebrow. I agreed with them. And when they suggested that some streams of academia questioned Mormonism and hence should be avoided, that was another easy sell. I was a first year university student; they had PhDs and were really nice people whom I had been taught were utterly trustworthy. I was going to question them? Well, I did question one thing. One of them was adamant that sex was only for procreation, and that hence the only permissible birth control was the “rhythm method”. This didn’t make sense to me. Years later this man went to jail for sexual molesting foster children that were in his home. But I digress.

The entire Mormon system when I was growing up was geared toward discouraging people like me, as strongly as possible, from reading anything that questioned our Mormon beliefs. For many Mormons, it still works like this.

Fast forward 20+ years.

I have married in a Mormon temple.

My wife and I have had seven children.

We have both dedicated our lives to Mormonism.

One of my moments of clarity as I was beginning to awaken came when I read these documents back to back and realized that Quinn made far more sense than Packer, who at that time I revered as an Apostle. I had never heard of Quinn at that time, in mid-2002 at age 44.

We decided where to live; what I would do for a living; when and how many children to have; that my wife would not work; etc. all primarily on the basis of what would be best from a Mormon perspective, and how we could be of most use to God and “service in the Kingdom”.

My minor was religious studies at university, but I concentrated on things like biblical studies (of course the New and Old Testaments are full of scribal errors!) and how Eastern religions work (isn't it amazing how the light of Christ, in a weak way, is present in all cultures!). And I avoided the sociology of religion and anthropology as per my Institute instructors advice. Toxic waste, that.

My faithful behaviour caused Bob Gimlich, who at the time was a member of the Edmonton Stake Presidency and hence both Bob White and my Mormon file leader, to tell me at about the time I entered law school that he was sure that I would be a bishop shortly after graduation. He told me that he was not prophesying, but rather noting the obvious. The kind of person I was – dedicated to Mormonism; willing to sacrifice my time, talent etc. to Mormonism; on my way to being a well-educated professional; etc. – made it easy to predict what would happen as long as I remained faithful. And so it was.

I was told by Jon Tollestrup, the Stake President who called me as Bishop just after I turned 31, that my wife and I were an exemplary young Mormon couple for the same reasons Gimlich had indicated, and that was why I was being called as Bishop. He told me that exemplary Mormons were put in this position to model the kind of faithful behaviour within marriage, family and community that Mormonism's highest leaders want to spread. He also told me that it was God's will that I renege on a job offer in another city that I had already accepted and ask for my old job back (I had resigned two days prior) so that I could accept the calling of Bishop he extended to me. He promised me that my wife, who was teetering on the edge of a nervous breakdown at the time as well as suffering from some medical problems, and I would be strengthened if we sacrificed to do God's will. We accepted the calling, and I believe are still paying a personal and family price for having done so.

While Bishop I was forced to confront “The Godmakers” (in video format), the only piece of anti-Mormon literature I would see until my mid-40s. I found what I saw of it unpersuasive. “Mormons teach that man should become God!” Yup. “The Book of Mormon teaches that polygamy is condemned of God, but Mormons practised it!” Scripture taken out of context. “Thousands of changes were made to the Book of Mormon after it was published!” Joseph had scribes too, and the Church was just going back and correcting their errors to conform with the pure truth that fell from Joseph's lips as he dictated (boy, was I off on that one). I lost interest at this point, told the ward member not to worry about it, and suggested that she read some Hugh Nibley. He had become my guiding academic light. I had over a dozen of his books. “Start with ‘No Maam, That Ain't History’ and ‘Sounding Brass’ – they will save you a lot of time with anti-Mormon garbage”, I said.

And then at age 44, after having had some time to decompress after being released as Bishop, I discovered real Mormon history and the sociology of religion. It took three weeks from start to finish for my Mormon testimony to disappear.

In that context, I met my old friend Bob White for the first time in 20 years. And he had the gall to tell me that I was foolish to obey the Mormon leaders who taught (and still teach) that I should avoid any material that questions Mormon authority. He said that it was weak – foolish – of me to obey as I did.

This reversal of field worsens an already egregious breach of trust. And to make matters worse still, Bob then said (through my Stake President) that now that I had this information, I must either keep my mouth shut about it, or be forced out of the community that was the only one I have ever known, as well as facing possible divorce and rupture of important family and social relationships.

When you add this up, it amounts to a staggering abuse of trust. I am one of countless people who have been abused in this way.

Bob White's Interview Techniques

During my interview with Bob, his main technique seemed to be to attempt to find out what I believed, and hence how sophisticated his responses to me needed to be, and then only advance to the level of sophistication required to deal with me. If I was ignorant and would swallow the kind of simple story he told Loomer, I believe that is what he would have told me. That way, he would not be responsible for educating me with regard to issues of which I was not already aware. The purpose of the process is not to educate, but to persuade.

My wife and Stake President were present while Bob and I spoke to each other. Neither of them had much prior information with regard to the issues Bob and I discussed for well over an hour. In my wife's case this was due to the fact that she had refused up to that point to read anything I asked her to read about Mormonism. In the Stake President's case (another friend for over 20 years), I suspect that the reasons for his ignorance were similar to mine, as indicated above. He has two university degrees, is a successful executive and an exceptionally pleasant person. So Bob White and I played ping pong while they watched and listened.

One of the themes Bob returned to several times during this interview was how well his family was doing and how much I owed Mormonism for my wonderful family. He implied and may have stated (I can't now recall) that were we to leave Mormonism our family would likely suffer. This frightened my wife, as should be expected. Mormons play this fear card in countless situations¹⁴⁴.

Since our departure from Mormonism my wife has noted numerous times how surprised she is that she and our family have not changed except in ways we both welcome. I have not kept track of Bob's family, but will not be surprised to hear as time passes of a toll taken by being required to live a tightly wound life, to keep up appearances, etc. while suffering in ways that only the subconscious registers. This is likely a contributing factor to Utah's nation leading anti-depressant consumption rate.

With that preview, we return to Loomer's article.

Prophet or Fraud?

Bob McCue and Bob White are two sides of the same coin, perfectly illustrating how one faith can appeal to some and drive others away.

McCue is a lawyer from Calgary. White is a lawyer from Edmonton. McCue was raised a Mormon, but left the faith as an adult after deciding it was founded by a fraud. White

¹⁴⁴ See (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf> at page 34.

joined the Mormon faith as an adult, deciding it could only have been founded by a prophet. They've seen the same facts, the same history, the same challenges to it. One believes, one doesn't. Such is the power of belief.

My Reasons for a Change of Perspective

"I've always said that it felt like a vice was taken off my head when I got out of the church," says McCue, who rose to become a stake president and bishop in Mormonism, also known as the Latter-day Saints church. "It's kind of like a friend of mine, a kid who lived in Utah. When he was in Grade 10, his mom told him he had size 11 feet and he started wearing his older brother's shoes. And he'd worn size 11 ever since."

Here I will start correcting errors. I was a Stake Mission President, not a Stake President.

"At age 40, someone in a shoe store said, 'Let's measure your feet, because they don't look size 11 to me.' He tried on size 12 shoes and he couldn't believe it. His feet had been aching his whole life and he just thought that was normal. For me, being a Mormon was the same thing. I got out and all of a sudden everything started making sense."

Although he was always a critical thinker, his family ties to the faith - his great grandfather is a revered pioneer, his father a noted Mormon historian - kept him from exploring literature written by outsiders about the church.

My father was an historian who happened to be Mormon, not a "noted Mormon historian". And, I did not say that my "family ties to the faith" kept me from exploring issues outside of Mormonism. Many people with similar family ties explore the periphery of Mormonism. It was obedience to Mormon authority that kept me from exploring. In fact, after returning from my mission as an ultra-orthodox Mormon, I ignored some advice that my parents gave me because it was not orthodox enough for my taste. This illustrates the transfer of allegiance from family and other intimate relationships to the Mormon institution that it systematically cultivates¹⁴⁵.

But in his early 40s he found himself depressed and unsatisfied. The church was no longer offering all of the answers he needed, "so I began to break the Mormon rule that everything not supportive of the Mormon faith should be avoided."

See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.most%20common%20questions.pdf> at page 7 for background re. the "depressed and unsatisfied" comment. This was the effect of cognitive dissonance, I believe. Depression is often a signal that something basic is wrong with our lives. Medicating depression hence sometimes puts off dealing with problems that should be addressed. Utah's national leading use of anti-depressants is telling in this regard.

Among the charges levelled against church founder Joseph Smith by mainstream historians is an 1826 document indicating he was convicted of impostorism for suggesting he could use "scrying stones" to find treasure on a man's property. Smith later used "scrying stones" to allegedly find the gold plates that contained the Book of Mormon, the underpinning of the faith, which claims Jesus visited the Americas in the seventh century and proclaimed a new gospel.

¹⁴⁵ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.the%20creation%20and%20erosion%20of%20false%20faith%20-%20a%20timeline.pdf> for my attempt to understand this odd path with the benefit of hindsight.

Joseph Smith did not use his scrying stone to find golden plates, but rather used the stone to “translate” the plates once found. “Translate” in this case means to look into a hat with the stone at its bottom and dictate the words Smith said appeared in the stone. The golden plates were not involved. And most Mormons will likely say that the Gospel Christ presented in America was the same as presented in the Old World the stated purpose of the Book of Mormon is to act as a second testament of Christ.

Mormon historians labelled the first such reference to a conviction a fraud and said a later confirmation left open the possibility that Smith was deceived by a man who hired him as a labourer but just didn't want to pay. They note that a further 30 criminal charges against Smith came after he founded the religion and was being persecuted.

Loome did not deal with the mainstream historian position on this point, nor does he reference the recently discovered court documents that confirm the historicity of the hearings related to Joseph Smith's “glass looking” legal woes¹⁴⁶.

Mainstream historians point to the fact that there are massive inconsistencies between the Hebrews in Smith's book who supposedly moved to America in ancient times and those modern history recognizes - including a complete absence of their most important ceremonies, along with linguistic and descriptive errors one wouldn't expect of a document handed down from an angel, as Smith claimed. They also note that Smith's entire story -- right up to finding the plates buried in a hillside - is consistent with many myths of the day.

It all became too incredible for McCue to believe, particularly when considering that throughout his life, Smith was sued for failed financial ventures, painting an pattern of deception not unlike a modern-day con man. He was also a polygamist while preaching faith to a single wife to his supporters. To historians, he repeatedly denied having multiple wives and sex partners for a decade. To Mormons, he was either not a polygamist or held back the information until supporters were ready to accept it as a tenet of the faith. The church has since outlawed the practice.

"I saw a pattern of Mormon leadership deception going back to Mormonism's beginnings with Joseph Smith, and was physically ill for months as I adjusted to this reality," says McCue. "The suppressed aspects of Mormon history that most troubled me indicated many instances in which Mormon leaders deceived their followers and the public about important matters. Joseph Smith was the worst in this regard. His tendency to deceive when in a tight spot bears a striking resemblance to the habits of shady stock promoters I have met in my legal practice."

See <http://www.thechurchisnottrue.com/> for text and audio related to the “trustworthiness” issue.

¹⁴⁶ 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. 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.

Bob White's Response

Robert White has not been swayed by such arguments. He says even if Smith did commit offences as a young man, the underlying quality and content of the Book of Mormon makes a non-spiritual explanation impossible. "It was beyond the capacity of his education, not only in its length but in the complexity and consistency of its theology," says White. "Either it was translated as described or it's a fake. And it isn't a fake - I know that's easy to say, but that's a conclusion I've reached after thousands of hours of study and thoughtful consideration. Joseph Smith's level of literacy would be inadequate and the storyline is so complex that no one at that time could've written it."

White concedes Smith's wife was highly literate and present when most of the book was written but counters that she also testified to her children later in life to its validity. Although he concedes she also could have been lying, White says it begs belief: why would a con man have spent three years writing a never-ending source of admonition to do right? No evil man could ever have written this book.

If someone else had helped write the book, "why didn't they publish it? Where have they been all this time? How come no one ever seems to have seen or heard a record of it?"

Classic Mormon Apologetic Tactics – A Review of Bob White's Comments

This is classic Mormon apologetics, and as a result of my experience with him, I would say that it is classic Bob White. In reading what he has to say, we should remember that Bob's grasp of the scholarly literature that questions Mormonism is somewhere between good and excellent and that he likely took advice as to how he should proceed from other Mormon leaders in Salt Lake City. The man is not speaking from ignorance, but rather is carefully selecting arguments that are most likely to persuade the Mormon audience that will read this newspaper piece and be disturbed by it. So rather than deal with the strongest arguments against the Book of Mormon, he sets up straw men of the kind for which Gordon Hinckley is notorious¹⁴⁷. This is a debating trick designed to take in those who don't know better, or who have social and other needs to believe and hence are susceptible to manipulation.

So, let's deal with the questions Bob addresses in a realistic fashion. Before doing so I note that I was misquoted and Bob may have been as well. Since I can't guess at what he might have said, and since these quotes are consistent with my experience with Bob, I will assume for purposes of my analysis that Bob's statements are accurately reproduced and not taken out of context. He may correct the record if he disagrees.

"... even if Smith did commit offences as a young man, the underlying quality and content of the Book of Mormon makes a non-spiritual explanation impossible."

This is preposterous. The scholars who study the Book of Mormon would laugh at this assertion, and Bob White knows this. They put spiritual explanations for the Book of Mormon on par with spiritual explanations for alien abductions, the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Iliad.

However, we should note that many of those we believe the Koran to be God's literal word would see something similar about it. The same is true of the New and Old Testaments,

¹⁴⁷ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.should%20i%20join1004226v2.pdf> at page 27.

which have both been convincingly shown to be full of additions made by likely well intended people who wanted to influence belief along the “right” lines. Or how about the “revelations” received by Seventh Day Adventist founder Ellen White, many of which have recently been found to be plagiarized from other writings? Those familiar with each of these sources would not rate the Book of Mormon as their scriptural superior. And we do a pattern of similar behaviour among each group of believers.

Statements like Bob’s are made by believers in every religious tradition about their foundational documents and beliefs. The intensity of their belief results from their relationship to a particular social group that sponsors the belief. Truth has almost nothing to do with these feelings and beliefs, or the willingness of people like Bob to express them. And, as we will see, there are many plausible alternative explanations for the Book of Mormon.

I have heard Bob deal with the arguments against the Book of Mormon’s literal accuracy, acknowledge their force, indicate that the evidence both for and against the Book of Mormon is uncertain, and indicate that ultimately this is a matter of faith, not reason. That was his ultimate defence after laying out his rationale arguments and finding that they were easily countered.

The best explanation for Bob’s assertion to Loomer that all rational explanations for the Book of Mormon are impossible is that he is consciously making a statement that he thinks will be persuasive to his intended audience – the Mormon faithful who will read this newspaper story – even though he knows this statement is at least misleading if not false. He did not take this position in our private meeting, and I can’t imagine that he would take in now were we to meet again.

We are here listening here to the lawyer Bob White presenting a case in the most persuasive fashion possible rather than someone who is trying to present a balanced view of the evidence. This reminds me of one of the things that I found most difficult to bear as I left Mormonism.

I naively believed that Mormonism’s highest value was the pursuit of truth, as countless Mormon leaders from Joseph Smith on have said. Hence, I believed that if there was a problem with Mormonism in the sense that some Mormon belief was out of line with the truth (like black people cannot have the priesthood) that my Mormon leaders would be the ones to point it out and fix it.

So, I believed that people like Bob White were to be trusted completely. He was my religious leader. And, he was a well educated, successful professional. I would believe anything he told me as long as it was sensible within the context of the information available to me. When others like him told me that I should not read books that questioned Mormonism, I believed them and obeyed. I had been taught that people in his position would never lead me astray. This is a basic Mormon belief – that the leaders of the Church will not be permitted by God to lead it astray. God would cause them to die before he would allow that to happen.

When I found essays written by Dallin Oaks (another lawyer) and Boyd Packer, both Mormon apostles, indicating that it was the duty of Mormon leaders to present only one side of the story – the side favourable to Mormonism – I felt ill¹⁴⁸. This is “faithful history” again. And Bob White’s statements in this news article continue this sorry chapter in Mormon history.

¹⁴⁸ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/come%20clean.pdf> at page 2.

"It was beyond the capacity of his education, not only in its length but in the complexity and consistency of its theology."

First, several significant books with which I know Bob White is familiar have been written in support of the thesis Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon. Dan Vogel's is one of the most recent¹⁴⁹. Deceased Mormon General Authority B.H. Roberts, one of Mormonism's leading scholars, is on record as indicating that he thought Smith wrote the book¹⁵⁰.

It is also possible, but in my view highly improbable, that the Book of Mormon came to Smith in the kind of flood of seeming inspiration that is sometimes called "automatic writing"¹⁵¹. The least likely theory as to how the Book of Mormon came to be is the one Mormons accept – that an angel disclosed the plates, Smith translated them, the angel later took the plates away, etc.

Mormon theology is notoriously confused, likely as a result of the haphazard way Smith and others threw it together in a short time. And the Book of Mormon is more confused still. A good part of Mormonism's theological problems result from Smith and others' deviation from what the Book of Mormon has to say. However, the Book of Mormon is remarkably consistent with Sidney Rigdon's beliefs. This supports the theory that Rigdon was involved in its production¹⁵².

Bob also ignores the possibility of collusion in writing the book. Cowdery and/or Rigdon (as noted above) are likely authorial candidates. In my view, this (or something like it) is the theory most likely to explain how the Book of Mormon came into being.

Bob does not mention the possibility that Smith was a "pious fraud", which is the leading scholarly candidate as to how Mormonism started. I know Bob is familiar with this theory because I have discussed it with him. He has read Dan Vogel, and hence is familiar with at least one of the most sophisticated versions of this theory. But it suites Bob's purpose to present a straw man position because it will appeal to the Mormons who read his comments.

I outlined the pious fraud argument to Loomer, but he had so much material to cover that it did not make the cut. And this is precisely the kind of issue that Bob, in my experience, tends not to address until it is put to him. As noted above, his method of argument when I met with him was to attempt to find out what I believed, and hence how sophisticated his responses to me needed to be, and then only advance to the level of sophistication required to deal with me.

The pious fraud theory would have Smith, and perhaps associates such as Cowdery and/or Rigdon, pretending the find ancient records and to produce the Book of Mormon from them to promote a particular form of Christianity. Once a religious group formed around the book, it developed a life of its own, as indicated above is generally the case with human groups. And Smith, as a leader of a human group, exercised the traditional male leadership prerogative of sex with many of his female followers¹⁵³.

¹⁴⁹ See <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1560851791/102-3726216-9200133?v=glance&n=283155>.

¹⁵⁰ See <http://lds-mormon.com/sotbom.shtml>.

¹⁵¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatic_writing.

¹⁵² See <http://mormonstudies.com/criddle/rigdon.htm>.

¹⁵³ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.early%20mormon%20polyandry.pdf> at page 6.

"Either it was translated as described or it's a fake."

Bob and I finally agree on something, and it is a tautology. That is, this statement can't be false. The book is either translated as Smith represented it, or it is a fake.

"And it isn't a fake - I know that's easy to say, but that's a conclusion I've reached after thousands of hours of study and thoughtful consideration."

How many people of similar intelligence and education say the same thing about Young Earth Creationism, the Muslim faith, Orthodox Judaism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh Day Adventists, etc.? Let's throw in alien abductions just for good measure¹⁵⁴. Bob White's personal testimony means as much, or as little, as any of the above. Reasoning is not definitive regarding matters of belief, said Bob White to me. Does he say that, or imply it to Loomer? Not at all. Rather, he relies upon rational argument. Why would he do that when he has told me that reason does not prove or disprove religion? I again note that his words are aimed at the audience that matters most to him – the faithful Mormons who will read this news article and be disturbed by it.

And for the record, reason can tell us a great deal about which modes of religious faith make the most sense. We have no trouble discounting the Young Earth Creationists, for example. And we laugh at the Catholics because they only got around to publicly agreeing the Galileo a few years ago. When we look carefully at the conflicts between many Mormon positions – past and present – and science, we find similarly egregious errors. Hence, rational analysis can tell us that past and present Mormon leaders are almost certainly wrong about many important things. But, says Bob White, that doesn't matter because Mormonism acknowledges that its prophets are imperfect and sometimes make errors. To this I respond that once I came to appreciate how often, and how wrong Mormon prophets have been, and how dysfunctional their decision making methods are, I decided that it was unwise to trust them at all. There are far more reliable guides available to me and my family. Trust in those who would lead us is based on how they provide accurate information and good advice. This is a batting average calculation. The batting average of Mormon leaders is bad enough that I have no interest in following their advice any more. And it is precisely the kind of information needed to compute this batting average that is suppressed within Mormonism.

Bob does not wish to acknowledge the legitimacy of what I just said because it undercuts his position. He retreated to faith in our discussions because rational argument failed to support his position in debate with me, and it favours my position. Many Mormon intellectuals have acknowledge to me that the Mormon position is highly improbable, and they consider their continued belief on that basis to be an important act of faith – the passing of a test God requires of them. This is one of the oldest stories in the book.

"Joseph Smith's level of literacy would be inadequate and the storyline is so complex that no one at that time could've written it."

Another preposterous statement. Does Bob White really believe that no one in the 1800s could have written a book as complex as the Book of Mormon? He is well read, and knows that the Book of Mormon is mediocre literature at best. Countless books of that period are better, more complex, etc. As noted above, a Mormon General Authority, B.H. Roberts, who is one of the finest intellectuals Mormonism has produced, passed the Book of Mormon as bad literature –

¹⁵⁴ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 103.

the product of an immature mind.¹⁵⁵ This opinion is echoed by Dan Vogel and many other scholars whose opinions are worth taking seriously.

The overlap between the Book of Mormon story and a variety of other sources has long been noted. It was likely at most a cobbling together of ideas that have been shown to be well known in Smith's environment. The only real question that remains as far as the scholars are concerned is who did the cobbling - Smith alone or with the help of others.

Why doesn't Bob mention any of this instead of making the bold statements he does? Again, he is attempting to persuade instead of communicating the most accurate information available with regard to the relevant facts.

"White concedes Smith's wife was highly literate and present when most of the book was written but counters that she also testified to her children later in life to its validity. Although he concedes she also could have been lying, White says it begs belief"

Emma is a poor candidate for author, and Bob was no doubt responding to Loomer's question on this point, which he also asked me. Bob accepted the straw man Loomer offered him, and did not point out that it was a straw man. When Loomer asked me this question, I said, "You are asking the wrong question" and explained the context to him. My discussion with him on this point must have gotten lost in the mountain of information with which he was working.

But while we are talking about Emma Smith, we might recall that she maintained throughout her life that Joseph did not engage in polygamy although she caught in him the sexual act with his polygamous wives, and the presentation of the doctrine of polygamy to her is well documented. She was in either complete denial regarding facts that should have been obvious regarding polygamy, or she was consciously lying. In my view it is likely that she was aware that the Book of Mormon was likely fiction. But I don't think she had a hand in writing the book.

"... why would a con man have spent three years writing a never-ending source of admonition to do right? No evil man could ever have written this book."

That is an overstatement. The Book of Mormon does tell us to believe in Christ and mostly to be good people, and that is Mormonism's main message too - be good, but make sure to obey everything Mormon leaders say including (and most importantly) giving them a lot of time and money.

The Book of Mormon does, however, have more than a few troubling ideas in it. It links "good" behaviour to white skin, and bad behaviour to colored skin, for example¹⁵⁶. Its politics are straight out of the mid-1800s¹⁵⁷, except that it favours theocratic government of the kind for which Iran is now famous. It teaches a relativist ethic¹⁵⁸, and especially teaches that when one feels strongly that God has told him to do something, it must be done. This includes killing people¹⁵⁹. The Lafferty murders occurred just this way¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁵ See "Studies of the Book of Mormon".

¹⁵⁶ See <http://www.irr.org/MIT/skin-color.html> and <http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=review&id=508>.

¹⁵⁷ See <http://www.postmormon.org/tories.htm>.

¹⁵⁸ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/moral%20conflict.pdf> at page 14.

¹⁵⁹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sword_of_Laban.

This book is not lily white as Bob suggests.

And, this is another straw man argument based on a false dichotomy. I know that Bob is aware of how Jim Jones set up Jonestown. He is familiar with the social psychology of the Moonies, Scientology, the Young Earth Creationists, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovahs Witnesses, etc. Adherents of each of those organizations and countless others say things about their founders and founding documents that are similar to what Bob just said about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. And Bob knows that Jones followers sang his praises up to and including the act of suicide¹⁶¹. I asked him to distinguish these cases from Mormonism, and he cannot from any perspective other than “I know what I feel”, which is precisely the basis on which all other believers of this type justify their experience.

Cons that are obvious, and conmen who look and act like villains, do not get off the ground. Successful cons combine large amounts of good with small amounts (at least initially) of bad and are run by persuasive, charismatic people. But I don't think Joseph Smith was a simply con man. He was probably a pious fraud.

“If someone else had helped write the book, “why didn't they publish it? Where have they been all this time? How come no one ever seems to have seen or heard a record of it?”

First, there are credible reports that one of Smith's close associates – Sidney Ridgon – was involved in helping to write the Book of Mormon. Bob is well aware of this.

And second, if those involved in the pious fraud are really pious, this would cause them to keep their secret as surely at the end of the game as at the beginning. Ridgon ordered all of his personal papers to be burned, and in many other ways acted in a manner consistent with a role as creator of the Book of Mormon.

Mormonism and the Book of Mormon “makes me a better man, it helps me to be true to God, to be an honest man, to be a chaste man, to be a patient man, a generous man, a man of service.”

Do other religious belief systems not do the same, as least as far as their adherents believe? This is Mormon parochialism writ large. But Bob White is not parochial. Why would a man with such a broad view of the world and how it works make such a simplistic, misleading statement? Again, the best explanation for this is Bob's audience – faithful Mormons – and how this statement would sell in that market.

There are many books about which countless people would say something similar to what Bob said above. Some of them are noted literary works. Others (such as the books at the base of Scientology, the Moonies, Jonestown, John de Ruiters group and many others) have virtually no attraction outside their religious group. That is, the religious experience defines what is good for the group and creates a demand for the literature produced by the leaders of the group.

How many books written by Mormon leaders (a nicely profitable activity, I might add) are purchased by non-Mormons? Ask the same question within other religious groups and you will

¹⁶⁰ See Jon Krakauer, “Under the Banner of Heaven”.

¹⁶¹ See <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1998/11/12/MN85578.DTL>.

see a pattern. The Book of Mormon falls into this category of literature. Very few outside of Mormonism take it seriously. Mark Twain famously panned it as “chloroform in print”. See my review at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.book%20of%20mormon%20review.pdf>.

Consider also how many people have done things that we regard as evil while praising the writings of their leaders. Pol Pot. Mao. Hitler. There have been many. The fact that followers praise leaders tells us little about anything real except the influence of the leaders.

Bob’s statement also ignores the negative elements of Mormonism. It still breeds polygamists. It is still racist. In many ways it suppresses females, gays, etc. It seems to cause depression, a tendency toward financial naivete, tax evasion, personal bankruptcy, domestic violence, etc.¹⁶²

"McCue has a lot of things he likes to say are fact but they're not," says White. "The LDS church is as open to truth and error in itself as it is in any other organization. We have no interest in burying the truth."

See my comments above regarding “faithful history” and how unreasonable it is now to say that people like me who obeyed the Mormon rule not to read material that questioned our faith were somehow in the wrong by obeying. This is a classic double bind. If you disobey you are wrong, and if you obey you are still wrong. Mormonism is full of these. If you obey you will be happy, so if you are not happy you must be sinning somehow. Mormonism and its leaders are always right. If things are not working in any way, it can’t be their fault. It is always the fault of the poor, clueless members.

The irony and hypocrisy around Bob’s statement above is knee deep and smells like a stock yard. And note how carefully Bob choose his words. “[The LDS Church has] no interest in burying the truth.” That statement is debatable in the present tense, and patently false in the past tense. As recently as a decade ago Mormon academics and others were being excommunicated for insisting on their right to free speech regarding the reality of Mormon history, and Mormon leaders in various other ways suppressed information that did not support orthodox Mormon belief¹⁶³. And recall the history described by Hardy and Quinn, as cited above. Then consider the lessons taught in LDS meeting houses each week, the Mormon missionary lessons, and even the texts used for Mormon adult, for credit, university level “Institute” classes, in light of what real historians have to say about Mormon history¹⁶⁴.

When Bob White’s comments regarding how Mormonism does not bury the truth are read in light of this kind of information, they seem misleading at best. It is fair to call them ridiculous.

A Case Against the Book of Mormon

There is a relatively simple way to debunk the Book of Mormon’s claims. It is this: Few, if any, non-Mormon scientists today take seriously the Mormon side of any of the many scientifically testable claims implicit in the Book of Mormon. And here is why that is such powerful evidence against the Book of Mormon’s claims.

¹⁶² See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.mormon%20history%20in%20a%20nutshell.pdf> at page 19.

¹⁶³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_Six.

¹⁶⁴ See my comments regarding the Mormon Church’s treatment of its history in general at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf> starting at page 10.

The scientific community is the single most productive group in human history when it comes to producing reliable information about reality. It is set up for the express purpose of doing this. Almost all who participate in this process pool their information so that scientific knowledge will advance as rapidly as possible. And countless people check each piece of significant work that is put forward as "science". Scientists usually don't make a lot of money. They are rewarded by the respect of their peers and the public at large.

Science can be thought of to a large extent a competition in the establishment of ideas that accurately describe reality, where the biggest winners have new elements, theories, species, etc. ("Darwinian evolution", "Brownian motion", for example) named after them. Points are scored both for showing that ideas thought to be reliable descriptions of reality are not, and that ideas thought not to be reliable in this regard, or new ideas, accurately describe reality. Thousands of the most intelligent people on the planet, with immense resources under their control, play this game 24-7.

And virtually all of them (except the Mormons, of course) are not prepared to give the ideas about reality that are dear to most Mormon hearts a second glance.

Imagine the reputation a scientist could garner were she able to posit even a reasonably likely case for elephants or horses in the Americas around the time of Christ? Or steel at that same time. Or that the migration hypothesis on which the Book of Mormon rests has a reasonable chance of being correct. There are literally dozens of other scientific hypotheses like these embedded in the Book of Mormon and other aspects of Mormon theology. Mankind starting in Missouri? The sun deriving its energy from another celestial body, whatever its name? Dark skin color as a social-pathology indicator?

And remember, for a scientist to score huge points it is not necessary to prove that any of this stuff is "true". All they have to show is that a semi-plausible case for it can be made. And not a single non-Mormon scientist of whom I am aware today is prepared to argue in favour of any of these ideas. This should tell us something about the quality of Mormonism's foundational ideas, and the reliability of the people who first put them forward as real, and worse yet, who continue to teach them as reality in light of what science has to tell us.

There are many analogous situations. The people who believe that the Earth is 6,000 to 10,000 years old continue to publish nonsense that has a striking resemblance to FARMS¹⁶⁵ output regarding the historicity of the Book of Mormon¹⁶⁶. But no serious scientists take the Young Earth Creationist or Mormon side of the debate in peer reviewed journals¹⁶⁷. In fact, the peer reviewed journals seem to ignore these issues. Is this a scientific conspiracy against Mormonism (as well as Young Earth Creationism and other similarly odd theories), or is it a huge community of knowledgeable people who have tested something so thoroughly that the horse is dead and not worthy of more beating? Or maybe Satan has blinded all those scientists?

The alien abduction research is even more interesting in this regard. A few scientists did, until recently at least, take the position that the hypothesis that alien abductions are real should be taken seriously. Peer reviewed papers have been published along this line. And yet, to my knowledge not a single peer reviewed paper has been published that suggests taking seriously

¹⁶⁵ See <http://farms.byu.edu/>.

¹⁶⁶ See for example, "Young Earth Creationists: Creation Conference in Lynchburg" by Jason Rosenhouse in the Volume 12, No. 2 of Skeptic at http://www.skeptic.com/the_magazine/index.php.

¹⁶⁷ These are the publications in which serious scientific debate occurs.

any of the many Mormon theories about the Book of Mormon Americas seriously. On this basis, it seems more likely that aliens have been visiting the earth and abducting people for breeding experiments, etc. than the Book of Mormon is historically accurate. And, it appears that the probability of the Book of Mormon being an accurate description of history is roughly the same as the Earth being about 6,000 years old. That seems to be the consensus of the huge community of people who are the people most knowledgeable with regard to the many scientific disciplines that are relevant to this topic.

The best Mormon apologists can do against this, as illustrated by the debate related to DNA and the Book of Mormon¹⁶⁸, is to establish that the case against the Mormon position is not airtight. That is, it can't be proven with 100% certainty that the Mormon position is false any more than it can be proven with 100% certainty that the Earth is more than 6,000 years old, or is not flat. However, given all of the evidence relevant to questions of this kind, we can determine roughly speaking how probable it is that the Earth is 6,000 years old, or flat. And that probability is vanishingly small.

We intuitively use probabilities to govern countless decisions each day based on our perception of the evidence, and hence reality. And it is this hugely important question of probabilities that religious apologists work as hard as possible to obscure. They focus on the absence of absolute proof, and avoid the examination of probabilities.

I remember years ago reading one of Hugh Nibley's¹⁶⁹ essays in which he indicated that scientists, linguists, etc. did not take the Book of Mormon seriously, and argued that as soon as they finally came to their senses and considered his brilliant theories regarding the Book of Mormon, Book of Abraham, etc. they would agree with him that Mormonism can't prove its case, but is worth taking very seriously. For years that idea was compelling to me. And then one day the scales fell from my eyes. They never fell from Hugh's. And they have not fallen from many highly intelligent people of my acquaintance, including Bob White.

To the end of my days I am likely to be engaged by the mystery of what causes some to see and other similarly situated people in all discernible ways, not to see. Picking away at this question during the past few years has provided me with some fascinating insights into my own behaviour as well as that of other people that have become useful to me at work as well as in my personal life.¹⁷⁰

The Difference Between White and mccue

I have been asked to explain why two people who seem so similar in many ways – Bob White and bob mccue – could react so differently to Mormonism¹⁷¹.

¹⁶⁸ See http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/magazine/index.php.

¹⁶⁹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Nibley;
<http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.leaving%20the%20saints.pdf>.

¹⁷⁰ See
<http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf>;
<http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>.

¹⁷¹ For the long story on my part, see my essay on how denial works at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>, my personal “timeline” at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.the%20creation%20and%20erosion%20of%20false%20faith%20-%20a%20timeline.pdf> and the “nutshell” description of the “tipping point” process at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.most%20common%20questions.pdf> (page 7).

In short, our behaviour can be boiled down to genes and cultural conditioning. I can't assess Bob's genes. However, I know something about his conditioning and can observe his behaviour. Here are a few thoughts.

Bob White and I are in many ways similar. We both have big egos; we both have a lot of energy; we both like to think and write; neither of us minds confrontation when required to achieve an important goal.

Bob seems to be me to be more discipline oriented in both his personal habits and interpersonal interactions than I am. My relatively undisciplined nature means that I tend to explore the sideways and byways of each significant issue I encounter. My guess is that Bob stays closer to the center of the fairway. Michael Shermer in "How We Believe" says that the single best predictor of who will change their religious beliefs in fundamental ways as they go through life is how oriented toward exploring new issues and having new experiences a person is. This personality attribute is measured by most standard personality tests. My guess is that I would score far higher than Bob in this vector of personality.

However, the most important factor that distinguishes us likely has to do with our relationship to power. I do not like exercising power. I shied away from Mormon leadership positions. I avoid leadership positions at our law firm and in community associations, while having lots of opportunity to take them up. Once forced into the Bishop's chair, I enjoyed intimate personal interactions with ward members and did not relish exercising power. I did not conduct a single church court during my close to five years tenure as bishop, for example. And there were many occasions that called for this kind of discipline. As I look back on that now, I have to acknowledge that I simply ignored these. I was "in denial" regarding my Mormon leadership responsibilities because I do not like being required to sit in judgement, and order people around.

My personal dealings with Bob and most of what I know about him via others who have also dealt with him indicate that he is at the other end of the power spectrum. He almost immediately took leadership positions within his law firm, and continues to exercise significant power in that context. Despite his protestations to the contrary (which I have heard in person), he appears to enjoy the power he wields as a Mormon leader. And he has put this hat into the ring for other powerful positions in community circles.

This proclivity – or need – for power makes Bob unlikely to ever get off the Mormon leadership treadmill. And I have said many times that I am not sure that I would have been able to make the changes I have if I had continued on the Mormon leadership track. Mormon leaders are in a position where they are under constant pressure to bear of public testimony; they lack of time to read and allow perceptions to form on the basis of what is real instead of faith; they are constantly held up as community examples; etc. All of this make it less likely that Mormon leaders will see the conflict between their faith position and what makes rational sense. These factors play into the denial equation.¹⁷²

The Mormon leaders who get out most often do so by first feeling for whatever reason that they cannot continue in Mormon leaderships (family issues; personal health; etc.) and then after a period of decompression they change their beliefs. I know only a handful who have lost their Mormon testimonies while serving in callings like Bishop. Stake Pres., Mission Pres. Etc. This is testament to the powers of the forces outlined in my denial essay.

¹⁷² See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>.

How Was I Deceived?

I have also been asked how I could have been taken in so thoroughly. That is, if the problems with Mormon are so clear to me how could I have missed the obvious for so long? I have thought a lot about this question¹⁷³.

First, see the “timeline” document above¹⁷⁴. I was heavily conditioned as a young person. Despite the fact that my father was an historian who knew about Mormon issues (and even published about them – google “Robert J. McCue” “mormon”), he never spoke with me about these things. This likely had to do with the period of time during which I came to maturity, and the fact that my father was a Mormon leader and hardly ever around.

In the 1970s, while I was coming of age, Mormon scholars were struggling with how to deal with Mormon history and the position of Mormonism’s leadership was clearly set out – do not speak of faith threatening issues. My father was a faithful Mormon leader and he followed that advice. And I was a rebellious Mormon kid. I think my father knew that had I understood a small fraction of the issues he understood, I would have bolted for the door and not come back. So I did not get a whiff of any controversy related to Mormon history while I was growing up.

When I returned from my mission as a hardcore Mormon missionary leader, I was personally committed to following Boyd Packer’s advice that we not allow intellectual cancers into our lives. Had my father suggested at that point (which he did not in any event) that I look at real Mormon history, I would have accused him of gainsaying, not supporting the Brethren, etc. In fact, when my parents suggested that my wife and I delay having children for a year or two, contrary to the clear instructions of the Brethren and my institute instructors, my wife and I thought that they had gone a little “soft”. Our first child was born 10 months after our marriage.

I also note that when I finally did start to read in my mid-40s, and so started to talk to my father about these things, he quickly acknowledged that he knew all about them and said that he didn’t think they were relevant to living a good life and so did not bring them up. Had I asked about them, however, he would have been happy to talk. My mother was with us when we had this conversation, and it was at that time that she found out about Joseph Smith marrying other men’s wives and young girls, lying about his sexual activities, etc. Several times during the course of this conversation she looked at my father with horror in her eyes and said, “Really?! Are you sure?!”. And my mother is at least as intelligent as my father. So not only did none of these things ever come up during my relatively brief, tumultuous coming of age, they did not come up at any time during the course of a close to 50 year marriage.

Contrast this with the experience of J. (Joseph) C. Smith, an emeritus law professor at the University of British Columbia with whom I have been exchanging email and telephone calls lately. He has published widely on issues related to the problems with patriarchy (google - "jc smith" patriarchy postmodern – or "jc smith" feminism – to get an idea of his scholarship).

¹⁷³ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf>.

¹⁷⁴ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.the%20creation%20and%20erosion%20of%20false%20faith%20-%20a%20timeline.pdf>.

JC changed the name by which he went from "Joseph" to "JC" after leaving Mormonism. As a boy his nickname was "Prophet" in Cardston where he grew up both because of his name and his assumed destination for high Mormon office that resulted from his intelligence, family connections, faithfulness, etc. He was named Joseph because of the unusual circumstances of his conception, a vision his father had, and his birth on the day and at the time of Joseph Smith Jr.'s death.

JC and his wife discovered problems with Mormonism while at Yale in the 1960s, at about the same time my parents were at BYU and my Dad was immersed in the Mormon history courses that gave him an understanding of the more or less the same issues. JC assumed that Mormonism embraced all truth, and that he could help Mormonism change. He and his wife discussed these matters extensively and were more or less on the same page. They came back to Vancouver where JC took a teaching position at the UBC law school, and was immediately called as Bishop at about the time my parents arrived in Victoria with me in tow as an 11 year old boy.

JC and his wife quickly found out that their Mormon leaders would not permit them to talk about the things that were important to them (getting the blacks the priesthood; overcoming Mormonism's backward attitudes regarding the role of women in society; dogmatism; etc.), and was told that he either had to shut up or get out. He got out. His wife went with him, as did a number of other people in his family and the Mormon community in Vancouver who were of an intellectual bent.

JC has never written anything about Mormonism because, as he put it to me, tackling patriarchy would rip the roots out of the ground where attacking Mormonism would merely hack off a few branches. He and his wife raised a wonderful family of agnostics who are successful in every imaginable way (not that this proves much, but since Mormons like to talk about this aspect of Mormonism community outcomes, I mention it), and sees his grandchildren coming up the same path. He and I find the same scholars enlightening, think much alike and seem to be cut out of much the same cloth. My path has been so far similar in many ways to his. He is likely to become one of my mentors.

The kind of intellectuals who back in those days remained inside Mormonism while being aware of all the "issues" are people who like my father, for whatever reason, decided that the information they had was either not important enough or so potentially destabilizing that it should not be shared with those they loved the most. Each population will have some people like my father, and others like JC Smith. I happen to be more like JC Smith.

Misquotes that Cause Personal Turmoil

Back to Looime's article:

But he says he now "deeply regrets" indoctrinating his children because their tie to the Mormon faith is unbreakable.

"My son graduated with high marks from the University of Calgary, he got into the dental school at the U of A, and he's doing very well," says McCue. "So he's a rational, critical thinker, a scientist. "And yet he won't even let me walk through it and explain why I came to this decision. "He just says, 'Dad, you've been deceived by Satan so I won't even read it. I know how smart you are, and if you've been deceived by Satan, I could be too.' "

Here the article concludes, and this is what caused me significant anguish. The quote regarding my son is inaccurate in a number of respects, and I told Jeremy Looome while on the phone specifically not to include anything I said about my son, or other family members, in the article without allowing me to see it first. Because I told Looome that, I did not put the statement above in context as I would have if I thought I might see it in print. The accuracies are as follows:

The article says: "My son graduated with high marks from the University of Calgary, he got into dental school at the U of A, and he's doing very well". My son did not graduate from the U of C. I told Looome that he received high marks in chemistry. He went to dental school without an undergrad degree.

The article says, "So, he's a rational, critical thinker. A scientist. And yet he won't even let me walk through it and explain why I came to this decision. He just says, 'Dad, you've been deceived by Satan so I won't even read it. I know how smart you are, and if you've been deceived by Satan, I could be too.'" The critical point that Jeremy missed here is that my son said this when he returned from his Mormon mission to the Ukraine a couple of years ago and for a time he stuck to it. However, he eventually relented and he is now prepared to read the things that question the Mormon point of view.

My son was understandably troubled by what Jeremy wrote about him. I have apologized to Brayden, and asked Looome to do what he can to get the following letter into the Edmonton Sun.

Dear Sirs,

Re: Jeremy Looome, April 19, 2005 - "Prophet or Fraud?"

Jeremy Looome's series regarding spirituality nicely summarizes a complex, emotional topic in a way that I suspect has been helpful to many people. He mentioned my family and me in April 19th's piece "Prophet or Fraud?", and while I thought he did a great job overall, I should point out a few misstated facts. I will take the blame for not speaking clearly enough during our interview. I also have a few substantive comments regarding Jeremy's piece.

The personal errata are as follows: My dental student son did not graduate from the U of Calgary, and while he is still a faithful Mormon, after initial difficulty he has become willing to consider scholarly information respecting Mormonism. The kids in the picture with me are two sons and a grandson, not three grandsons. I was not a Mormon "Stake President", but rather a "Stake Mission President". My father was not a "noted Mormon historian", but rather an historian who happened to be a Mormon.

Regarding substantive matters, my friend Bob White chooses his words carefully when he says, "[The LDS Church has] no interest in burying the truth." That statement is debatable now and unquestionably false as recently as a decade ago when Mormon academics and others were being excommunicated for insisting on the right to free speech and Mormon leaders in various other ways suppressed information that did not support orthodox Mormon belief.

Bob does not mention the possibility that Joseph Smith was a "pious fraud", which is the leading scholarly theory as to how Mormonism started. And Bob's beliefs about who wrote the Book of Mormon rely on the idea that the Book of Mormon and Mormonism are so good that they must be from God. He is familiar with Jonestown, the Moonies, Scientology and John de Ruiter, etc. Adherents of each of those organizations say similar things about their founders and founding documents. And, Mormonism has its dark side as well.

I reiterate Jeremy's eloquent point that most religious belief systems of this type, including Mormonism, rely on the same kind of psychological and social mechanism to engender and maintain belief.

Thanks again for a fine series of articles.

Best regards,

bob mccue
Calgary, Alberta

While some Mormons may attempt to use the factual errors noted above to discredit Looome's reporting, that would not be fair. I am familiar with most of the sources he quoted in addition to my own material, and the errors I have noted are the only ones in the series of five pieces.

Familiar Story of Infidelity

In the same issue, the Sun included another piece Jeremy authored that mentioned me as well. Its text with comments follows.

Carol Askhew and Bob McCue share common ground.

Five years ago, the Washington state woman moved to Edmonton to support John de Ruiter, the self-styled "embodiment of truth." Her trust in him fell apart, as did McCue's faith in Mormon founder Joseph Smith, when the guru was caught cheating. Infidelity is common among spiritual leaders: at least a dozen from around the globe have been caught either cheating on spouses or used supposedly "divine" powers to justify sex with followers in the last 15 years alone.

Even Mormon scholars agree that it is far more than a dozen¹⁷⁵. This behaviour seems to be common among male leaders of religious sects. In fact, there is some research that indicates this should be expected based on the personality type of the males who tend to lead human groups, and evolutionary theory supports the same conclusion¹⁷⁶.

As some historians contend was the case with Smith, de Ruiter also initially denied, then justified, his promiscuity by saying his manifestation of power - in his case "inner truth," in Smith's "God" - told him it was OK. Many supporters stuck by him, just as Smith's stuck by him.

This is consistent with a widespread pattern of human behavior within religious communities and elsewhere. Political and other structures will be used by those who can take or keep power to do so. It is that simple. So, a person like Joseph Smith should be expected to tell, and in many cases sincerely believe, the stories that would have the effect of getting him power, or allowing him to keep it. Think about "line upon line; precept upon precept" in that context. If you can't change the rules as you go, it is much more difficult to make things work the way you want them to.

¹⁷⁵ See <http://www.wivesofjosephsmith.org/> and Todd Compton, "In Sacred Loneliness".

¹⁷⁶ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.early%20mormon%20polyandry.pdf> at page 4.

One of the principles used to analyse legal systems or any other human activity that is governed by rules is that the greater the discretion in the hands of the leader, the more powerful the leader and the less powerful each group member. Dictators have the ultimate discretion. Democracies governed by the rule of law have the least leader discretion as a general rule. "Line upon line; precept upon precept" says the leader can change the rules whenever he wants, thus maximizing his power.

"He was pretty ballsy when the whole thing came down," says Askhew, who has since moved back to Washington state but has kept in touch with friends she made while part of the group. "I asked him whether he felt responsible for the group and for being a guide to how to live his teachings. And he basically said he wasn't forcing anyone to do anything.

"Ballsy" is a fair way to describe Joseph Smith's behavior, or several levels, as well. All those years telling people over the pulpit, through the news media, privately etc. that he was not involved in adultery or polygamy while he was involved on an outrageous scale.

De Ruiters outward appearance of being a good family man to his wife and three kids initially cemented her interest. "He always said we have to honour marriage," she said. "But when I heard what was going on, it just seemed very mean, very mean to his wife and children. To me, the decision to leave came down to how he actually lived day-to-day.

Again, the parallels between de Ruiters and Smith are striking.

"Anyone can talk about how love should be paramount. But it's how you live day-to-day, when all the shitty things happen to you or the people you love, when you have important decisions to make. Those decisions are what's important."

Amen to that.

Tricks of the Subconscious

The science that says we're frequently irrational may be easier to understand when you consider our subconscious may be to blame.

The survival instinct is wired deeply into the brain, as is the related fear of our own mortality. That can lead to the brain performing some interesting tricks on our perception. In Dr. Andrew Newberg's experiments, outlined earlier in this series, he demonstrated how the brain can be tricked into thinking our internal monologue – that little voice on our shoulder – is a disembodied voice talking to us, rather than emanating from us. Our bodies are just as susceptible.

A spiritual case in point? Ouija boards. Almost anyone who has tried them and successfully seen them spell out a message from spirits will have a hard time believing science has repeatedly disproven their value.

As with other "sciences" such as a "facilitated communication," "applied kinesiology" and "Toftness Radiation Detection," Ouija communication seems to work due to what is termed "ideomotor action": the brain subconsciously influencing human muscles to turn a belief into reality.

This element of Loome's research was new to me, and fascinating. More proof as to how our most important beliefs affect what we perceive. Without experiencing what I have re. Mormonism, no amount of reading could have drilled into me the "theory ladenness of observation"¹⁷⁷ concept as it has. I don't take this as far as many do. That is, I believe there is an objective reality, but that the part of it we see is highly influenced by our worldview. Our worldview creates a portal through which we look, in effect. Even the best scientists are so limited, at least to an extent¹⁷⁸.

All of the above noted practices have been disproven using double blind studies, where no participants were able to view the process as it happens. When no participants can see the board as they attempt to have spirits contact them, Ouija doesn't work. Ever. Anywhere. Yet hardcore believers will dismiss the science before the technique, demonstrating how a powerful belief can trump rationality.

"Under a variety of circumstances, our muscles will behave unconsciously in accordance with an implant expectation," writes Dr. Ray Hyman of the University of Oregon, in his paper *How People Are Fooled by Ideomotor Action*". Hyman has used science to disprove everything from water divining to cold reading – the process of pretending to know about someone by reading their emotions and reactions.

"What makes this simple fact so important is that we are not aware that we ourselves are the source of the resulting action," he says.

One of the most striking "medical" failures disproven by double blind experiments is applied kinesiology. As bogus as it is as a science, it does a credible job of demonstrating the power of belief. Thousands of North Americans still subscribe to the technique, which involves using muscular pressure and tongue sensation to allegedly diagnose illnesses and allergies. Nonetheless, even after demonstrating to a roomful of chiropractors that it doesn't work during double blind studies, Hyman could not get them to admit defeat.

"When these results were announced, the head chiropractor turned to me and said, 'you see, that is why we never do double blind testing anymore. It never works!,' Hyman writes. "At first, I thought he was joking. It turned out he was quite serious."

This is brilliant. One of the best illustrations of how denial works I have seen. I will have to add a new section to my denial essay.

The man was so convinced going in that the neutral, controlled science had to be wrong, not applied kinesiology.

"Many pseudo and fringe scientists often react to the failure of science to confirm their prized beliefs, not by gracefully accepting the possibility that they were wrong, but by arguing that science is defective," he says.

¹⁷⁷ See http://carnap.umd.edu/phil250/250F98/theory_laden.html.

¹⁷⁸ See for example, Michael Ruse, "Mystery of Mysteries: Is Evolution a Social Construction?".

Day 5: TRANSFORMING RELIGION

Doubt is part of all religion. All the religious thinkers were doubters. Isaac Bashevis Singer

This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness. Dalai Lama

Whose Religion Anyway?

This is the wrap-up piece, and I thought it was brilliant.

To Rabbi David Oler's congregation, religion is mankind's answer to the unanswerable question: What is God? The Chicago theologian heads one of 40 synagogues across North America, dedicated to secular humanist Judaism - a belief God didn't pass down religion to man; man invented religion in order to try and understand our mortality and to aspire to social and personal improvement.

"It's understood by many people that biblical material is created by humans. The stories that are told, while of deep significance, are understood as humanly authored. But my congregation is committed to religion regardless of the notion of supernatural or divine sources," he says.

"People might come from any kind of orthodoxy and fundamentalism. But from my perspective and that of my congregation, we do this for the opportunity for religious transformation, to grow as a person who is more like that which, in Judaism, we place upon God."

Oler argues the world has been split: some religions transform the message and members over time and follow universal moral codes, while orthodoxies are left behind with unchanged messages feeding the sense of conformity that allows supporters to feel secure.

Religion is "a symbol for a universal ethic," he says. "There are two kinds of religions: there are those that exist for people seeking comfort, and that may be typified by a belief in going to heaven or that if you pray hard enough, God will answer those prayers.

"But if you look at the Holocaust and all of the suffering in the world, that perspective can be hard to believe. The other problem is that that form of belief does not inspire me to be a better person; it inspires me to be a more dependent person. "And then, on the other hand, there's transformational religion."

Fundamentalism saddens the multiple-degree-holding theologian who started out with orthodox beliefs himself but now believes a healthy perspective would be to assume it's ridiculous humans could "know God".

"I have certainly been inspired by the awesomeness of the unanswered question to feel a sense of humility. And what saddens me is that some of these people don't find a spiritual transformation towards humility. It leads to religious conflict of the type that we see all around the world.

"I would also say that I think there are a lot of people who, unfortunately, remain secular and anti-religious because they don't believe in the fundamentalists and they don't realize that one can be religious with an open mind."

I have had the pleasure of spending many hours in David Oler's presence. He is a relatively small man with a dark beard and penetrating eyes. We were at Star Island¹⁷⁹ with him last summer, and will be there together again this summer. David is the type of person who measures his words carefully. When he speaks, he is worth listening to.

I think that we will see many more congregations move toward the trail David Oler is blazing. That is, people who love their communities, wish to preserve the unique cultures and rituals that have nurtured them, but no longer find the literalist beliefs formerly related to those cultures satisfying will do with various Christian, Muslim and other belief systems what David Oler is doing with Judaism.

I saw more or less the same thing underway when a couple of weeks ago I visited a large Anglican congregation in Ottawa, Canada. Many humanists and agnostics worship there. Roughly half the congregation is gay. The man who conducts the choir, is the primary organist and plans the liturgical aspect of each service, is a gay postmormon who at one time was the assistant organist at the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. He has a PhD in liturgical music and teaches at a local Catholic university. I have a half finished essay regarding my experience on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, taking communion, in his Anglican Church. I am in the process of reframing my relationship to religious ritual and authority, and took some significant steps forward while in his company.

We have a deep need for community, and ritual. I see this everywhere around me. Yoga classes, art classes, professional sports events (I was at a Calgary Flames play off hockey game a short time ago with about 20,000 screaming fans almost all dressed in red – powerful ritual stuff), political rallies, elections, etc. I believe that people like my friend in Ottawa who understand ritual and how to make it evolve within our multi-cultural context have an important role to play. For example, he can build another level of ritual and music onto what his congregation already enjoys that will make them say, "Wow, that was a beautiful innovation on a wonderful old theme!", and will make a lonely Muslim who wanders in off the street say, "I have found my new spiritual home!" That is, those who understand more than one culture can make ritual speak in ways that will touch many people in different ways. My friend has already done this for wayward Mormons. His Anglican congregants do not know that on some Sundays part of the music they love resonates much more deeply with visiting Mormons who hear several bars at a time of what sounds like "Come, Come Ye Saints" and other Mormon staples, mixed in with old Anglican favorites.

Chanting. Ritual. Responding in unison to authority figures (including cheering for heroes and booing at referees). Holding silence while in community. Things of this nature move us at an inarticulate level; a level at which many of us need to be moved. This is what enables the John de Ruiters of this world to start new and highly successful cults. It has made Deepak Chopra and many like him fabulously wealthy. And it keeps the Mormon Church growing in wealth if not numbers.

¹⁷⁹ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.star%20island%20overview.pdf>.

I expect that we will continue to see innovation in how we use these forces in our lives. The better we understand where our own buttons are in this regard, the more likely we are to create experiences that will be valuable to us and the less likely we are to be taken advantage of.

A few hours west, former John De Ruiter follower David S. is keeping an open mind. He lost his girlfriend to de Ruiter's movement, but not his optimism that spirituality has a grand place in human existence.

"I think I'll always be very interested in why some people have an agitated mind, why some of us are always challenging the facts of what is going on around us but at the same time can't get past this sense of anxiety about it all," he says. "I'd still like to believe that on some level, some of the answers to this are what we would see as 'supernatural', or beyond our ability to simply explain away with science.

David was experimenting with alternate beliefs long before he joined De Ruiter's group and has moved on to others since, always careful to ensure the message is about transforming its supporters into better people, not glorifying the messenger. "For example, (new-age guru) Byron Katie's writing helps one to see the way you judge your life is simply a creation of your own mind, and therefore does not have to be absolute, the final word on it. And that means other people's perspectives of you aren't either. "If one person sees me as ugly and another sees me as beautiful, what do I actually have to do with it? It's their perspective, not my reality."

Most of the ideas new age gurus teach ranges between helpful and harmless. They sell books, etc. because people feel that they are helped by the guru so we should not expect that they will be recognizable as frauds from a distance. However, their teachings tend toward relativism – a kind of “if it feels right, go for it!” kind of mentality that encourages the weak to fall under the influence of the strong. This theme is common within religious groups. And, it encourages all kinds of quasi-quackery in terms of physical and mental remedies for what we think ails us.

This is an important point that relates to the discussion around Day 3, Andrew Newberg, etc. Many people believe that the subjective experience of the religious believer (or anyone else for that matter), tells us something real about the nature of the “spiritual” forces around us. While that may be so, I am not prepared to believe that these experiences (and especially my own) give me any reliable information about reality. My reasoning, quite simply, is that given how often I have seen people fooled by these experiences and given that there is no reliable way to interpret them, I am not prepared to rely upon them in any way as a guide to what is, or is not, real.

The union of medical quackery and New Age belief provides some support for my position. Medical science is notoriously imprecise. However, it is the best we have. And the use of the scientific method to attempt to understand the complex systems that make us sick, and healthy is what sets medicine apart from most aspects chiropractic, naturopathic and other alternative forms of care. However, many people are convinced the chiropractic care, for example, really works. Double blind studies, as noted above, prove that there is no measurable connection between certain “treatments” prescribed by chiropractors and the alleged benefits of those treatments. And after reviewing this information, patients continue to pay and chiropractors continue to collect money to perform these very treatments.

Can we be 100% certain that the alleged benefit is not there? No. But knowing how easy to deceive we are when it comes to things like this, continued belief is akin to belief that the Earth is roughly 6,000 years old. And many believe this as well.

The point is that under the influence of our emotions, there are many highly improbable things that we will from time to time desperately wish to believe, and hence will tend to believe. Those of us who wish to maintain the most reliable connection possible to reality will identify our emotional weak spots and try to do things that will help us to overcome the distorting influences we can see interfere with how others perceive certain aspects of their environment, and we should assume that we are also subject to these forces. In this regard, we rely upon trusted friends, advisors, etc. who have proven themselves to be reliable guides with regard to particular issues.

FAITH IS NATURAL

Dr. David Wulff acknowledges such faith is natural, despite his agnosticism. The psychologist and author understands the powerful draws of self-improvement and comfort offered by belief.

"There's no question we are a highly social animal, and fundamental to our thought processes and our sense of security is the desire to group with people with whom we have things in common," says Wulff, a specialist in religion at Wheaton College in Massachusetts. "In religion, you have a magnet that draws people together: there's mystery, there's the promise of a form of immortality, there is hope for solutions to complex problems. "A lot of it is very pragmatic. It's been argued that religion is what we do when there are no real answers left. And you see that reflected all the time: when people are trapped in a mine and there's nothing the people trying to save them can do, they pray. The fact that it's so often ineffective doesn't seem to matter, given the comfort that it brings them."

I fully agree. I would add that whatever your group believes, no matter how weird, you are likely to believe as well¹⁸⁰.

But he remains uncomfortable with orthodox beliefs that have no time for conflicting messages. Wulff quotes *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* by conservative theologian Mark Noll, which suggests orthodoxy rapidly retreats from intellectual discovery and anything that challenges it. "Who knows where we're going in the future, but I believe it's such an enormously complex question, that we're a huge way away from answering it." Even if we did, however, prove that religion was man's creation and not God's, Wulff suggests many people would still take part, just as with Oler's congregation.

Again, I agree. And I think that while we can't predict exactly where we are going, some trends are visible. This is a bit like long term weather forecasting. And by long term, I mean decades at least. Will the Earth continue to warm? The average temperature of this planet over millions of years is far higher than it is right now. That should tell us something. And human activity is likely accelerating what would in any event likely occur. Predicting the course of religious community evolution is a bit like that.

¹⁸⁰ See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 119.

We are unlikely to become irreligious, though traditional religious language is likely to decline in usage. There is a huge amount of conflict related to religion right now because the Internet is spreading all kinds of information that questions basic beliefs. A cultural war has resulted. As we accustom ourselves to a new information environment, energy will gravitate away from this toward other more productive issues just as energy that was at one time spent on theology in the Dark Ages was redirected toward science.

We have seen these changes occur on a generational basis in the past, and should expect the same now. That is, each generation will have its beliefs set early by the dominant information environment of its time, and little will change for that generation as it lives out its life. And it will be largely in denial as to the changes the next generation or two will absorb.

The data collected at www.worldvaluessurvey.org illustrates this and other trends nicely. It indicates, for example, that we are likely to become more individually oriented in our lifestyles and beliefs as time passes. The teachings of the new age gurus emphasize this. And yet we need community. Look for new structures to evolve that will allow for more of both. And look for both healthy organizations in this regard as well as those who will push our buttons more for someone else's gain than our benefit.

"I'm thinking back to a study done in the 1970s by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in which they trained interviewers to go into nine congregations and interview members to find out why the church was important to them and what about it was most important.

"And what the people kept saying over and over again was that it was the sense of caretaking, first towards the congregation by the minister, and then between the congregation itself. Whenever one of the interviewers would suggest there was something wrong with the answers, because they didn't discuss the church's 'justification by faith' doctrine, or God or Jesus, they would remark that there was no better conversation stopper than the actual theological questions.

"So despite the church's belief that all of these important doctrines, rules, codes and traditions were important, inevitably the congregation wasn't concerned with that. They were much more concerned with one another."

Great point. This highlights something Karen Armstrong says in "The Great Transformation". During the Axial Age (800 BCE to 200 BCE), which gave rise to all of our existing major religions, the emphasis was on compassionate behaviour instead of belief. We need to consciously move in that direction.

As long as Mormons continue to hold onto literalist belief and try to use rational means to defend their beliefs, they will appear as foolish to those on the outside of Mormonism as Scientologists, Young Earth Creationists, alien abductionists etc. appear to Mormons.

There are two solutions for the Mormon who wants to keep her integrity (that is, not define "honesty" as "say and do whatever is necessary to achieve your objectives", which is the way Mormon leaders define it as evidenced by their deceptive history) and continue to participate fully in the Mormon community.

First, the Mormon can go metaphoric. I know lots who have. Leonard Arrington and many who worked with him were in this camp. I will spend this weekend in the company of one member of

that elite group. Metaphoric or “mythic” (the term Arrington and most scholars prefer) is a lot more flexible than literal truth. That means that the message of the Book of Mormon is important; whether the events it describes really happened or not is unimportant. That was Arrington’s position.

This casts things like temple interview questions, and temple covenants, in new light for most people. What does it mean to say you know Joseph Smith was God’s prophet, in a metaphoric sense? What does it mean to covenant to give all of your metaphoric money, time and talent to a metaphoric Kingdom of God? There is a lot more room in this concept to work out a relationship with Mormonism that will be healthy.

Second, the Mormon can go phenomenological¹⁸¹, as noted above.

Of these two, the metaphoric approach is preferable. But let me clearly state my preference for the approach that says to Mormon leaders that we will not play their silly games any longer. We should call spades spades when it comes to Mormon history, and insist that Mormon leaders earn their respect on the basis of the quality of the ideas and programs they deliver.

There are so many wonderful sources of information available these days about how to life well that it is impossible to summarize them. Here are a few: Martin Seligman's "Authentic Happiness"; Jon Haidt's "The Happiness Hypothesis"; Marvin Levine "The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga". These books outline the principles that one should follow to live a satisfied life, and how people within the human population vary in terms of their needs in this regard, and finally how to assess our needs. A few of the basic ideas are that we need relatively modest amounts of things like money, good weather, etc. We have a high need for "flow" activities (activities that challenge and absorb us so that time disappears). We have relatively high needs to interact with people who respect our contribution to some small group or groups, be they family, community or work related. We need intimacy with one special person. And we need to feel connected to something larger than ourselves (this is the core of the "meaning" issue), but this is relatively easy for most people to satisfy. That is, almost any larger-than-you cause will do. Scouts; the environment; politics; Mormonism or anti-Mormonism; the local PTA or historical society; coaching kids sports; etc. Mormonism emphasizes the "larger-than-you" issue so much that we postmormons are a bit skewed.

RATIONAL CONFLICT

That same sense of social responsibility can even drive people away from faith. Ex-Mormon Bob McCue, a Calgarian, admits he feels the need on some level to protect society from beliefs that, while often beneficial, ultimately conflict with rationality and therefore retard social progress. "I feel that some things need to be said; that I would have been better off as a young person, young adult and mature Mormon if I had access to better and more information." Suppressing information inevitably leads to conflict, says McCue. "The more people behave as I am, the richer the information environment will become and the more quickly our culture will evolve in a healthy direction. "I am deeply concerned regarding the still-increasing degree of irrationalism in North American culture and the lessons we should be learning (about) the importance of placing greater emphasis on science and rational thought processes and problem solving, both in our educational institutions and our public discourse in general."

¹⁸¹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenomenology>.

These were all accurate quotes to which I have nothing to add.

Nonetheless, like Oler and Wulff, McCue believes in the positive power of faith. "Religion - or better put, myth and metaphor - has a profoundly important role to play in our lives. Literalist religion, though, can be grouped into one camp that is mostly dysfunctional."

Oler, Wulff and McCue raise the spectre of the "war on terror" as an example of how orthodoxies - Christian and Muslim - representing a small percentage of the world's overall faith population can hold humanity's fate in their hands. On one side, U.S. President George Bush has stated he feels his faith as an evangelical Christian has called him to lead. On the other, orthodox Muslims promote the idea of a one world "Caliphate", or homeland, to fulfil the Prophet Muhammad's goal of spreading the faith across the globe.

"Humans are under more pressure to change right now than at any other time in human history," says McCue. "Karen Armstrong in *The Battle for God* persuasively argues that this pressure is responsible for the recent resorting to ideological and physical violence on the religious right.

FEAR AND INSTABILITY

"The more people are in fear mode because their group's stories are under attack, the more people will behave in a deeply irrational fashion. The larger the percentage of any population that is living this way, the more likely the group itself is to become unstable. See the Middle East, for example. One of the good things about the conflict in the Muslim world is that it is drawing attention to the ills that can befall a social group when irrational forces gain control. That can happen in a democracy and, indeed, it appears likely that such will be the case over there."

McCue believes the answer is to allow for a broad, non-partisan outreach effort by introducing religion in schools. Rather than reinforcing limited beliefs, it will allow kids to study why religions exist, what their benefits and drawbacks are, and do it all without interference from parents driven by indoctrinated and irrational ideology. "This is one of the things that sets Europe apart from Canada and the U.S. Religious studies are part of the required high school curriculum in many countries because multiculturalism is so important over there. Hence, literalist religious belief is a harder sell over there."

Here is part of the text of an email I received last night from what sounds like a Mormon high school student: "Last Thursday in my social class we were given the assignment to do a speech on a subject of our choice. A boy in my class had read your website and collected information from it. Today we gave our speeches and he got up to share his. I could literally feel a pounding in my head as I was swelled with emotion. He spoke some very untrue things that hurt my feelings terribly. I then came home today determined to find where he got his information from. I read much of your website ..." She then bore her Mormon testimony, called me to repentance and asked that I "soften my heart" and re-read the Book of Mormon. And it is likely that this painful experience at a young age will cause her to look for answers to some questions I wish I had been given reason to try to answer when I was her age. Pain of this type, administered in small doses by our school system over the course of many years, is in my view the best hope we have to defuse the violent, ignorant forces that literalist religion wields here and elsewhere.

And "literalist belief" often turns into intolerant behaviour, notes Edmonton cult expert Stephen Kent. "A lot of people in society believe that individuals can hold whatever faith positions they want. It's the translation of faith positions into behaviour that becomes problematic. "

Across town, in a \$1.7-million monument to his belief in his inner truth, John de Ruiter is giving his followers answers. Whether they're useful or not is debatable, as is just about any point of faith. The guru won't elaborate. Five years since his last interview, he's still not talking.

de Ruiters' monument is to himself, from what I can tell. You don't get into the position he is in without a massive ego.

Conclusion

Overall, I thought Jeremy Loome did a great job of summarizing some of the critical issues related to spirituality. The forces that drive our behaviour in this regard are so deep that they are hard to understand. Indeed, I don't think that it is reasonable to expect us to understand them without a lot of help from people with a much broader perspective than most of us have. Loome provided a great deal of perspective in relatively few words.

Loome's articles and my commentary have been largely about the application of various branches of science to the question "why do we believe as we do?" A variety of interesting ideas have been reviewed, and a striking pattern of human belief – a tendency to near certain belief – in the most uncertain aspects of our existence became clear. This is one of the most troubling aspects of human psychology – a need for certainty. This causes deadly conflict in many parts of the world as well as troubling us on countless lesser ways.

And yet, the more we learn from science the more humble we have cause to be. As science helps us to bring more within our control as the result of our ability to predict the consequences of certain of our actions, it also shows us new questions and many aspects of our existence that appear to be beyond our control. These new questions challenge us in large measure due to our need for certainty. This is likely responsible at least in part for the resurgence of literalist religious belief around the world.¹⁸²

However, there is a deeper and more exiting lesson in what science is now teaching us that I hope will eventually hold sway. It is how deeply connected we all are, and how open we should be to the miracle of creation.

New galaxies burst into existence. Earth's ecosystem has a history of incredible fecundity, and even as we burden it terribly, continues to create new forms of life. Social organisms of new kinds continuously come into existence as a result in part of increasing cross-cultural connectivity, and it is breath taking to contemplate our most dramatic cultural phase transitions¹⁸³ through history's lens, such as the simultaneous blossoming of compassionate social rules (like the Golden Rule) in Hebrew, Greek, Indian and Chinese culture during the Axial Age (800 – 200 BCE)¹⁸⁴. Many human beings are reborn several times during life. Our brains generate new neurons, and new connections between neurons, until near death. And at

¹⁸² See Karen Armstrong, "The Battle for God".

¹⁸³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phase_transition.

¹⁸⁴ See Karen Armstrong, "The Great Transformation".

the most basic physical level we can at this point grasp – the quantum world – it seems that energy spontaneously foams into existence.

The reality of which we are part is creative at its core, as are we. To fail to grasp this insight is the greatest tragedy; to allow its mystery to inform our faith and guide our journey is to experience a continuous miracle or rebirth.