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George Dempster Smith, Jr., on the Book of Mormon
Reviewed by Louis Midgley

*On the Barricades* consists of thirty-four essays drawn from eight volumes of *Free Inquiry*—a magazine begun in November 1981 and dedicated to advancing what Paul Kurtz, its founding editor, describes as a “secular humanist” stance on religion. The editors of this book express pride in having made the label “secular humanist” a kind of battle cry in a struggle with Fundamentalists and others, thus generating a bewildering controversy. *On the Barricades* should be of interest to students of the Book of Mormon because it makes readily available the tendentious debunking contained in an essay entitled “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon,” originally published in 1984 by the owner of Signature Books, George D. Smith. This remarkable essay—which deserves to be better known—is situated in the section in *On the Barricades* devoted to “critiquing the religious mind,” something that Kurtz and company are busy doing.

Kurtz lauds reason and promotes a “scientific-naturalistic outlook,” while he pictures those he considers in thrall to

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1 Though not a household name, Paul Kurtz is described in *On the Barricades* as the author of “more than 500 articles and twenty-five books” (p. 381).

2 Previously available in *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (Winter 1983-84): 21-31, reprinted in *On the Barricades* (pp. 137-56)—though without the illustrations, one of which consisted of the Mark Hofmann forgery of the so-called “Anthon Manuscript” (p. 30).

3 The essays in *On the Barricades* are supplemented by “A Secular Humanist Declaration”—a manifesto or credo drafted by Kurtz which is heavily larded with secular sentiments and slogans. The book also includes interviews with B. F. Skinner, E. O. Wilson, Isaac Asimov, Steve Allen, and Jayne Meadows. The essays, constituting the bulk of the volume, are arranged under sections carrying titles such as “humanism,” “the new ethics,” “biblical criticism,” and “faith-healing and televangelism.” Each of these is preceded by an editorial introduction, as is the entire volume.

religion as opposed to both and hence as dangerous to people liberated from illusion or delusion. He insists that his "secular humanism" is not, however, necessarily hostile to "religious experience," if that language is used to identify something strictly within the confines of a "nature" from which God, at least as understood in the biblical tradition, has been systematically excluded, and if such experience is restricted to aesthetic sentimentality or secular moralizing. Given such a stance, it is not difficult to see why he published the views of cultural Mormons critical of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

The ideology promoted by Kurtz seems to provide the stuffings for a secular religion. For a number of reasons, however, the apologists for Kurtzian ideology insist that they are not promoting a religion, secular or otherwise. They strenuously decline to be seen as involved in marketing a religion because, as half-Marxists, they simply detest religion, which they picture as a skillfully administered narcotic whatever its form or content; they also fear that having their opinions identified as religious might lead to legal restrictions on the preaching of their ideology in American public education.

Though claiming Socrates, Epicurus, Lucretius, and other luminaries as exemplars of secular humanism, Karl Marx is the modern oracle for Kurtzian ideology: "Karl Marx, for a large part of the world, has been the most influential humanist of the twentieth century, even though his followers have taken a different approach. Marx was a disciple of the Enlightenment. He, too, rejected traditional religion and was committed to reason" (p. 71). That combination constitutes the crux of Kurtzism. But Kurtz also complains that "most forms of Marxism have betrayed Marx and the ideals of humanism" (ibid.). Both the magazine and the book, linked as they are to Prometheus Books, carry fulsome signs of a noxious political ideology. But Kurtz is not entirely credulous on such matters, for he grants that there are some "anti-humanist elements" in the writings of Marx, which eventually permitted or encouraged appalling abuses. His explanation: though "both Socrates and


6 Smith's essay was followed by "The History of Mormonism and Church Authorities: An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin," Free Inquiry 4/1 (Winter 1983-84): 32-34, which was also published in a longer version as "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin" in Dialogue 17/1 (Spring 1984): 18-43.
Marx pictured a utopia,” unfortunately it was “followers of Marx” who “became Marxists and were resolved to put it into practice” (p. 71), which was presumably a bad thing for them to have done, since the consequences have been horrendous.

Why would George D. Smith allow himself to become a kind of Kurtzian fellow-traveller? The explanation seems to be that cultural Mormons have a penchant for either promoting themselves as, or allowing themselves to become, tools in the hands of enemies of the Church. That someone is or was employed at Brigham Young University, or once served a mission, or was employed by the Church warrants him or her as an expert on Mormonism. And if they say the right things, they are eagerly sought by journalists and others anxious to publish opinions critical of the Restoration. Thus, Kurtz describes Smith as “a lifelong member of the church,” who “provides a detailed critical examination of Joseph Smith and his claim that the Book of Mormon was divinely revealed.” Like the earlier writing of Fawn McKay Brodie, George D. Smith pictures the Book of Mormon partly as Joseph Smith’s primitive autobiography (p. 143). He also claims that Ethan Smith’s View of the Hebrews provided much of the detail and plot for the Book of Mormon (pp. 144-45). There is not much in the way of original thought in George D. Smith’s account of the Book of Mormon.

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8 *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (Winter 1983/84): 20. Kurtz confidently characterized Sterling M. McMurrin “as one of the leading Mormons in America” (p. 32)—“a Mormon since birth, who questions the treatment of the history of the church by Mormon authorities” (p. 20).

9 Smith has been fascinated by the papers prepared by B. H. Roberts for discussion of the Book of Mormon with the Quorum of Twelve Apostles. He wrote to Fawn Brodie (on 13 August 1979) concerning his efforts to secure for her “a copy of the 1921 B. H. Roberts papers.” On 14 September 1979, he again wrote to Brodie to report that a paper he had read at the Sunstone Symposium “was well received by the 200-300.” (See “Book of Mormon Difficulties,” *Sunstone* 6/3 [May-June 1981]: 45-50, published after Smith had become one of the “national correspondents” for the magazine.) Brodie then wrote Everett Cooley (at Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah) about those papers: “I’ve been very interested in the B. H. Roberts materials ever since Sterling McMurrin or Hal [Harold W.] Bentley sent me a copy. I had read the incomplete version years ago, & at this date can’t remember who gave me a copy. Did you know that someone named George D. Smith Jr. (Smith Capital...
It would be tedious as well as unnecessary to rehearse the
details of George D. Smith’s attempt to denigrate Joseph Smith
and the Book of Mormon, since he draws on materials
commonly found in anti-Mormon polemics. But, in order to
provide an indication of the direction as well as quality of his
essay, it is necessary to examine what he says about the place of
the Book of Mormon in the life of believers. He recognizes
that Latter-day Saints see the Book of Mormon as either true or
false—either it is what it claims to be, an authentic ancient
history and divine special revelation, or it is nineteenth-century
fiction and hence a particularly glaring and monstrous
blasphemy. Smith, like others who have now found a ready
publishing outlet with Signature Books,\textsuperscript{11} seems to reject this stance, though he does not set out a plausible alternative. But he may have no other alternative in mind. "This literalistic true-false dichotomy," as he calls it, "continues today as Mormon leaders assert both that 'This is the only true church' and the \textit{Book of Mormon} is a literal history" (p. 138).

After running through the usual litany of anti-Mormon arguments to show that the Book of Mormon rests on nineteenth-century sources and is therefore frontier fiction, Smith complains that "in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, faithful Mormons still accept Joseph Smith's 'translations' from the Egyptian as literally 'true'" (p. 142). This seems to indicate where he stands on the Book of Mormon—it is not an authentic ancient history but was crafted by Joseph Smith out of nineteenth-century sources. He also asserts that the Saints still accept the Book of Mormon as a "literal history" and "is still a main tenet of the Mormon faith." Hence "only a small number of Latter-day Saint students confront the overwhelming evidence of contemporary source material used by Joseph Smith when he translated the \textit{Book of Mormon}. Still," he opines, "many Mormons continue to look for answers to questions that

challenge their faith” (p. 148). He also seems annoyed at the way the story of the restoration of the gospel “is reinforced in weekly Sunday school lessons, ‘correlated’ to reaffirm these ‘truths’ and to exclude any doubtful material. Seminary and Institute of Religion classes present Latter-day Saint high school and college students with ‘faithful history’—putting faith first and using ‘history’ that is edited to strengthen testimonies in the literal truth of Mormon origins, especially in the Book of Mormon” (p. 147).12 But Smith holds out some glimmer of hope, for “some Mormons have characterized the Book of Mormon, not as literal history, but as inspired allegory—a story to express the inspired communication received by Joseph Smith. Others view it as uninspired allegory.” He does not indicate which of these alternatives he accepts. Perhaps either will do, since both would, if accepted as true, remove the ground and content of faith for Latter-day Saints.

Unfortunately, from what seems to be Smith’s perspective, the traditional “Mormon belief-system has survived many assaults” from what he describes as “science and history” (p. 147).13 Robert Basil introduces the readers of On the

12 “When I write my book,” Smith informed Fawn Brodie in a letter dated 14 September 1979, “one chapter will deal with how the institution [the Church] survives such difficulties [as the book of Abraham], indoctrinates its youth with song and testimonies directed at an early age, and maintains a missionary system for its own as well as for other people.”

13 For the first time, and possibly because of the adverse publicity generated by reviews of Vogel’s The Word of God, Smith was obliged to include in Faithful History some essays that do not conform to the trendy revisionist party line on Mormon origins. These were written by Richard L. Bushman, Neal W. Kramer, David E. Bohn, and Louis Midgley. Edwin S. Gaustad and Martin E. Marty, two distinguished non-Mormon historians whose essays were included in Faithful History, also seem to see the issues associated with writing about the Mormon past in ways that do not necessarily support a revisionist ideology. “Does a balanced, unprejudiced approach produce the most ‘faithful’ history, or since no historian can be completely objective—should Mormon history be written with the ‘pre-understanding’ that Joseph Smith restored the ancient Christian church?” This is the way the blurb for Faithful History characterizes the key question addressed in that book, but this way of formulating the issue begs the crucial issue. Peter Novick, in his magisterial That Noble Dream (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), has shown that talk about objectivity constitutes a mythology and is conceptually confused, and that appeals to detachment, objectivity, balance, and so forth are made to privilege certain accounts without providing solid arguments. Historical
Basil, Gehrman, and Madigan, *On the Barricades* (Midgley) 11

*Barricades* to “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon” by claiming that

George Smith’s piece is a fascinating examination of the birth of our nation’s largest native religion, the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, and the composition of its Book of Mormon. “The membership of the Mormon church,” Smith writes, “is taught not to ‘question the mysteries’: ‘When the Prophet speaks, the thinking has been done.’ Feeling is placed over evidence, spirit over science, and faith over history. Feeling, spirit, and faith reflect instruction from church leaders, confirmed by personal prayer and study. The message is obedience.” (p. 80, cf. p. 147)

Whatever one might think of Mr. Basil’s garbling the name of the community that he wishes to ridicule, he does manage to select the passage from Smith’s essay that is most densely packed with slogans expressive of the bias that drives it.

When the choice is depicted as one between reason, science, and “free inquiry,” on the one hand, and “feeling, spirit, and faith” (and obedience to authority) on the other, it is easy to imagine which will appear the winner. But this is a false characterization of the choices, and it neither accurately accounts cannot avoid biases or prejudices, and all rest on some position taken by the writer about the subject matter. Hence all accounts of the past necessarily defend some point of view. It is quite unfortunate, though also understandable, that Peter Novick’s reflections on writing about the Mormon past, entitled “Why the Old Mormon Historians Are More Objective Than the New,” a paper read on 26 August 1989 in Salt Lake City at a Sunstone Symposium and available on audio recording (and in a rough transcription of the recording), were not included in Faithful History. In that paper, Novick indicates how the conversation over how best to approach Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon has recently shifted away from the dogmatic acceptance of naturalistic explanations on the grounds that such are required in order to achieve detachment, objectivity, or balance. In his “Editor’s Introduction” to Faithful History, Smith asserts that Mormon history can either be made “faithful to the past,” or it can be “written to express and support the faith”—and those are presented as mutually exclusive alternatives. This seems to be a subtle way of claiming that the faith of Latter-day Saints is not “faithful to the past,” that is, not grounded in historical reality. Such a claim has not been demonstrated, and, as it now stands, involves question-begging.
represents what is at stake in the conversation over the authenticity of the Book of Mormon nor how the discussion is being conducted. Those who reject the Book of Mormon have not demonstrated that it is false or that the gospel of Jesus Christ has not been restored. Smith’s literary ventures merely indicate that efforts are still being made to convince people that there is neither hope here and now nor the possibility of eternal life, for that is what is entailed in revisionist accounts of the Book of Mormon. However, thoughtful Latter-day Saints sense that there is no security afforded by intellectual attainment alone; there is simply no refuge or fortress, no hope, except in obedience to God. Hence one must start with the revelation—the Book of Mormon—and not with some generalized background or presumed “context” that has been devised to explain it away. To begin with the latter premise, the granting of which implicitly entails the absurdity of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, begs the crucial questions. Such naturalistic explanations are not evident in themselves and are not made evident by Smith’s essay in On the Barricades.