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Atheists and Cultural Mormons Promote a Naturalistic Humanism

Reviewed by Louis Midgley

The humanist revolts against the dogmatisms of typical theism but does not admit the dogmatisms that plague his own system.

Sterling M. McMurrin

Latter-day Saints may be unaware of the agenda of Prometheus Books. Massimo Introvigne, one of the better informed specialists on the varieties of anti-Mormonism, has recently described the company—one of the two publishers of *Religion, Feminism, and Freedom of Conscience*—as “the ultimate skeptic press.” It constitutes an example of what he labels “the secular anti-Mormon movement.” Hence it may be significant that this book was published by both Prometheus Books and Signature Books. I

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3 Ibid., 13.
will examine some of the links, ideological and otherwise, between these two publishers and their entrepreneurs.

**Prometheus Books and the Secular Anti-Mormon Movement**

Unlike the varieties of sectarian anti-Mormonism advanced by evangelical fundamentalists bent on promoting a brand of sectarian religiosity or on enticing money from those who can be frightened by the restored gospel, the secular (and presumably less irrational) anti-Mormonism linked to Prometheus Books, again according to Introvigne, “confines itself to the criticism of Mormonism and does not reveal any religious or philosophical ideas which should be adopted by those who abandon Mormonism.” But on this issue Introvigne seems only partly right. He senses that sectarian and secular anti-Mormons may borrow from each other, though otherwise they differ significantly. He is aware of some of this cooperation and borrowing. And he correctly notes that “it is clear that liberal LDS and RLDS intellectuals and historians share some views”—for example, that the Book of

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4 Introvigne distinguishes between what he labels a secular anti-Mormon movement, which can be generally understood as secular humanism (and which he sees flowing from the likes of Prometheus Books), and a religious counter-Mormon movement, which is sharply divided between a “rational” and “post rational” variety. Ibid., 12. See also his “The Devil Makers: Contemporary Evangelical Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism,” *Dialogue 27/1* (Spring 1994): 154–58. Introvigne is a partner in one of Italy’s largest law firms and also teaches sociology of religion at the Foggia branch of the Theological University of Southern Italy. He is also the director of the Center for Studies of New Religions (CESNUR) in Turin, Italy, which was established as part of the “Project New Religious Movements” founded in 1988 by the International Federation of Catholic Universities on behalf of four Vatican departments.

5 There are 556 agencies and individuals worldwide (but mostly in the United States) involved in a furious attack on what they like to call “cults”—Introvigne’s “new religious movements.” This is up from 510 in 1991. For the most recent listing, see Keith E. Tolbert and Eric Pement, *The 1993 Directory of Cult Research Organizations: A Worldwide Listing of 729 Agencies and Individuals* (Trenton, NJ: American Religious Center, 1993). Tolbert and Pement indicate that 174 of these have targeted Latter-day Saints; cf. ibid., 51–53, for the list of these agencies.


7 Ibid., 21.
Mormon is not an authentic ancient text. And he is correct that it would be "difficult to infer a conspiracy from cooperation" between cultural Mormons (for example, those linked to Signature Books) and RLDS spokesmen and scholars. He also assumes that those he labels "conservative Utah Mormons"—he has in mind Stephen E. Robinson, Daniel C. Peterson, and me—"even accuse part of the LDS and RLDS intellectual community of cooperating with anti-Mormons to promote their revisionist view of Joseph Smith and the Restoration. Similar accusations have been made with respect to the editorial policy of Signature Books."

Robinson, Peterson, and I have identified the revisionist agenda furthered by George D. Smith through Signature Books and the private foundation known as Smith Research Associates (and also through the atheist magazine Free Inquiry), an agenda which is also visible in other publishing outlets currently influenced, if not fully controlled, by those associated with Signature Books. In these venues the opinions and ideology of "liberal" RLDS "intellectuals" are clearly welcomed and promoted. And it is also clear that both secular and sectarian anti-Mormons sometimes find some of this literature useful for their own purposes.

However, merely because Robinson, Peterson, and I have pointed to a few instances of cultural Mormons and other dissenters on the fringes of the Mormon intellectual community making common cause with RLDS "liberals" or even with well-known anti-Mormon publicists, or instances of anti-Mormons, both secular and sectarian, drawing upon or making common cause with former Mormon intellectuals or dissenters, does not mean that we are describing a conspiracy of some kind. We have in mind exactly what Introvigne properly describes as informal "cooperation" between diverse agencies and individuals. No
one with whom I am familiar has inferred a dark conspiracy from such cooperation.

Introvi gne may not be entirely wrong when he claims that the secular variety of anti-Mormonism “is not interested in Mormon theology,” but “concentrates on the alleged social harm of Mormonism, the fraud perpetrated on the gullible, the LDS ‘corporate empire’ and its influence on state and national politics.”12 The secular anti-Mormon pictures Joseph Smith as a fraud seeking money, power, and sex. Most of these features have been perpetuated by the current leadership of Mormonism, which has evolved into a powerful and economical kingdom. These attitudes are epitomized in publications by “professional skeptics” whose aim is to “debunk” the claims made for religious miracles.13

And such people “normally publish with the Buffalo-based press Prometheus Books.”14

There are several striking examples of the publication of such attacks on the Church by secular anti-Mormons through Prometheus Books or agencies linked to it such as the atheist magazine Free Inquiry. Introvi gne identifies one example; I will identify several others. According to Introvi gne,

by far the most often quoted recent work written by a secular rationalist anti-Mormon is Trouble Enough,

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 14.
published in 1984 by psychiatrist Ernest H. Taves. Besides writing for *Playboy*, Taves is a member of the professional skeptics’ organization CSICOP and his book has been published by the ultimate skeptic press, Prometheus Books.15

Introvgine also notes that “professional skeptics no matter how clever in exposing all sorts of frauds, are not immune from being fooled by their present-day counterparts. Thus, it is not surprising to find that Dr. Taves is among the many victims of Mark Hofmann.”16 Introvgine chides Prometheus Books for allowing Taves to market his attack on the Church, which makes much of what has turned out to be a counterfeit blessing supposedly given by Joseph Smith to his son on January 17, 1844, even after the exposure of Mark Hofmann’s spectacular forgeries. Taves was confident in 1984 that this supposed “blessing,” had it been known earlier, would have changed the course of history by making it clear that the Reorganization had the legitimate claim to prophetic succession.17 Introvgine feels that Prometheus Books should not be applauded for continuing “to circulate, at least as late of [as?] 1992, Taves’ book without a word of caution about the bogus nature of the celebrated document.”18

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16 Introvgine, “The Image of the RLDS Church,” 16.


18 Introvgine, “The Image of the RLDS Church,” 16. In 1991, however, Taves corrected an earlier opinion that he grounded on a Hofmann forgery. In a book in which he strives to relate “some interesting aspects of Mormon history in the period” from the assassination of Joseph Smith to the coming of the transcontinental railroad to Utah, he acknowledges that in 1984, when he referred to the Anthon transcript, he “had reproduced a different copy of such characters than had surfaced in May 1980. Because of a recent series of events in Salt Lake City, it is now known that this ‘Anthon transcript’ is a forgery, sold by Mark W. Hofmann to the church under false pretenses.” Taves, *This Is the Place: Brigham Young and the New Zion* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), 35 n. 3. Taves claims to have been raised in Utah in a large family that was “half Mormon, half Mennonite.” Ibid., 34. He also claims that he did “not intend to present another biography of Brigham Young,” nor “a comprehensive history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” but merely some
Prometheus Books has published other equally ambitious attacks on Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the restored gospel. One such attack is contained in *The Final Superstition*, a book written by Joseph L. Daleiden, an economist who, according to his own account, started out to write about economics and ended up attacking God instead.19

Daleiden strives to replace what he understands as the truly terrible superstition of belief in God with his fully rational understanding of the world, his version of true "religion." In so doing he makes a frontal attack on Joseph Smith. "There are," he claims, "many unimpeachable sources which provide overwhelming evidence of the true nature of the founder of Mormonism."20 But Daleiden has only two sources: an essay by George D. Smith Jr.,21 owner of Signature Books, and the published version of Ed Decker’s unseemly movie, *The God Makers*.22

Daleiden seems fond of what Ed Decker has to say about Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints.23 But he also finds "it astounding that writers such as Ed Decker and Dave Hunt can do such a thorough job unraveling the pagan origins of Mormonism, yet fail to see that Christianity is based on the same myths."24 Instead of facing the problems their polemic against Mormonism creates for their brand of sectarian religiosity, Decker and Hunt, according to Daleiden, "narrow-mindedly attribute . . . to the work of the Devil" anything that might raise questions about their own ideology. "Had they been a little more objective, they would

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20 Ibid., 28.
23 Daleiden, *The Final Superstition*, 28-37, for his treatment of the "Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints—the Mormons." This is taken from the heading on page 28.
24 Ibid., 364.
have traced the basis of the Christian belief to the ancient myths as I have done," Daleiden concludes.\(^{25}\) He seems unaware of the extreme hostility to Ed Decker among the less irrational, sectarian anti-Mormons.\(^{26}\)

One rather notable feature of Daleiden’s book and much of the literature flowing from Prometheus Books and found in the atheist magazine *Free Inquiry* is that a concerted effort is being made to provide exactly what Introvigne claims secular anti-Mormons are not interested in doing, that is, a substitute religion to take the place of faith in God as that is understood by Latter-day Saints. Introvigne, it should be noted, labels the secular critics

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

of the Church as anti-Mormon, and describes the essentially Protestant evangelical attacks on the Church as counter-Mormon movements rather than as anti-Mormon.27 But we have just seen how easily the two may blend, at least in the sense that writers like Daleiden are willing to borrow heavily from even the lunatic fringe of sectarian anti-Mormonism (that is, Ed Decker and company) in order to denounce Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the contemporary Church.28

Perhaps we could say that in anti-Mormonism, whether countercult or secular, an enemy of an enemy is a friend. That this is so seems to be the case, if the recent publishing record of Smith Research Associates and Signature Books is any indication. George Smith, owner of Signature Books and publisher of some rather cunning attacks on the Church, its historical foundations, and essential teachings29 has now joined what Introvigne correctly

28 And evangelicals sometimes promote essentially secular attacks on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon without appearing to realize (or with wanton disregard to the fact) that such attacks are inimical to their own stance. Sandra and Jerald Tanner, for example, offer for sale Brent Metcalfe’s New Approaches to the Book of Mormon. But the authors whose essays appear in that book are not sympathetic with the approach promoted by the Tanners through Utah Lighthouse Ministry. Some of those authors are either indifferent or hostile to Christianity in any form. When in 1977 a “Latter-day Saint Historian” [D. Michael Quinn] published a booklet entitled Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s Distorted View of Mormonism, the Tanners responded with Answering Dr. Clandestine: A Response to the Anonymous LDS Historian (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, 1978). They still offer this item for sale. But they also praise Quinn, no longer a Latter-day Saint, since that suits their partisan agenda. In their most recent tabloid, they advertise their scathing attack on Quinn, while also offering for sale his 1981 talk attacking Elders Boyd K. Packer and Ezra Taft Benson and me. In the November 1994 issue of the Salt Lake City Messenger, the Tanners claim that this is “one of the best speeches ever given by a Mormon historian” and boast that Quinn therein “attacked the suppressive policies advocated by Apostles Benson and Packer.” This talk, initially circulated by both Quinn and the Tanners, was entitled “On Being a Mormon Historian.” It is now available in an expanded version as “On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath),” in Faithful History, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 69–111, which is offered for sale by the Tanners with a remark that “this book contains D. Michael Quinn’s speech which infuriated Mormon officials” (p. 16).
29 Signature Books has published books by Protestant evangelical anti-Mormons. For example, Rodger I. Anderson’s Joseph Smith’s New York Reputa-
identifies as the main purveyor of secular anti-Mormonism—Prometheus Books—in furthering his own secular agenda.

The Secular Anti-Mormon Movement Comes to Utah to “Dialogue”

*Religion, Feminism, and Freedom of Conscience*[^30] consists of the proceedings of what was originally described as a “Humanist/Mormon Dialogue.” This conclave was held on September 24–26, 1993, at the University Park Hotel in Salt Lake City, Utah[^31]. The official sponsor was something called the Institute for Inquiry, which is one of several fronts for what is called the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH), Inc. Among other ventures, CODESH publishes *Free Inquiry*, a magazine launched in 1981 by Paul W. Kurtz[^32] to advance the cause of what he calls “secular humanism.”[^33] The Kurtzian ideology


[^31]: Cost for attending this “dialogue,” without lodging, was $69.00.

[^32]: Paul Kurtz has popularized a credo entitled “Secular Humanist Declaration.” The first such declaration appeared in 1933 and the second in 1977. See *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, ed. Paul W. Kurtz (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993). Kurtz sees Karl Marx as the leading recent “secular humanist.” But he also strives to distinguish Marx from his various followers who have unwisely attempted to put his ideology into practice and have thereby produced dreadful evils. For additional details, see Louis Midgley, “George Dempster Smith, Jr., on the Book of Mormon,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 5–12.

[^33]: In addition to publishing *Free Inquiry*, CODESH sponsors many organizations and activities. Over the years a number of these CODESH-fronts have enlisted distinguished (or wealthy) fellow-travelers. One of these—the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (aka CSER)—from 1978 to 1990 listed “George Smith, president, Signature Books” as one of its participants.
functions as a secular religion. Those involved with Free Inquiry tend to refrain from emphasizing the atheist foundations of the ideology of naturalistic humanism—a more accurate and also less polemical label than "secular humanism."

Judging from A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue, what took place at the gathering assembled by Paul W. Kurtz (and George D. Smith, Jr.) was not a genuine dialogue between competing or alternative positions and certainly not a debate. A naturalistic humanism was assumed to constitute the truth. Brigham Young University and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were the targets, both being scolded for not conforming to the Kurtzian ideology.

The Book of Mormon—Either Ignored or Brushed Aside

Not much was said at the Smith-Kurtz conclave about the Book of Mormon, even though the program had a section entitled "Secular vs. Religious Interpretations of Scripture." The program listed Brent Lee Metcalfe as a participant, listing as his qualifica-

34 For various reasons those associated with Free Inquiry seek to avoid having their endeavor known as "religion." For example, if something like the particular brand of secular modernity advocated by Kurtz is recognized as a "religion," then it is possible that it might be legally excluded from the public schools rather than promoted therein as the latest fruit of reason and science and thereby made part of a fashionable secular indoctrination. But those not concerned about such essentially political issues see naturalistic humanism as a religion. For example, McMurrin, Religion, Reason, and Truth, 109, describes naturalistic humanism as a religion. He borrows his definition of religion from Paul Tillich (1886–1965), a prominent German-American Protestant theologian: "Religion is man's ultimate concern and commitment." And McMurrin emphatically treats naturalistic humanism as a genuine alternative to faith in God. Hence the following: "The strength of humanistic religion is its supreme commitment to reason, its faith in man's creative intelligence," and so forth (ibid., 75, cf. 77–79, 93–95). Instead of faith in God, and hence in at least the possibility of redemption from sin and the terrors of mortality, naturalistic humanism involves, according to McMurrin, faith in man, whatever that might mean.

35 I have borrowed the label "naturalistic humanism" from McMurrin; see Religion, Reason, and Truth, xii, 89, 81, 94, 280. This label is also employed by others. See, for example, Corliss Lamont, "Naturalistic Humanism," Free Inquiry 7/1 (Winter 1986–87): 6.
tion his editorship of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, a book published in 1993 by George D. Smith’s Signature Books containing ten essays attacking the Book of Mormon. A *Mormon/Humanist Dialogue* contains transcripts of talks by Gerald A. Larue and Robert S. Alley defending secularized interpretations of the scriptures; nothing appears defending the truth claims of the scriptures. For reasons not indicated, Metcalfe’s talk was not published.

The stance taken on the Book of Mormon at the Smith-Kurtz conclave seems to have been set out by Gerald A. Larue, who claimed that when Humanists

approach authoritative scripture, whether it be the Bible or the Book of Mormon, we do not abandon critical faculties. We bring to our examination the best analytical tools of our professions whether they be literary and historical analysis, or the fruits of archaeological research and studies in comparative religion, or simply good old common sense. (p. 30)

If Kurtz and Smith had arranged a genuine confrontation between two competing claims to religious truth, then the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims would have taken

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37 Given recent publicity surrounding Metcalfe, virtually all of which was generated by Metcalfe himself, George Smith and his associates at Signature Books may have thought it unwise to publish something by him in *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*. Instead of including something by Metcalfe, a talk by Gary James Bergera, who manages Signature Books for George Smith, was included in the volume. Bergera has made a habit of mocking Brigham Young University. See Bergera and Ronald Friddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985).

38 Larue, explaining his fondness for a “literary-historical” approach to scripture (p. 17), claims that “the scriptures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, notably the Book of Mormon, are also subject to such inquiry” (pp. 17-18). In itself this remark is unobjectionable, but Larue then asks his readers to consult Brent Lee Metcalfe’s *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*. This volume, however, does not appear to be an example of a sound literary-historical approach to the Latter-day Saint scriptures.
center stage, and at least someone would have defended both. So it turns out that what is not said about the Book of Mormon is perhaps the best single indication of the agenda at work behind the program set out by Smith and Kurtz.

However, the Book of Mormon turns up a few times in *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*. For example, it is cited when it can be called upon to seemingly support the ideology grounded in naturalistic humanism (George Smith, p. xiii), and it is also brushed aside as nineteenth-century fiction (Roberts, p. 52). But mostly it is ignored. Allen Dale Roberts, a critic of the Church whose profession is architecture, admits that Latter-day Saints take it seriously. “However,” he claims, “modern multi-disciplined scholarship has shown the Book of Mormon to be a nineteenth-century product rather than an ancient document as claimed by Joseph Smith” (Roberts, p. 52). Since Roberts operates without the benefit of scholarly citations, it is often difficult to determine what literature he might have in mind, but one can assume that he is referring to the Metcalfe volume already mentioned.\(^\text{39}\)

**A Who’s Who of Cultural Mormon and Humanist Figures**

The participants in the Smith-Kurtz “dialogue” were described in the program as “leading liberal Mormon thinkers and some of America’s best-known advocates of secular humanism.” But those with links to the Latter-day Saint community are not distinguished students of Mormonism, although some are known as dissidents (for example, Lavina F. Anderson, Cecilia K. Farr, and Gary James Bergera), former or current editors of *Dialogue* (L. Jackson Newell, F. Ross Peterson, Martha S. Bradley), or both (Allen Dale Roberts). One surprising feature of *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue* is the absence of Sterling M. McMurrin, emeritus professor of history at the University of Utah. McMurrin has roots in the Mormon culture and seems committed to his brand of naturalistic humanism. In addition, he frequently voices his opinion about Mormon things. As we will see, McMurrin has

been an eloquent spokesman for the religion of naturalistic humanism. His absence from A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue leaves a major lacuna in the book.

The cadre of Kurtzian “secular humanists,” contrary to the promotional material, is neither well known nor distinguished. Latter-day Saints can be excused for not being familiar with Robert S. Alley (who teaches humanities at the University of Richmond in Virginia), Gerald A. Larue (a retired professor of biblical studies at the University of Southern California), Vern L. Bullough (described as “distinguished professor emeritus at State University of New York at Buffalo”), or Bonnie Bullough.

40 Vern L. Bullough, in Free Inquiry 8/3 (Summer 1988): 58, is described as the “author and editor of more than 20 books on history, sexology, neurology and other fields.” With Bonnie Bullough, he has written or edited at least eight books on nursing. Earlier he was “dean natural and social sciences at the State University of New York College at Buffalo [sic]” (ibid., 58). He is currently listed in Free Inquiry as Dean of the Institute for Inquiry, which offers “courses in humanism and skepticism,” as well as holding “an annual summer session and periodic workshops.” He is also listed as professor of history, California State University, Northridge, and as part of the Secretariat of The Academy of Humanism, a front for CODESH “established to recognize distinguished humanists and to disseminate humanistic ideals and beliefs”; see Free Inquiry, inside back cover, any recent issue. The Humanism/Mormon Dialogue in 1993 was cosponsored by his Institute for Inquiry. Bullough’s publications include An Annotated Bibliography of Homosexuality (New York: Garland, 1976); The Frontiers of Sex Research (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1979); Homosexuality: A History (New York: Garland, 1979); with Bonnie Bullough, he edited Human Sexuality: An Encyclopedia (New York: Garland, 1994); with Lillit Sentz, he edited Prostitution: A Guide to Sources, 1960–1990 (New York: Garland, 1992); with Bonnie Bullough, he produced Prostitution: An Illustrated Social History (New York: Crown, 1978); with James Brundage, Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1976); with Bonnie Bullough, Sin, Sickness and Sanity: A History of Sexual Attitudes (New York: Garland, 1977), and so forth. With Gerald Larue, he is a Senior Editor of Free Inquiry, to which he is a frequent contributor. See, for example, his essay on “The Causes of Homosexuality: A Scientific Update,” Free Inquiry 13/4 (Fall 1993): 40–42, 44–47. Bullough has also opined on Mormon topics; see his “Mormonism Re-veiled,” Free Inquiry 9/1 (Winter 1988/89): 57–58, which is a review of Linda Sillitoe and Allen Dale Roberts, Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Murders (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988)—Signature Books placed an advertisement for this book on the following page; and “A Mormon University,” Free Inquiry 6/3 (Summer 1986): 58–59, which is a jaundiced, favorable review of Bergeira and Priddis’s Brigham Young University: A House of Faith. See also Thomas
(retired professor of nursing at State University of New York at Buffalo). And Paul W. Kurtz (also retired from the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he taught philosophy) is not exactly a household name, especially among the Saints, even though he is the author of "more than 500 articles and twenty-five books" and the editor of an atheist magazine. George Smith, however, is now rather well known in Mormon intellectual circles for his publishing enterprises and for his hostility toward Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

How might "some of America's best-known advocates of secular humanism" have gotten involved in a conversation with "leading liberal Mormon thinkers"? George Smith, who is listed as editor of A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue, and who owns Sign-
nature Books—one of the book’s publishers—has ties with Paul Kurtz and Free Inquiry, where a decade earlier he published an essay entitled “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.” This essay attacking Joseph Smith’s claims was republished by Prometheus Books in 1989 in On the Barricades, an anthology of essays from Free Inquiry. And George Smith’s name has appeared frequently in the pages of Free Inquiry.

Naturalistic Humanism?

Paul Kurtz saw the occasion of the “dialogue” between humanists and cultural Mormons as “historic, for as far as we are aware this is the first formal exchange of ideas by Mormons and humanists. In a pluralistic society,” he claims, “it is important that people from diverse religious and nonreligious traditions engage in debate to define differences and more meaningfully to discover common ground” (p. xvi). Unfortunately, he does not indicate why this is so.

Instead, Kurtz strives to define “humanism.” He grants that the term “means different things to different people” (p. xvii). He also admits that, “like ‘democracy,’ ‘socialism,’ ‘peace,’ ‘motherhood,’ or ‘virtue,’ humanism is all things to all men” (p. xvii). After giving up on finding a satisfactory definition, Kurtz insists that the term “has been used to justify a set of ethical principles” (p. xviii). And then, without argument, he links humanism and freedom. But what is meant by “freedom” is no easier to pin down than is the meaning of “humanism.” Accord-

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46 See Basil, Gehrman, and Madigan, eds., On the Barricades, 137–56.
47 In addition to publishing essays in Free Inquiry, George Smith has been listed in Free Inquiry as a contributor first to a Religion and Biblical Criticism Research Project sponsored by CODESH and then later to the Committee for the Scientific Study of Religion (CSER). Flynn, “The Humanist/Mormon Dialogue,” 55. describes George Smith’s “Salt Lake City-based Signature Books” as having “perhaps the sharpest point of focus for church rebuke. No fewer than five scholars published under its imprint have been excommunicated.” Flynn has in mind Lavina F. Anderson, Maxine Hanks, D. Michael Quinn, Paul Toscano, and David P. Wright. And “for its part, Signature has Courageously released new titles by Quinn and Toscano since their excommunication” (ibid.).
ing to Kurtz, "the first principle of humanism, thus, is its commitment to the idea of freedom. But what," he asks, "does that mean?" (p. xviii). "Freedom" means different things in different contexts to different people. Kurtz lumps together several of these sometimes radically different meanings. (Propaganda often relies on this sort of equivocal use of language.)

George Smith claims that it was in "the Renaissance, when humanism was born" (p. x). Kurtz, unlike Smith, sees a form of humanism at work much earlier than the Renaissance. He claims as part of his "humanist" heritage figures like Socrates, as well as Epicurus and Lucretius—whose writings provide the most bold manifestation of atheism in the ancient world.48 We may agree that there was a classical humanism among the ancient Greeks, and that the Renaissance was an effort to recover something of that variety of humanism. And there have been other "humanisms" as well.

George Smith can be forgiven for not describing in detail the various "humanisms" of the past. He seems to have striven to establish two points: that there was and is a "humanism" that values a "freedom" grounded in "rationality," and that Brigham Young University and the Church have turned against these values,

48 McMurrin, Religion, Reason, and Truth, 79, asserts that naturalistic humanism "has no theologians, because it has no gods. But it has prophets, poets, and philosophers—Democritus, Aristotle, Epicurus, Lucretius, Bruno, and Spinoza; Voltaire, Mill, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey." This list of authors is a little puzzling. Did Aristotle dispense entirely with an idea of god? And did not Spinoza advance some form of pantheism? McMurrin may see pantheism, whether grounded in or derived from some ontological speculation or mystical experience or otherwise, as merely a sentimental form of atheism—and if that is his view, then I am in agreement with him. But he should explain and justify his stance. And certain notions of God are consistent with varieties of humanism. For example, McMurrin holds that "Humanism is not easily distinguished from certain types of impersonalistic theism, and in its more sentimental forms it may be regarded as naturalistic pantheism and may have much in common with traditional religious mysticism" (ibid.). And the claim that naturalistic humanists have no gods but still have "prophets" reminds me of the equivocation currently going on among cultural Mormons over who is a "Mormon" and also by those who now want to argue that Joseph Smith was a "prophet," so to speak, even though there were no angels who visited him, no Lehi colony, no resurrected Jesus of Nazareth and even, for some, no God. When dealing with "theology" we would seem to be in need of a truth-in-labeling law.
which he takes to be part of the Mormon heritage. Smith's remarks seem intended to set the agenda for *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*, and hence are not a full or even competent account of humanism. We will have to look elsewhere for such a thing.

Though the Smith-Kurtz parley is described as a Mormon dialogue with humanists, there is little in it resembling a conversation between different points of view in which a Latter-day Saint concept and a currently fashionable variety of humanism are compared and contrasted. Instead, a ragtag group was assembled "to discuss freedom of conscience as it applies to academic freedom and to expressions of feminism" (Smith, p. vii) at Brigham Young University and in the Church generally. This book blasts away at Brigham Young University and the Church for not conforming to Kurtzian ideology.

Hence, according to Smith, "what is open to debate is whether principles of what Mormons refer to as free agency apply to feminists and to teachers at Brigham Young University, which is owned by the Mormon church" (p. vii). So the point of this so-called "dialogue," let me emphasize, is not to discuss the viability of secular assumptions, that is, the religion of what Kurtz calls "secular humanism," in the light of the restored gospel, or even to compare and contrast Kurtzian ideology with the beliefs of genuine Latter-day Saints; the point of the book is to roast Brigham Young University (and the Church) for failing to act on the basis of what Mormon dissidents claim are both secular and Mormon beliefs. But this cannot be done without revealing the essentially atheist bias of Kurtzian ideology.

I will illustrate the atheist bias grounding *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*. Signs of it can be found in George Smith's opening remarks where he claims that, following the Renaissance, a "thirst for understanding began to challenge subservient reliance on both the state and received tradition" (p. xi). And then "by the nineteenth century humanism incorporated the positivist thinking of August Comte, which produced a value system independent of belief in God" (p. xi). It would have been more accurate to describe Comte's "positivism" as simply hostile to belief in God. Be that as it may, we are now close to the ideology advanced by Kurtz in *Free Inquiry*. Smith's inclusion of Comte's positivism as part of the ideology of naturalistic humanism would seem to indi-
cate the pedigree of the ideas being peddled in A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue.

**Humanism or Many Humanisms?**

But George Smith also notes that “twentieth-century theologians such as Karl Barth asserted that the Christian gospel was part of humanism in that it taught that each person is uniquely created in the image of God” (p. xi). There is, according to Barth, a “Christian humanism.” But it is grounded on what Barth liked to call “God’s humanitarianism.” I will explain.

If we can identify a classical humanism among the Greeks, and a Renaissance humanism, followed by Enlightenment brands of humanism, a Marxist variety and so forth, then we are faced with an assortment of humanisms. We can also agree with George Smith that, since the eighteenth century, humanist assumptions have replaced the religious assumptions previously grounding our culture. The humanisms of the past (especially the older Greek and Renaissance varieties) did not, at least for the most part, openly attack the religious foundations of morality. We can perhaps see a process in which morality is increasingly separated from a religious grounding and divine sanction. Where Renaissance humanists were at least nominally Roman Catholic, in the humanisms that have arisen since the Enlightenment we see increasingly secular, naturalistic ideologies taking over, in which faith in God has become an overt target. The large names in these humanisms are some of those Martin Marty has labeled the “God-killers,” including Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.

Humanisms at least since the Enlightenment have become increasingly secular, tending to advocate life without divine consolation, a society without church or community, and philosophy apart from or in direct opposition to divine revelation or prophetic truth claims. They have added a fashionable humanitarianism to

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the older humanist rhetoric; they wish to eliminate all suffering, oppression, privilege, inequality, war, and so forth. And they have replaced God and divine judgment with human progress grounded in or expressed through science and technology. Hence, it is not surprising that Kurtz boasts that "Karl Marx, for a large part of the world, has been the most influential humanist of the twentieth century." And Kurtz holds that the nice thing about Marx was that "he, too, rejected traditional religion and was committed to reason." But Kurtz also admits that some of the most empty, deceptive, oppressive, brutal regimes ever known have trumpeted humanist slogans and ideology, and especially those associated with Marx and his various disciples.

Recently humanists have tended to be embarrassed by communism, if not by Karl Marx. Communism offers a kind of laboratory for investigating the practical impact of the ideology of naturalistic humanism. For example, McMurrin notes that criticism of such a humanism sometimes comes from those who insist that "agnosticism and atheism are one with the godlessness of Marxist communism. They fail to realize," he claims, "that the evil in Soviet communism does not follow inevitably from its atheism, but rather from its false religion." Apparently McMurrin is willing to grant that humanism can become a false religion—when it promotes evils ranging from sybarite behavior to the politics of the police state. McMurrin thus sees communism as "an idolatrous religion . . . which yields a perverted moral idealism." And it must therefore be distinguished from a "true Humanism" that worships man and human history in ways that cause or at least allow democracy to work properly, and so forth.

What exactly is this false god that Marx taught his disciples to worship? Much like Kurtz, McMurrin neglects to explain why those who embrace the Marxist version of naturalistic humanism and with it what he calls "an idolatrous religion in which men worship the false god 'Dialectic,' a religion which gives a pseudo-

51 See Basil, Gehrman, and Madigan, eds., On the Barricades, 71.
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
divine approval to the consummation of their own interests and creates in them a fanatic devotion to a perverted moral idealism,”56 got that way. Did the atheism of Marx have nothing to do with what he calls the “godlessness of Marxist communism”?57 But the Marxist version of naturalist humanism is not godless—remember, it is an idolatrous religion and therefore worships a false god. And, “if religion is man’s ultimate concern and commitment,” as McMurrin claims, borrowing from Paul Tillich, then everyone necessarily has a religion of some sort, since everyone is concerned about something, and most of what constitutes the object of our deepest and controlling concern or commitment turns out to be illusions or idols and potentially or actually demonic. The problem then is not in determining whether man is religious, but in distinguishing true from false religion, or God from idols.58 When McMurrin talks about true and false humanisms, or about humanists who worship false gods, he has accepted something like my formulation of the problem.

Hence, McMurrin at times seems to be saying, and perhaps correctly, that it is idolatry—the worship of false gods—that is the ultimate threat to both individuals and groups. But notice—apparently not even or especially humanists are exempt from the excess or deficiency of idolatry. That is, humanists are not exempt from taking a moral holiday. For Kurtz, as we have noted, evils seem to flow whenever peoples have acted on the teachings of Karl Marx. Be that as it may, it seems that, when naturalistic humanism yields unacceptable results, as it has in the case of communism, it is brushed aside as a false religion—it is not a true humanism. I agree. Presumably the humanist gets it right when the true “God” is worshipped, otherwise we end up with idolatry and the moral evil that necessarily flows from worshipping false gods. So we must ask the question: is there a norm that will assist us in distinguishing true and false humanisms? Or is there a genuine Christian humanism?

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
Christian as Opposed to a Naturalistic Humanism; Need the Believer Abandon All Genuine Humanist Ideals?

Some Christians, observing the catastrophes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have seen in the humanisms of our age a degenerate form of Christianity. It takes on many of the trappings of religion even as it proclaims itself the vehicle for liberating mankind from the oppression of priests and other similar evils, and thereby proudly asserts its own moral superiority. Recent humanisms thus appear to thoughtful observers as surrogate religions and hence forms of idolatry. Critics have argued that a “secular humanism” or Marxism or whatever it might be called may come to constitute the “faith” of a few intellectuals, but such a surrogate “religion” can hardly sustain itself with its denatured moral idealism, and in the face of the allure of power, wealth, or fame. And when the enlightened few try to make their version of atheism the religion of the masses, they seem to need the authority of a police state to suppress competing faiths and, in the name of “liberation,” interdict as much as possible the free exercise of religion. Some believers therefore insist that we are faced with a choice between attractive but impoverished humanist ideals and genuine trust in God. But others have denied that such a radical choice is necessary. Let me explain.

As George Smith mentions, Karl Barth, the great Swiss-German Protestant theologian, once argued that by itself and apart from an authentically Christian grounding, humanism, whatever else one might say about it, does not have the power to sustain itself. Where T. S. Eliot called humanism a religion, Barth described it as an ideology. And both insisted that secularized humanisms are weak and perhaps impotent in the face of the evils found in this world—they may even foster or justify terrible evils. At least in the case of communism, apologists for naturalistic brands of humanism tend to agree. Barth believed that Christianity, when grounded on an understanding of the humanitarianism of God, is the true humanism.

Karl Barth dealt with these issues in 1949. As a participant in a conference held that year in Geneva, Switzerland, Barth discovered that Marxist ideologues, as well as various philosophers, scientists,
and so forth, were unable to define humanism, though the Marxists, of course, insisted that only their ideology was the true form. Barth argued that the proper understanding of human things is to be found in the fact of God’s humanity, for in the incarnation we see God’s love for and identification with humanity. In Jesus, God identifies himself directly and fully with human suffering, sin and guilt. Barth also argued that in Jesus Christ we have a solid ground for defending human rights and human worth, and that nowhere else can we find such a ground. We see in Jesus Christ what we should be and can be through the grace of God. Hence, for Barth, the Christian is not required to deny any genuine virtue or truth that may be found in the array of competing humanisms; the Christian can be for man in the proper way, and not thereby be against God; if he is against God he simply cannot fully be for man.

George Smith, though he mentions Karl Barth, brushes aside his understanding of a Christian humanism with the following observation: “religious thinkers” championed only some of the vaunted principles of humanism, adding that “humanists inevitably found themselves on a collision course with religion” (p. xi). And so it is with Latter-day Saints, according to Smith. But his treatment of these issues is superficial. He seems to assume that faith in God is inimical to the highest and genuine aspirations or interests of mankind. It is typical of naturalistic humanists to assert their moral superiority over those they consider unenlightened believers. We are therefore not surprised to find him claiming that, though Mormonism, in his account, “arose and flourished in an atmosphere of toleration and freedom of conscience that the pluralistic society of nineteenth-century American provided” (p. xi), “a century after freedom of conscience was invoked to form their radically new religion, the rhetoric of some Mormon leaders is ambivalent regarding the universality of such a right” (p. xiii).

And now we come to the point of George Smith’s sketchy account of the rise of an essentially naturalistic and atheist brand of humanism and what he considers its quarrels with faith in God. He strives to invoke the slogans of the brand of humanism advanced by Kurtz to embarrass Brigham Young University and the Church. In a series of inaccurate assertions, Smith claims that, “at a time when academic freedom is circumscribed by loyalty
oaths and doctrinal hegemony at Brigham Young University, when Mormon scholars are excommunicated for discussing contradictions in historical documents, it is easy to forget that Mormon leaders have consistently embraced 'free agency' as an essential principle of Mormon doctrine" (p. xiii).

There are, incidentally, no "loyalty oaths" administered at Brigham Young University. The faculty are merely expected to believe and act in a manner consistent with what is required of any genuine Latter-day Saint. That requirement hardly constitutes a crime against humanity, though it may seem oppressive to certain cultural Mormon dissidents. And no one has been excommunicated simply "for discussing contradictions in historical documents."

George Smith employs the expression "free agency," which he conflates with freedom of conscience, academic freedom, legal rights, and so forth. Hence he complains that "freedom" at Brigham Young University is, as he puts it, "circumscribed by loyalty oaths and doctrinal hegemony," whatever that might mean. "We hope that the Mormon community will recall its heritage as religious humanists, a heritage of freedom of conscience and expression that requires the community to find a way to listen to thoughtful dissenters" (p. xv). But since when, we must ask, have Latter-day Saints ever thought it necessary to be instructed by unbelievers or apostates?

For Those Really Interested in Moral Agency, Please Turn to the Book of Mormon

A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue contains charges about alleged violations of "free agency" by Brigham Young University (and the Church). These diatribes are grounded in confusion coupled to quaint slogan-thinking. Some of this confusion could have been avoided if the Book of Mormon had been taken seriously, for in it are found the primary texts setting forth the notion that human beings are moral agents able to distinguish good from evil. George Smith cites 2 Nephi 2:15–16 to support his contention that, "according to the Book of Mormon, one purpose of earth life is to allow eternal beings to make choices" (p. xiii). From his gloss of Lehi's instructions to Jacob he eventually concludes that
it is wrong for Brigham Young University to forbid "academic work that contradicts fundamental church doctrines" (p. xv).

But the point of Lehi's testament to Jacob was to emphasize that only those who keep the commandments will prosper, while those who do not keep those commandments will be cut off from the presence of God (see 2 Nephi 1:20), and, I might add, place themselves outside the people of God. The freedom Lehi is talking about is a fundamental freedom to choose either liberty and eternal life or captivity and death; it does not appear to be a liberty somehow guaranteeing to dissidents a right to attack fundamental teachings of the restored gospel or the texts upon which they depend from inside the Church or the institutions it sponsors. (Of course, dissidents and unbelievers are legally free to express their opinions outside the community of memory and faith.)

There is no mention in the Book of Mormon (or in other Latter-day Saints scriptures) of something called "free agency." The expression "free agency" has been used by Latter-day Saints looking for a catchy label to embody a host of longings for various freedoms and rights, including also the teachings found in the Book of Mormon on moral agency. But whatever the content poured into the expression "free agency," the scriptures simply do not guarantee to dissidents and apostates some right to have it their own way within the Church.

The expression "free agency" is typically employed by the Saints as a way of referring to what the scriptures identify as agency or moral agency, both scriptural terms that clearly refer to the power of choice within each human being that makes us morally responsible before God for our beliefs and actions. Understood in that light, it is simply not possible for anyone or any institution to take away one's agency without taking away life itself. For what is called agency in the Book of Mormon is the power in each human being to distinguish between light and darkness, good and evil, right and wrong; agency identifies the capacity to distinguish and choose between those large moral alternatives. What Lehi teaches is that we are moral agents. And we will be held accountable by God for the choices we make. This teaching is set within the context of a passionate appeal to keep the commandments, or suffer the consequences of being cut off
from the presence of God—the ultimate divine cursing for failure to make or keep covenants with God.

In addition to confusion about what is found in the Latter-day Saint scriptures concerning moral agency, George Smith has not stated accurately what is going on at Brigham Young University. For example, he charges that “BYU faculty have been forbidden from participating in unapproved symposia and conferences” (p. xv). The Brethren merely issued a statement cautioning Latter-day Saints to avoid situations in which their presence would give aid and comfort to enemies of the Church, that is, of appearing with enemies of the Church at symposia. But forbidden? Certainly no more than the Brethren were able to forbid George Smith’s associates from appearing with “advocates of secular humanism” at the Smith/Kurtz symposium.

Smith seems troubled because the Brigham Young University mission statement, as he puts it, “forbids academic work that contradicts church doctrines” (p. xv). Wow! Now there is a powerful restraint on the freedom of those who voluntarily come to Brigham Young University precisely because they are believers. Is Smith suggesting that anti-Mormons, atheists, and other dissidents somehow have or should have either a legal or moral right to teach at Brigham Young University, and the faithful Latter-day Saints a responsibility to pay them to attack the Church and its fundamental teachings?

It appears that Smith is arguing that, in order for Brigham Young University to be the kind of secular institution that he might find attractive, it must permit and even encourage its faculty to advance views radically in opposition to the fundamentals of the restored gospel. If that is not permitted, then what? Someone’s “free agency” is being violated? But exactly how? No one is forced to teach at Brigham Young University. Nothing forces anyone to become or remain a Latter-day Saint, if doing so violates their conscience.

There is simply nothing in the authentic teachings of the Church, properly understood, that requires either the Saints or Brigham Young University to dig their own graves. Certainly members of the Church (including the faculty and students at Brigham Young University) are and ought to be free from whatever they choose to believe is wrong, sinister, or dangerous.
assume that faithful Latter-day Saints have a right of conscience, just as do atheists or so-called secular humanists.

I find it unseemly for George Smith and Paul Kurtz to hold a conference in which dissidents and those outside of the community of Saints make it their business to attack Brigham Young University and the Church merely because a few people have been disciplined by the Church and have ended up charging the Church with being involved in “spiritual abuse” (Anderson, pp. 3–8). And two of the several people turned down annually for candidacy for continuing faculty status at Brigham Young University59 have claimed through the press that they were not advanced to candidacy because they published opinions embarrassing to the Church. Incidentally, those having doubts about the wisdom manifest by the faculty review process at Brigham Young University in not advancing Cecilia K. Farr to candidacy for continuing status should examine her talk entitled “Dancing through the Doctrine: Observations on Religion and Feminism” in A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue.60

Humanist Feminism

The last part of A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue is truly disappointing. It consists of three talks dealing with feminism. Bonnie Bullough, apparently a nurse, summarily finds Brigham Young University and hence the Church guilty of “repression of women” (p. 118). But she believes that, until very recently, everyone has been guilty of this crime. And “humanism” had not become a liberating social force when the Church was getting started. She holds that “humanism did not develop as an organized social movement until the twentieth century when it was established as an arm of the Unitarian church” (p. 118). A what? That is right—an arm of the Unitarian Church. Hence, she admits,

59 Neither Cecilia K. Farr nor David C. Knowlton had been at BYU long enough to reach the point where they might have been denied continuing status. Instead, at the routine preliminary third-year review they were not advanced to candidacy for continuing faculty status, which is quite a different thing from being denied continuing faculty status.

"some call humanism a religion and some do not" (p. 118). Now really? A religion? And even an arm of the Unitarian Church?

Bonnie Bullough then notes that "the great thinkers and writers of the [humanist] movement remain mostly men; and since it is primarily a movement of ideas rather than activities, this is important" (p. 119). She then tries to explain this anomaly before asserting that

Mormonism and humanism differ most on the issue of authority. Mormons believe there is a god who rewards and punishes, and that god is male. More significant is the fact that the president of the Mormon church speaks for God, and God’s pronouncements in the last two decades have been paternalistic and repressive of women. (p. 119)

She also claims that women are seen as equal with men from the humanist perspective, while they are not in any way equal according to Latter-day Saints. We might be forgiven for asking exactly what there is in the ideology of a naturalistic humanism, as such things are understood by Bonnie Bullough, that yields equality for women. The answer is instructive. It is, she claims, because “humanists do not accept divine authority,” and “they do not believe in an after-life, heaven and hell, divine punishment, or divine rewards. Women are as devoid of divine support as men,” she claims, “so they are at the most basic level equal” (p. 120). This is naturalistic humanism at its very best—a real shout of joy; it simply does not get any better than this.

But there is more “good news,” for, according to Bonnie Bullough, “some Mormon women have lost the love and support of men who are threatened by women’s drive for freedom” (p. 121). But instead of freedom, what she really has in mind is power, for she immediately complains about how Latter-day Saint “women have lost power from the early church to the present time” (p. 121). And this is so because men have at the same time been acquiring and abusing power. So the struggle is political, with the end being power and not merely some appropriate equalities.

The women whose views are represented in A Mormon/ Humanist Dialogue seem deeply concerned, even obsessed, with
power. In addition to Bonnie Bullough's comments, Lavina F. Anderson refers to a "power struggle," to "the sense of powerlessness," and to a need for a "sense of empowerment" for the women she strives to represent (pp. 4–5, 8). And Marti Bradley claims that she hears "too many [Mormon] women apologize for their statements of power as they acknowledge concern about women's issues and protest the current state of affairs" (p. 124). She also affirms that "we feminists are the Reds of an earlier generation. Many believe we pose the most significant threat yet confronted in the twentieth century to the integrity of the LDS church and the *patriarchal powerhold* of the Mormon community" (pp. 124–25, emphasis added). Finally, she complains about "the narrowing of women's political power within the [LDS] community" (p. 125, emphasis added). She then asks "why the sustained attack against women" (p. 134), as if it were obvious that such a thing has and is taking place.

An obvious common feature of the four talks by women published in *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue* is the impassioned expression of pain they feel over their presumed powerlessness. David Hume (1711–1776), the famous Scottish historian and philosopher, once wrote something about the politics of the power struggle he saw occasionally going on between men and women within marriages. Being a friend, as he says, to both women and truth, he felt obliged to give an accurate account of this struggle—one he felt harms both the married state and the larger community dependent upon it. (I warn the reader that Hume is being both playful and ironic, both of which are now quite out of fashion in discussions of so-called "women's issues." That is, Hume is not, as they now say, "politically correct.") According to Hume, he will

tell the women what it is that our sex complains of most in the married state; and if they be disposed to satisfy us in this particular, all other differences will easily be accommodated. If I be not mistaken, 'tis their love of dominion, which is the ground of the quarrel, tho' 'tis very likely, that they will think it an unreasonable love of it in us, which makes us insist so much upon the
point. However this may be, no passion seems to have more influence on female minds, than this for power.61

But he then added the much needed qualification: “But to be just, and to lay the blame more equally, I am afraid it is a fault of our sex, if the women be so fond of rule, and that if we did not abuse our authority, they would never think it worth while to dispute it.” And he added the following sage observation:

Tyrants, we know, produce rebels; and all history informs us, that rebels, when they prevail, are apt to become tyrants in their turn. For this reason, I could wish there were no pretensions to authority on either side; but that every thing was carried on with perfect equality, as between two equal members of the same body.62

If power is the issue, Hume has said much of what needs to be said.

“An Uncertain Sound”63

L. Jackson Newell64 created a minor commotion in 1985 when he strove, as he put it, to “marshal the forces” to battle against what he saw as a betrayal of some of his most cherished values65 by the leaders of the Church. He again couches his remarks in *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue* in a show of moral earnestness (pp. 31–39). But his emotional intensity over the issues

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62 Ibid., 559–60.
63 This title is taken from 1 Corinthians 14:8: “For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?”
64 L. Jackson Newell has recently accepted a temporary appointment as president of Deep Springs College in California, but will still teach at the University of Utah. With his wife, he once edited *Dialogue*.
65 See Newell, “An Echo from the Foothills: To Marshal the Forces of Reason,” *Dialogue* 19/1 (Spring 1986): 26–34. This is the published version of a talk, originally subtitled “To Marshal the Forces of Reason and Conscience,” that was presented on 21 November 1985 to the B. H. Roberts Society. An earlier version of Newell’s paper was read on 24 August 1985 to a Sunstone gathering in Salt Lake City.
he raises once again seems to have clouded his understanding and colored his judgment.

Some of Professor Newell’s moral idealism is difficult to dispute. Who does not at least claim to value the quest for knowledge and understanding? And, of course, I congratulate Newell in encouraging the freedoms that make that sort of thing possible. Who would want to oppose “liberty, justice, and equality” (p. 33), when these are properly understood? And who would oppose “peace, mercy and love”? (p. 33). But Newell now adds to his earlier complaints against the Church66 the charge that “by the summer of 1993 the Mormon church had become so immersed in its struggle to control free expression among its membership that it began to appear that nothing mattered as much as obedience and orthodoxy” (p. 33). The Church, he charges, “engaged in the conflict with such zeal that it bordered on obsession” as it moved against what he quaintly describes as “the intellectual, feminist, and homosexual communities” (p. 33). Then he sets out his own trendy political agenda, which he would like Latter-day Saints to follow.

However, as Newell sees it, the Church is too narrow, parochial, and conservative to take up his agenda. Why? “One of the difficulties of the Mormon world view is the belief that a divine plan exists” (p. 38). For Newell, “a humanist perspective is much more realistic about our human responsibility to respond to contemporary problems” (p. 38). But he seems to sense that something may be missing in the Kurtzian ideology, for he regards himself “as a Christian humanist—rather than a secular humanist—acknowledging that the broad ethics of Jesus, as distinct from the institutional church, have a powerful claim on [his] philosophy and actions” (p. 38). The problem with what Newell describes as “the institutional church” is that it causes its members to be “dangerously dependent on leaders rather than [allowing them] to think for themselves” (p. 38), which presumably is what he does frequently and well.

In 1986, when Newell began examining the relationships between authority and liberty, he issued what I consider a call to battle against the Brethren. The blind obedience and mind control

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66 See Newell, “An Echo from the Foothills.”
which he mentioned in 1986 were simply a figment of his own imagination. He complained about “the increasing references to obedience as the first commandment, and the passing of free agency as a tangible LDS belief,” without getting clear on the terms he employed or demonstrating that his charges were sound.\footnote{Ibid., 29.} There simply have not been unwholesome demands for obedience, blind or otherwise, linked to the responses of the Brethren to the ongoing controversy over, for example, the Mormon past.\footnote{Newell has complained about what he described as “the forced resignation from the LDS Church Translation Department in September 1985” of Stan Larson (ibid., 27). In defending Larson, Newell may also be indicating where he stands on the Book of Mormon. Newell does not confront the question of whether the Church should pay people to attack the Book of Mormon, and that seems to have been the issue involved in the employment of Stan Larson. The Church hardly needs to spend tithing money to guarantee that criticisms of the Book of Mormon appear in print, since people like those shadows of reality the Tanners, George Smith, and various others use their seemingly ample resources for that purpose.} Could the leaders of the Church possibly imagine, as Newell seemed to claim in 1986, that they could control the sources of information or limit the scope of academic debate going on in the world generally? Would they want to, even if they could? All they can do is teach and admonish. So where is the repression and mind control? Should they not have the right to express their views? Perhaps Newell wants the Brethren to remain silent about threats confronting the Saints and the world generally simply because he disagrees with their views.

The Brethren have, of course, with tact and moderation set out their views and discreetly responded to dissidents and critics, which they have both a right and a moral obligation to do. And some dissidents have been disciplined for clearly justifiable reasons.\footnote{By avoiding contact with local congregations while courting Church discipline, and then refusing to appear before a resulting disciplinary council, one dissident has been able to announce through the press the reasons he wants the public to consider as the grounds for his excommunication. See D. Michael Quinn, “Dilemmas of Feminists and Intellectuals in the Contemporary LDS Church.” \textit{Sunstone} 17/1 (June 1994): 68, 73. I suspect that Quinn has not been entirely forthcoming about his excommunication. Be that as it may, his remarks concerning his excommunication appear calculated to make him appear an heroic...} These actions are not something new or despicable but...
part of the way the Church has operated from the beginning. And the remarks of the Brethren on, for example, the controversy over how best to tell the story of the Mormon past, are models of tolerance and careful reasoning, especially when compared to some of the stuff to which they are responding. In the final analysis the obligations of the Saints are self-imposed precisely because they rest on covenants made with God. And we are free to break those covenants, just as we are free to make them in the first place. In that sense only is obedience the way to Zion, a pure-in-heart community in which love abounds.

The Saints have, of course, had problems getting straight on questions of authority and hence we sometimes have abused legitimate liberties. But if we are to avoid such things—the lust for power, the resulting misuse of authority, whose blandishments we see around us—it will be by drawing upon the categories and norms internal to the faith, from prophetic wisdom rather than a denatured humanism shorn of a genuine trust in God. We hardly need the rhetoric provided by humanists to assist us in getting straight on these issues. Newell is eloquent about freedom, but during his tenure as editor at Dialogue the magazine gained a reputation as an outlet for his ideology. And he refused to allow a conversation in Dialogue over the soundness of that ideology. Manipulation and control of presses and the other public fora is hardly conducive to the open and presumably healthy exchange

figure—a kind of martyr—who is constantly being victimized simply for his being honest. I recommend a careful examination of Quinn’s rather bizarre personal essay entitled “On Being a Mormon Historian,” which he and the Tanners circulated beginning in 1981. An expanded version of this essay appeared under the title “On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath)” in Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 69–111. Quinn’s remarks should be compared and contrasted with his more recent apologia for his and others’ exit from the Church that appeared in Sunstone under the title “Dilemmas of Feminists and Intellectuals,” 67–73.

70 See “An Echo from the Foothills,” 28, 33, for signs of Newell’s quarrel with Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Russell M. Nelson.

71 For instance, there seems to have been an effort to prevent a critical discussion of what I have called revisionist Mormon history. Hume’s remarks, already quoted, about the tendency of rebels to become tyrants, when they have power, might be an appropriate commentary on such repressions of free and open discussion of crucial issues by erstwhile “liberals.”
of ideas, incidentally, something which his ideology seems to demand.

A genuine dialogue with naturalistic humanism might assist the Saints in sorting out the ways we must be distinguished from the larger world in which we live as aliens and strangers. But, if we turn to the wrong source for our direction and fundamental norms, we are bound to get it wrong and suffer the individual and collective consequences. And if we sometimes have problems handling authority, it is precisely because we have not given sufficient or careful attention to our scriptures. A candid look at the history of Mormonism will show that bad things follow when the Saints fail to take divine things seriously, and, as a result, end up not really understanding much about human things either.

If we turn to the Book of Mormon, we are continually faced with warnings against contention over doctrine, about community-destroying dissent—about carnality and lusts that turn the people of God into contending factions. Yet in 1986, with a reference to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Newell strove to justify the creation of contention over our history and doctrine within the household of faith. The Saints need to stand together against the evils that abound in the world, but obviously that form of unity must be entirely voluntary. And all the Brethren can do is admonish—their work is through persuasion and long suffering. The picture in the Book of Mormon of the people of God approaching Zion is of a people who freely choose to trust God and obey the covenants they have made. We hardly need the rhetoric of a naturalistic humanism to chart the course or set the agenda. Obviously our relationships with God presuppose moral agency and a freely chosen duty to God. We are not called to obedience to mere whims. Furthermore, the same terms and conditions apply to all the Saints, including those who are called to preside.

Neither Newell’s 1986 paper nor the talk he contributed to A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue constitutes a careful exegesis of the texts appropriate to the questions he raises or a coherent account of our current situation. Instead, he marshals forces to fight against the essentially imaginary evil he projects upon our leaders.

72 Newell, “An Echo from the Foothills,” 27, 32.
And he sets out to arm a faction with battle slogans borrowed for the most part from a corrupt secular culture. It was against exactly that sort of thing that Elder Hugh B. Brown—ironically one of Newell’s idols—thought that we need the protection afforded by a well-developed critical capacity.  

The struggle against secular ideologies that challenge the people of God cannot effectively take place if the foundations of faith are jettisoned by those who have appropriated the categories and explanations of competing secular ideologies. When something like that point is made, Newell seems to assume that he has found evidence of a lack of confidence in critical inquiry. But he has gotten this wrong, for we need more careful inquiry precisely in order not to fall prey to every trendy slogan and intellectual fad and fashion that comes down the pike.

Other than the charge that the Brethren have begun a campaign of repression by, for example, not remaining entirely passive when faced with attacks on the historical foundations of the faith from without and increasingly seductive revisionist statements from within, Newell does not really address the question of freedom within the community of faith. What he does not see is that there must be certain voluntary limitations on the freedom of individuals within the Church in order to avoid falling into the anarchy of contending factions. These legitimate limitations are placed upon the Saints by, among other things, the duty to manifest Christian love and forgiveness, as well as by simple matters of taste and tact, and above all by the content of the covenant that binds the Saints to God. Newell has not shown that such self-imposed restraints—and in the end these are the only kind that are available to the people of God—place any burden on a genuine quest for knowledge and understanding.

Newell draws a picture of the leaders of the Church who, he claims, are in a kind of frenzy brought on by the assaults of influential enemies on both the moral discipline and the historical foundations of the faith. In 1986, he saw their anxiety extending merely to a “perceived threat” or a “seeming threat” from vulgar and gossipy journalists or those I label revisionist Mormon

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historians. In 1986 he granted that this response of the Brethren was "well-intentioned," but still mistaken. But he also admitted that the faith is in danger from attacks directed against its historical foundations. He granted that "the well-financed and sophisticated attacks of anti-Mormons ... seek to undermine the foundations of the Church and destroy the faith of its members." So apparently something that has been taking place constitutes a genuine threat. Hence the question is not whether there is a threat but what and who constitutes that threat.

What Newell will not admit is that the Brethren may be correct in noting a few wolves at work among the flock. He also objects to their taking note of the consequences of the appropriation of various fashionable explanations of the historical foundations of the faith such as the notion that the Book of Mormon is frontier fiction fashioned by Joseph Smith out of his immediate environment. Newell insists that such accounts constitute only a "seeming threat" and hence are not a real threat at all. His identification of this so-called "seeming threat" is instructive. "The seeming threat is to the historical and spiritual foundations of the faith, the authenticity of traditional accounts of Joseph's visions [this was before Hofmann's forgeries were uncovered], and the origins of the Book of Mormon." It is not clear, however, how this mere "seeming threat" differs from the "attacks on the Church" made by "well-financed ... anti-Mormons." From my perspective, they are distinguished only by the degree of sophistication and the candor of the authors, and perhaps partially (but not entirely) by the source of their financial support.

In 1986 Newell seemed concerned that there would eventually be casualties among dissidents as the controversy he pictured continues. He was concerned that "those who harbor legitimate doubts," whatever that means, and the uncommitted might be "made to feel unworthy or unwelcome" under the current reign. But the Church cannot be expected to oversee its own destruction or authorize the use of its resources to spread the poison of doubt and unbelief among the Saints merely because it

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74 Newell, "An Echo from the Foothills," 32.
75 Ibid., 26.
76 Ibid., 32.
77 Ibid., 33.
must and obviously does have a deep concern for those troubled ones on the fringes or those with doubts. Should a concern for the sensitivities of a few doubters and uncommitted allow attacks on the foundations of the faith to go unanswered? Newell has been silent on such issues.

There are those who now attempt to manipulate or beat others into submission with skillfully orchestrated political statements and public relations stunts—the “olive branch,” “circle of love,” and candle-light vigils by dissidents being an example—which are clearly intended to embarrass the Church and polarize the Saints. Such endeavors are obviously not building Zion. And to picture the Church as filled with mindless robots is a bizarre caricature. Whatever the problems that confront the Saints on the delicate questions of freedom and authority, Newell’s assessments have been a disservice even to the cause he defends. The people of God have been, on balance, tolerant and even forgiving of doubts, heresies, and even instances of outright apostasy. For example, Vern Bullough reports that “in the past the Mormon church was slow to excommunicate ordinary members who did not threaten the church directly” (p. 69).

However, Bullough thinks that “in recent decades church leaders have become more aggressive in threatening excommunication” (p. 70). In an item announcing the 1993 Humanist/Mormon Dialogue, Bullough explained to the readers of Free Inquiry that Brigham Young University is faced with “growing problems” because “part of the uniqueness of the Latter Day Saints [sic], as they call themselves, is that the Mormon church lacks a professional clergy.” And “Mormon officials” see that “any deviant member poses a threat, and the target in recent years has come to be the church-controlled religious institutions, of which BYU is the most influential.” And

BYU aspires to become a leader in American higher education, and it has managed to attract some distinguished scholars. This is a source of conflict because religious orthodoxy and the intellectual freedom necessary for higher education are simply contradictory components.
Part of the trouble is that much of the Mormon doctrine was set in terms of nineteenth-century American ideology and times have changed.  

He assumes that believers must adapt to the shifting ideological sands of their times. In support of these claims, Bullough charges that Cecilia K. Farr and David C. Knowlton were "denied tenure"—which is simply not true, since they never reached that point in the review process—because they challenged "the hierarchy." As a result, "many of the faculty members who belong to the Sunstone group, a liberal Mormon group, or contribute to the journal Dialogue feel threatened. But how does change come about," he asks, "if internal critics are silenced?" And, in reasoning rivaling some of the more wanton outbursts of D. Michael Quinn or Lavina F. Anderson, Bullough charges that there is currently "a wave of excommunications second to none in Mormon history, emphasizing that BYU is not so much the university it claimed but simply a sectarian seminary." It is, however, not clear what rather routine disciplinary actions taken against five apostates has to do with Brigham Young University.

Even when Newell touches on real problems, his passion tends to get in the way of a calm, balanced, well-informed assessment of conditions in Mormon culture. In his eyes the Brethren have capitulated to irrationalism, abandoned the belief in moral agency, and turned the Church into a fortress armed to fight merely imaginary evils. Through the use of such curious and inaccurate political rhetoric, Newell has drawn a picture of a sinister threat that has its focus in the leadership of the Church, and certainly

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 9–10.
82 In 1986, speculation on political mass movements introduced Newell's charges against the Brethren. In his estimation, all mass movements are in some degree evil, but some may be beneficial if they repress greater evils. That sets the stage for his claim that the Brethren, in a panic, have created an immoral mass movement in an effort to deal with what they falsely believe is a crisis. Newell seems not to have asked why the Brethren should be concerned about what is taught and believed about the scriptures and the Mormon past. And hence he seems certain that there is no justification for their concerns on these issues because all we have is the publication of essentially harmless treatments.
not a threat flowing from the work of his friends and associates. Such rhetoric is often used to force a choice between equally unsatisfactory alternatives. Either one must choose irrationality and mindless authoritarian conformity and obedience without moral restraint or one must follow the path of humanist enlightenment and the abandonment of the historical foundations of the faith. Are those the only alternatives? There must be a middle ground between such extremes.\(^{83}\) Newell has in mind a different middle ground—what he calls “the reasonable middle ground where belief flourishes in open country, and doubt and commitment exist comfortably on the same landscape.”\(^{84}\)

Newell draws from a talk by Elder Hugh B. Brown the expression “freedom of the mind.”\(^{85}\) But the crucial freedom that Elder Brown had in mind was grounded in and flowed from a commitment to the fundamentals of the restored gospel. He warned BYU students of the consequences of mindless adherence to slogans and ideologies that are soul and community destroying. And in that talk Elder Brown testified of his own knowledge that “Jesus of Nazareth is and was and will ever be the Son of God, the Redeemer and Savior of the world.” Nothing could be further from the credo of naturalistic humanism.

Newell, like George Smith and others, holds that the Brethren, in their zeal to control the Saints “by demands for blind obedience,” have silently abandoned the belief that we are responsible moral agents, a belief central to the Mormon understanding of man and God. But, unlike some cultural Mormons, the Brethren have not abandoned the belief that we are free to choose between liberty and eternal life and captivity and death. Why? Because the Book of Mormon is still in place in the Church, even if it has recently fallen on hard times among a few on the fringes of the Mormon academic community. When that text is brushed aside as the frontier fiction of a pious but ignorant rustic or as a con-

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\(^{83}\) There is, of course, no middle ground on the question of whether Joseph Smith was or was not a genuine prophet of God.

\(^{84}\) Newell, “An Echo from the Foothills,” 32–33.

sciiously contrived fraud or whatever the revisionist accounts attempt to make it out to be, then and only then have its teachings lost their authority. So it turns out that a defense of the historical foundations of the faith is necessary in order to preserve the norms that Newell tries to invoke.

Some of the more alienated on the fringes of the Mormon academic community—among whom are several recruited by George Smith as part of his “dialogue” with humanists—seem to insist that we have a choice between following blindly the dictates of irrational leaders or being dissident, contentious, and critical. They want us to believe that faith and the obedience to God that flows from it are merely emotional or sentimental, as they set themselves up as the proponents of rationality, and “free inquiry.” To see things in these terms is to misunderstand the alternatives and to confuse the issues. There is no worthy sacrifice offered to God that is not done by moral agents operating in the clear light of the day.

Cultural Mormons and the Neglect of the Book of Mormon

Allen Dale Roberts, currently one of the editors of Dialogue, is known for his having been involved in the production of an account of the Hofmann Affair. He is also known for his recent criticisms of the Church. So it is not surprising that he appeared on the Smith/Kurtz program and that his talk appears in A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue. In this talk Roberts attacks both Brigham Young University and the Church by describing what he sees as the limitations placed on believing Latter-day Saints—which presumably impinge on the necessary academic ambiance, as he understands such things, that is needed by a genuine univer-

86 The other “coeditor” is Martha S. Bradley, and the assistant editor is Gary James Bergera, who works for George Smith at Signature Books. All three of these people have essays that appear in the pages of George Smith’s A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue.


sity. These limitations are, for Roberts, at the root of the controversy over academic freedom at BYU. First, the Brethren are old, and hence “the leadership, which tightly controls the academic environment at BYU, remains entrenched in old thinking” (p. 53). And we know that “old thinking,” or thinking by those who are old, is bad. Right? And, Roberts charges, these old fellows claim infallibility. (This is, of course, a ludicrous charge.)

In addition, Roberts also claims that “perhaps the single most intellectually confining idea in Mormonism is its belief that it is the only ‘true church.’ I believe,” he explains, “that any exclusive claim to truth is antithetical to the freedom of thought needed in life generally and in the academy in particular” (p. 53). He neglects to explain why he holds such opinions. And yet some things believed by Latter-day Saints might perhaps be true. What really galls Roberts is the Church as an organizational structure. But certainly when Latter-day Saints talk about a true Church, they have in mind the restored gospel and not a bureaucracy.

Roberts has more to say about what he sees as limitations. Consider the following: “Similarly Mormons are limited by their belief in scriptural literalism.” He also charges, as I have shown, that Latter-day Saints refuse to accept the findings of scholarship, since, in his opinion, “modern multi-disciplinary scholarship has shown the Book of Mormon to be a nineteenth-century product rather than an ancient document as claimed by Joseph Smith” (p. 52). Oh it has? That matter has been settled? This unsupported assertion about the Book of Mormon is then followed by an apologia for David P. Wright, who left Brigham Young University.

Allen Dale Roberts claims that it was “admitted that [David P. Wright] never taught these unorthodox views to his students. He was fired solely on the basis of his personal and privately-held beliefs.” But are not all beliefs in some sense personal and private? And who exactly “admitted” that Wright did not communicate his opinions to others? Wright’s students were reporting his presumably “privately-held beliefs” accurately soon after he arrived at Brigham Young University. And he soon began circulating a paper in which he set forth his opinions on the Bible and other Latter-day Saint scriptures. See his “Historicity and Faith: A Personal View of the Meaning of Scripture,” an eleven-page draft of a paper Wright prepared for delivery at the Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium in August 1987. By describing his clearly heretical opinions as “a personal view,” Wright and others—for example, Roberts—seem to think that he has thereby somehow insulated himself from responsibility for holding those
and was later excommunicated for his view that the Book of Mormon is nineteenth-century fiction. After his apologia for David P. Wright’s heretical opinions, Roberts then claims that “another intellectually limiting Mormon belief is the myth of absolute and unchanging doctrine” (p. 53).

This is an issue worthy of further examination. Roberts seems convinced that Latter-day Saint beliefs have nothing approaching stability, even on the most fundamental issues. In this instance, unlike his opinion on the historicity of the Book of Mormon, he provides what he considers “proof.” He claims that Thomas G. Alexander has “put to rest the myth that Mormon theology is constant and unchanging by showing the evolution of basic doctrines of God and humankind” (p. 53).90 According to Roberts, Professor Alexander showed that Mormons have understood and worshipped different gods at different times. The godhead Mormons think of now is entirely different in character than the divinity worshipped by early Mormons. Moreover, Mormonism’s unchangeable doctrines are changing as we speak. The infusion of ideas from protestant neo-orthodoxy theology is a recent example. (p. 53)

When Roberts opines that Latter-day Saints have “received an infusion of ideas from protestant neo-orthodoxy,” and also that their beliefs concerning God are in flux, he seems to be drawing upon the opinions of three authors, Thomas G. Alexander, whom he mentions, and Sterling M. McMurrin and O. Kendall White, Jr., who are not mentioned.91 But Alexander and even White claim

opinions. Sterling M. McMurrin now handles the matter of his having held heretical views while employed by the Church Education System as an Institute of Religion teacher and director much more frankly. “I should,” he reported in 1984, “have been more forthcoming in revealing my heresies, such as my disbelief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon”; see “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” Dialogue 17/1 (Spring 1984): 26.


91 For a criticism of this notion, see my essay entitled “A Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Challenges Cultural Mormon Neglect of the Book of Mormon: Some
that contemporary Latter-day Saints have taken over much from Protestant theology. Instead, they seem to argue that the current emphasis on the Book of Mormon and stress on the atonement of Jesus Christ is analogous to something that went on in European Protestant circles after World War I when Karl Barth turned against Cultural Protestantism. I suspect that Roberts has misunderstood Alexander’s intentions.

Roberts also insists that the Church hides the truth from its members (p. 54). And it excommunicates those who tell the truth. “More than ever before,” Roberts charges, “Mormon leaders are intolerant of unfriendly truths” (p. 53), and “using truth to expose abuse is what Lavina Fielding Anderson did. It resulted in her excommunication” (p. 54). A more truthful way of describing Lavina F. Anderson’s action would be to say that she abused truth by claiming that Church leaders at all levels are involved in a conspiracy of some sort against intellectuals, by which she meant a very few dissident historians, radical feminists, and homosexuals. To claim that her charges are the truth is to accept her account of matters that by their very nature are confidential, open to various interpretations, and often simply inaccurately reported both by the media and by the dissidents themselves. When one relies upon newspaper accounts of anything, and especially that which pertains to the Church, one is at risk of getting it all wrong. And when one only listens to dissidents, one gets only one side on complex and complicated issues.

But the charge that the Church and its leaders are fearful of what Roberts calls “the truth” rests on his having confused “truth” with accepting the views of the uninformed, of dissidents, or publicity seekers and so forth (p. 54). And yet he grants that “the church is not without cause in harboring these fears” of such people. Why? His explanation is instructive. “Since its founding,” he reports, “it has lost members who have learned uncomfortable truths about leaders, practices, doctrine and history. Some have been lost to the influences of secularism, rationalism, positivism, socialism, and other worldly competitors of Mormonism” (p. 55). Presumably all of these fit squarely within his

category of "uncomfortable truths." But why must we assume that all these various "isms" and many more that could be included are, in fact, true? At best they merely make competing claims to being true.

Roberts then claims that "a humanist would say that any person has the right and duty to explore all of these options and select the best from among them. Mormon leaders would argue that their duty is to hide these confusing truths from the members who are childlike and weak and will be eaten by ravening wolves if not protected" (p. 55). But Roberts is confused—no one would deny that every person has the right to inquire and choose. Could he be claiming that the playing field is always level when these uncomfortable, confusing, and competing claims to possess "the truth" tangle with each other and the gospel of Jesus Christ? One only has to examine a recent issue of Dialogue, one he has edited, to see that a bias is present, giving a spin to what is included in its pages. And one suspects that something approaching a systematic institutional censorship is now in place at Dialogue. But this is true in every forum, is it not? Or do we still cling to the myth of objectivity? The answer is yes, at least for some.

Roberts celebrates objectivity, whatever that may be. "The conservative religious agenda tends to limit attempts at objectivity. Objectivity," he claims, "is one of those highly-touted but rarely achieved goals" (p. 57). One wonders whether he considers Dialogue to be objective? I wonder whether Roberts has given attention to the conversation that has been going on in Mormon academic circles over the possibility and desirability of objectivity. And if not, why not? I suspect that Roberts might find himself made uncomfortable by the conversation.

Roberts blasts away at what appear to him to be misplaced efforts to support the restored gospel at Brigham Young University. One of his examples is instructive. He reports that "BYU pro-

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Professor of anthropology Ray T. Matheny concluded in a 1984 paper entitled ‘Book of Mormon Archaeology’ that there is no archaeological basis to support the Book of Mormon as ancient Mesoamerican. His scores of convincing examples are too lengthy to mention here. The fact that he was warned not to speak again in public on this issue is the salient point” (p. 58). The curious reader might ask: by whom was Matheny warned? And what might have been the content of this warning? And how does Roberts know about such presumably confidential matters? And exactly why is an unsubstantiated charge—a mere rumor—“the salient point”? And why did Roberts not report the contents of a letter written by Matheny in which he emphatically denies that the views he expressed in his paper in 1984 represent his opinion on the Book of Mormon? In this letter, Matheny seems to claim that all he was doing in 1984 was responding to a question handed to him on a card by someone at a Sunstone session in which he thought he would merely be a discussant. And that card asked him to explain how a non-Mormon archaeologist might assess the Book of Mormon. Hence, he was not presenting or setting forth his own views on the matter.93 And is Roberts sure that Matheny once intended to publish his seemingly rather casual remarks? If not, why all the fuss?

Finally, Roberts charges that “careful surveillance of all student and faculty activities” takes place at Brigham Young University” (p. 59). He then refers to “secret monitoring with intent to harm” (p. 59), mentioning a real instance that once took place during Ernest L. Wilkinson’s stint as President of Brigham Young University (p. 59)—which ended in 1971. But to charge, as Roberts does, that anyone connected with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, for example, has been involved in “secretly monitoring colleagues and church members at large, collecting verbal and written information on what they consider to be questionable or unorthodox activity” (p. 59) is simply false. It is outrageous for Roberts—an editor of a magazine—to make such unsubstantiated charges and to allow them to

be published. Unfortunately, in his zest to blast Brigham Young University, Roberts indulges in much similar and related gossip. And it is gossip that is nasty and vengeful. One wonders how such gossip was allowed to appear in *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*.

There are other instances of false or unsubstantiated charges in *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*. Take the following as an example: Gary James Bergera claims that "the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), an offshoot of SEHA and NWAF, has produced a growing collection on interdisciplinary defenses of Book of Mormon historicity based on [John L.] Sorenson’s speculations" (p. 105). Whatever else one might think of Bergera’s characterization of FARMS, at least it is certain that FARMS was not in any way the offshoot of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology (SEHA), nor was it the offshoot of the New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAF). Such a bizarre claim is the equivalent of asserting that Signature Books is the offshoot of the Utah Lighthouse Ministry—something no one believes.

**Anti-Mormon Bigotry and So-Called “Academic Freedom”**

Some interesting bits of gossip are to be found in F. Ross Peterson’s personal reminiscences entitled “Tenure as a Tool” (pp. 87–92). Peterson reports that various dissidents left Brigham Young University in “the early 1950s and 1960s” (p. 88) and moved to Utah State University. These included “J. Golden Taylor, Thorton Y. Booth, Brigham D. Madsen, and Carlton Culpsee.” According to Peterson, “they blasted the LDS church in their daily classes” (p. 88). (They moved to Logan, incidentally, because they found Provo “inhospitable,” according to Peterson.) And in Logan they joined people like George C. Jensen94 and Heber C. Snell (a dissident refugee from the Church

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94 Peterson reports that “Jensen, a returned Mormon missionary to Germany, became disaffected and so as he aged evolved toward sacrilege. He loved to give sacred Mormon temple signs while shaking hands and say other things that upset students and faculty” (p. 88). But, since he had tenure and there was wanton “academic freedom” at Utah State University, he was apparently perfectly free to mock the faith of others. He persisted, even though his antics had nothing to do
Education System), who "were harsh, sarcastic, and cynical so far as religious-sponsored education was concerned" (p. 88). In other words, at Utah State University they were free to blast away at their former faith. What all of this has to do with Peterson's topic remains more or less a mystery. But it is still interesting stuff. And it suggests an important question.

Are there or should there be limits to what goes on in a university? I think that there should be. And Peterson eventually reports that there are at least some limits, for "a thorough analysis reveals that each institution creates its own criteria for retaining teachers" (p. 88). And institutions supported by churches have a right to tailor those criteria to suit their own ends, for, according to Peterson, "frankly, private institutions can do what they want" (p. 91). Then he notes that Brigham Young University has set in place criteria that do not strictly conform to "traditional academic freedom" (p. 91). What that means is that George Jensen's or Heber Snell's antics would presumably not have been tolerated at Brigham Young University, or at least they would not now be tolerated, though they might have been prior to World War II. But why should they be? It is a wonder that they were tolerated in Logan. Peterson seems inclined to quarrel with efforts of the Church to protect the students under its charge in the Church Education System and at Brigham Young University from indoctrination by people not committed to the restored gospel. Hence he notes that people like the late Obert C. Tanner and Sterling M. McMurrin were sacrificed "in order to maintain theological

with his teaching appointment or research. There are numerous examples of what we might now begin to call the "Jensen Syndrome" all along the Wasatch Front, where it is not uncommon to find a battle going on between cultural Mormons and the faithful in which efforts are made in and out of the classroom to justify the disbelief of dissidents, and to ridicule the sincere faith of others. What is called "academic freedom" presumably protects such antics. But the faithful do not seem to enjoy such a promiscuous "academic freedom," for they are in part restrained by the demands of good taste, but also by the restraints placed informally on their freedom in an academic setting, especially along the Wasatch Front. There is some delicious irony in all of this. It is amusing to see dissidents attempting to empower themselves and their ideology while silencing and mocking their opponents by mouthing slogans about "academic freedom."
orthodoxy” (p. 92). “Sacrifice” is too strong a word, since they merely moved on to other things, which they were free to do.95

Professor Peterson’s remarks about affairs long ago in Logan are matched by Frederick S. Buchanan’s rumination about affairs at the University of Utah. He reports that “the University of Utah has its own set of problems. It is almost impossible for a devout Mormon to find employment in many departments” (p. 83). He describes this as an “unwritten exclusionary policy” (p. 83) and goes on to explain why it may happen, without addressing the issue of the religious bigotry it manifests. Should not faithful Latter-day Saints have equal access to public institutions? Should they not also have full academic freedom at places like the University of Utah? We must ask whether their faith should function openly or covertly to exclude them from employment in public institutions of higher learning.

But we may contrast Buchanan’s admission that there is what he calls an “unwritten exclusionary policy” at the University of Utah that makes it “almost impossible for a devout Mormon to find employment in many departments” with the rather more sanguine opinion once expressed by Sterling M. McMurrin. In 1984 he opined that “the University of Utah is as free a university from the standpoint of academic freedom as one can expect to find anywhere in this country or in the world.”96 But it may not be free for faithful Latter-day Saints (as contrasted with cultural Mormons). Indeed, portions of the University of Utah may also be free from believing Latter-day Saints. One can be excused for wondering whether this is what is meant by some who celebrate unfettered academic freedom. Be that as it may, according to McMurrin,

of course, there are limitations in all institutions. There are limitations which a qualified instructor should impose upon himself [and herself?]—such things as not using the classroom as a podium for any kind of political propaganda, or exercising genuine propriety in matters pertaining to moral conduct, and good

96 “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” 24.
judgment in treating issues that are locally very sensitive. Those who lack the judgment and sense of responsibility necessary to impose both moral and intellectual standards upon themselves have no business teaching in a university or any other kind of school.\textsuperscript{97}

This language would seem to justify a university setting in place procedures for review and perhaps removing faculty who simply will not impose upon themselves the necessary moral and intellectual restraints. And McMurrin also admitted that private institutions like Brigham Young University “are free from the imposition of some pressures that public institutions must contend with.”\textsuperscript{98} Whatever else one might think about McMurrin’s opinions, at least in this instance his views seem rather distant from the diatribe aimed at Brigham Young University over the issue of academic freedom by various contributors to the Smith/Kurtz volume.

But given the Smith/Kurtz agenda, one wonders why the slip by Buchanan about anti-Mormon bigotry at the University of Utah was allowed to stand, since it flies in the face of the rhetoric about “freedom” that was trumpeted as the foundation of university life and then used as a weapon against Brigham Young University in \textit{A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue}. Could it be that secular universities have or perhaps need their own kinds of limits? And is it not also likely that certain limits actually enhance freedom and well-being? In a similar vein, Vern Bullough grants that even humanists have their own problems (p. 71). “Sometimes I almost wish we could excommunicate some who call themselves humanists,” he mused (p. 71).

Vern Bullough claims that the “use of excommunication to control dissent is like an alcoholic taking the first drink” (p. 71). I wonder whether the protection seemingly afforded to anti-Mormon bigotry in the name of so-called “academic freedom” might fit better into his analogy of the alcoholic. Certain comments by F. Ross Peterson concerning such matters at Utah State University suggest that it might. At some point, if justice and equity mean anything in our community, we may need a legally

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\item \textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
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mandated affirmative action program to advance and also protect believing Latter-day Saints in public institutions, especially along the Wasatch Front. And we may need legal protection against manifestations of offensive religious bigotry aimed at Latter-day Saint students and faculty in public institutions in Utah. Bigots may yet discover that anti-Mormonism—the currently fashionable manifestation of bigotry—is merely a socially acceptable analogue of virulent anti-Semitism. As such it runs against the grain of morally (if not, currently, at least in the case of bigotry directed at Latter-day Saints, legally) permissible behavior.

Finally, what are we to think of a professor of humanities—Robert S. Alley—who makes the following rather innocuous statement and allows it to go into print: “James Madison spoke of the danger of democracy as the ‘tyranny of the majority’ ” (p. 14)? Madison was a great man and had many fine ideas. And the notion that democracy is in danger from the “tyranny of the majority” is an interesting and often discussed possibility. But it was Alexis de Tocqueville in his Democracy in America, and not James Madison, who described the threat of a “tyranny of the majority.” And might we not begin to see just such a tyranny at work in some departments at such places as the University of Utah, where Frederick S. Buchanan claims there is an “unwritten exclusionary policy” in place that keeps out faithful Latter-day Saints?

Naturalistic Humanism—A Closer Look

Perhaps the most serious deficiency in A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue is that it lacks a serious discussion of what is at stake in

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the confrontation between genuine Latter-day Saint faith and naturalistic humanism. Hence, whatever else one might say about it, the book is superficial. This deficiency could have been at least partly rectified if something by Sterling McMurrin had been included. Hence, in an effort to be helpful, I offer the following as a compendium of his opinions on naturalistic humanism, taken from a collection of his essays entitled *Religion, Reason, and Truth.*¹⁰⁰ My interjections are included in brackets.

[McMurrin asks whether there should] be a return to the fundamentalism which substitutes the authority of creeds for the autonomy of reason, legend for history, and myth for science? Or, with the humanists, is one to declare religion in the traditional sense a remnant of the past, pleasant in certain respects, but untrue, and unfitted either to the intellect of modern man or to the manifold practical problems to which he must now turn himself in the new spirit of science?¹⁰¹

To abandon all vestiges of the traditional faith and settle for a naturalistic humanism is a more inviting alternative; the atmosphere, if thinner, is yet purer, and the call to thought and action clear and definitive. *But humanism is a denial of the highest hope of the human heart, a confession . . . that the voice of god which men had so often strained to hear was nothing but the ghostly echo of their own feeble and despairing cries.*¹⁰²

[Is there no meaning to life, other than what humans give it? McMurrin’s answer:] the individual person alone exists—exists to hope in vain, to suffer in anguish, and to die to annihilation.¹⁰³

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¹⁰¹ Ibid., 78-79.
¹⁰² Ibid., 79, emphasis added.
¹⁰³ Ibid., 274.
For the strict naturalistic humanist believes that there is no God and there is no immortal soul. His ultimate pessimism is his denial that there is an ultimate. For him the proximate world exhausts the whole of reality and existence. There is no cosmic purpose, no genuinely telic process, no center of absolute meaning for the world and for man. There is no superhuman moral power that judges the thoughts and actions of men, no world spirit that moves their history, that seeks the triumph of righteousness, guarantees an ultimate justice, or comforts with an all-forgiving love.¹⁰⁴

But for the humanist there is no God, there is no savior, no redemption, and man is alone in the world. But it is a world of which he is genuinely a part and in which he is at home.¹⁰⁵

The strength of the humanist religion [!] is its supreme commitment to reason, its faith in man's creative intelligence—faith that he has the power to discern, articulate, and solve his problems. The humanist is confident that under the guidance of good will the patient processes of scientific thought may eventually win through the amelioration of society and the achievement of human happiness.¹⁰⁶

[What McMurrin calls "liberalism" is] defined in terms of reason, creativeness, and the positive worth of man which has been under fire in our century. As an optimistic faith in the perfectibility of human nature and human society it received a death blow in Europe at the hands of the First World War. The comfortable circumstances of America’s middle class sustained it in this country for more than a decade, but with the economic depression of the thirties and the Second War, together with the more recent wars and the disheartening failures attending the efforts to establish the peace,
it has suffered a severe disintegration. We have been losing that faith in ourselves and in our powers of reason to discover and solve our problems which for some time appeared to be a chief glory of modern occidental culture.\textsuperscript{107}

[The] humanists, who had surrendered entirely the basic categories of traditional religion, abandoning faith in God in favor of a naturalistic interpretation of man and his universe, cultivated an even more positive and aggressive program of human action. They, with the general though indirect support of secularized public education, made a vigorous appeal to the liberals to accept the conclusions of their own logic, muster the courage of their convictions, and declare themselves free from the religion of the past which still held them in its embrace.\textsuperscript{108}

Liberalism with its optimistic faith in man was shallow and superficial in its failure to recognize the egoism, selfishness, and sinfulness which characterize human nature, its happy hopes for human society were naive failures to face the political and social realities which now are so evident to all; its easy doctrine of progress was the pleasant illusion that good will, education, and the sciences could deliver men from the social evils that must take their toll in bloody suffering.\textsuperscript{109}

The life-affirming optimism of Humanism is not unlike that of Liberalism. Indeed, just as many liberals are on the borderline of Orthodoxy, many are near the boundaries of Humanism, for Humanism, though having an ancient tradition of its own, results in modern times from the same positive forces that produce Liberalism; and as the children of the orthodox may be liberals, their grandchildren may be humanists.\textsuperscript{110}
We were also told that optimism is unwarranted. Why? The reason is that the humanist is inclined toward contempt for what he regards as the liberal's lack of courage, the courage to assert his freedom from the bondage of pre-scientific thought by abandoning every vestige of cosmic supernaturalism, by breaking the bonds that tie him sentimentally and morally to the forms of the past. The liberal, he believes, is attempting the futile task of rationalizing an outmoded theology in terms of a modern world view with which it is totally incompatible. The humanists join the neo-orthodox in convicting the liberals of professing a Christian faith while at the same time abandoning those very beliefs in redemption which have made Christianity a world religion and which throughout its history have been the chief source of its strength. 

Humanists and liberals seem to share the same illusions. How does McMurrin attempt to resolve this quandary?] As a religion Humanism enjoins men to engage in the moral struggle to create the highest values. But it is a struggle that can know only momentary victory, for the universe is totally indifferent to man and his moral aspiration. Everyone must die; after a brief moment the race will perish and the drama of humanity will be ended without the slightest trace or memory that it ever began.

Some humanists are acutely conscious of the ultimate tragedy of human existence and their philosophy is characterized by sadness and melancholy.

What is the point of having faith in man? Why is humanism optimistic?] Humanism has a quality of tragic heroism. Its tragic character is its belief that there is no ultimate meaning in human existence, that men must struggle alone to create and support their world of

111 Ibid., 105.
112 Ibid., 95.
113 Ibid.
values, and that someday they all will die and every-
ting they have created will die with them. The heroism
of humanism is that believing this dreadful thing to be
true, men will yet struggle valiantly to create such a
world and conserve it for others yet unborn, and that
even the heartbreaking disappointments of the past
decades have not completely disillusioned them. For
Humanism grounds its philosophy in an uncompro-
mising denial that morality requires a theistic sanction
or that secularism in principle is inimical to the full
pursuit of high personal and social values. Mortals, it
declares, can and should be cultivated independently of
belief in God. A person should be moral for no other
reason than that he is a human being.114

Man is born of nature and belongs to nature. His
life is a part of its life; his values are its values. Though
blindly and unconsciously, and with no intent or pur-
pose, nature has yet conspired to produce him, his
creations, his culture. This life is all, but there is noth-
ing to regret—for it is enough. The moral injunction is
to live it fully and abundantly, and when the times
comes to leave it, to die stoically, with resignation and
without complaint.115

[Why not “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow
we die”? It is the fate of the humanists to be judged
by their disbelief in God rather than by their faith in
man, and the condemnation is most rigorous from the
camp of those who have abundant faith in God but lit-
tle or no faith in man. This is the injustice of judging
men by their disbeliefs without inquiring into their
beliefs. It is not atheism but the positive affirmation of
life and human values that lies at the heart of Human-
ism.116

114 Ibid., 105–6.
115 Ibid., 95.
116 Ibid., 107.
Now the life of the humanist is not devoid, because of his naturalistic philosophy, of moral and spiritual value. Like those who believe in God, he loves his wife and cherishes the fondest hopes for his children, he is concerned for the well-being of his fellowmen; like the theists, in his heroic moment he will give his life for another; he gazes upon the same art as they, communes with the same nature—his spirit uplifted by the same music, his will steeled by the same high resolve, his life shattered by the same tragedies. Atheism does not make the humanist morally bad; it cultivates in him the cosmic loneliness of those who believe that their only companions in life and death are their fellowmen and the mute-world which has unknowingly cast them up, and will unknowingly reclaim them.¹¹⁷

Humanism denies that there are uniquely religious experiences and refuses to distinguish between the sacred and the secular. It declares instead that religious experience embraces every worthwhile human attitude and activity. . . . Man is the primary object of its interest and devotion. Its instruments are science and democracy, and its goal is the good life.¹¹⁸

Nothing will dispose of an optimistic philosophy of history more readily than a good look at the mean facts of history. The world quite obviously is not the pleasant, forward-moving affair we once believed it to be.¹¹⁹

[What is there in humanism that might support a mood of optimism without some illusions about the course of history thrown in as a consolation?] When we come right down to it and insist on being honest with ourselves, for those of us whose passion for reason and reliable knowledge has robbed us of our enchantments it appears that about all that is left is some kind of reverent naturalism. Not the bad type of naturalism that

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 94.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 95.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., 279.
was formerly called materialism and seemed to deny the reality of much that is of greatest value, but the good type that is usually called naturalistic humanism, or something like that; the type of naturalism that makes a place, and a large place, for mind and moral values and for spiritual aspiration and commitment and insists that these are as real a part of nature as are matter and physical events. This naturalism can generate an authentic piety and reverence for life. And it can enable an individual to invest life with purpose and meaning.\(^\text{120}\)

[McMurrin grants that] to reflect honestly on ourselves and our world must inevitably make us sad; because, with all its beauties and joys it obviously is not a very good world; for every beauty there is ugliness, and for every joy a plenitude of suffering and despair. We can do little more than face the tragedy of life courageously, intelligently.\(^\text{121}\)

[We should have courage in the face of ultimate meaninglessness. There is, however, still one last fragment of hope that remains: for] the most precious hope for those of us who have failed to see that the cosmos is really on our side is the hope that our failure is a fault of our own finite knowledge and understanding and our lack of faith and that in some inscrutable way the world will ultimately vindicate the longings of the heart as well as justify the reasons of the mind.\(^\text{122}\)

**Religion without Illusions and Genuine Consolations**

Sterling McMurrin is perhaps best known for a long and distinguished career as an educational administrator at the University of Utah, where he functioned in various capacities, and on various committees both public and private, including a stint (in 1961–62)

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 279–80.
\(^{121}\) Ibid.
\(^{122}\) Ibid.
as United States Commissioner of Education during the administration of John F. Kennedy. Early in his academic career—that is, prior to becoming an administrator and after holding positions in two LDS Institutes of Religion in Arizona—he crafted a number of essays in which he opined on what he understands as the large issues of religion and the questions of the meaning of life. The best of these essays have been assembled in *Religion, Reason, and Truth*. This book is thus a significant item in the intellectual history of cultural Mormonism.

Potentially the most revealing and sweeping generalizations offered by McMurrin appear in the concluding essay. Therein he maintains that the science associated with Charles Darwin has put an end to all the hopes of man except those sentiments associated with “naturalistic humanism.” After a career devoted to displaying a rich collection of liberal slogans about “life-affirming optimism” and “faith in man,” McMurrin reveals, as we have seen, some of his own religion. He concludes that in the final analysis there is no grand purpose or meaning to life other than that fashioned by man, nor is there any genuine deity, and eventually mankind will disappear without a trace. His “religion” is thus desperate and dark, grim and gloomy; it provides no consolation, nor does it offer a genuine hope either for the future of man on earth or beyond the grave.

McMurrin will accept no rationally unwarranted and hence presumably irrational hope or consolation, for his “passion for reason and reliable knowledge has robbed” him of such “enchantments.” His is therefore a melancholy, forlorn sigh of one unwilling to trust God or believe the message of the prophets; he will have nothing to do with divine special revelations or prophetic faith. What remains for him is merely a “reverent naturalism. Not the bad type of naturalism that was formerly called materialism, . . . but the good type that is usually called naturalistic humanism, or something like that. . . . This naturalism,” he

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123 Its major virtue is that it collects all of the best of McMurrin’s work under one cover. It is, however, puzzling that McMurrin’s Riecker Memorial Lecture, read at the University of Arizona on 1 April 1963 and eventually published under the title *Reason, Freedom, and the Individual* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1964), was not included in *Religion, Reason, and Truth*.

claims, “can generate an authentic piety and reverence for life. And it can enable an individual to invest life with purpose and meaning.”125

It is unfortunate that George Smith and Paul Kurtz did not allow someone deeply committed to naturalistic humanism to express these sentiments in A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue. All we get in that book is a parade of battle cries directed at believers. We are not let in on what is hidden behind those slogans.

The essays in Religion, Reason, and Truth manifest the prudent employment of language appealing to the sentiments of those whose fascination with elements of modernity leads them to disdain what they consider the thoughtless, unsophisticated, unenlightened credulity of believers. The superior tone, as well as the appearance of having occupied an intellectual vantage point from which one can survey those below, is the very heart of much pandering to intellectual fashions that occupies a large place in contemporary intellectual life. McMurrin’s essays do nothing to break the hold of that particular tyranny and may even further it among cultural Mormons.

**Above the Storm**

In the “Preface” to Religion, Reason, and Truth, McMurrin presents himself as an objective student of “the large issues of the philosophy of religion. I have written,” he claims, “primarily not to express my own views on religion but rather simply to examine some of the more important ideas in the history of occidental religious thought.”126 He is above the storm—quite detached from the issues he treats. He wants to be seen as a model of detached objectivity; he is merely “fascinated by theology.”127 Some positions he feels are stronger and some weaker, but virtually none of it is grounded in “reliable knowledge” as opposed to mere longings and hopes. McMurrin’s commitment is to rationality, and certainly not to any community grounded in what he assumes to be credulity, folly, or fraud, nor is he under the tyranny of a sacred book or of a presumed revelation from the deity,
or to any other authority not warranted by reason as he understands reason. Presumably one can therefore trust the story he tells. 128 Of course, this story has a plot—it is his story; he fashioned the plot and he selected the characters and he is there busy drawing the conclusions.

Can we locate his religion, as McMurrin tells his story? He denies wishing to preach. "Yet it seems to me," he reports, "that here and there something of a position shows through, though perhaps not clearly—certainly not in a way that would satisfy those who are looking for answers." 129 Of course a position shows through precisely because he has called upon all his obvious capacities in an effort to make his religion appear as rational as possible. But in the end his account of what he calls his "religion"—his ultimate concern—turns out to be a depressing tale. McMurrin's religion is a "naturalistic humanism" grounded on positivism. He grants that it is such that it "must inevitably make us sad." 130 And he warns his readers not to expect too much, not to expect to find "answers"—that is, genuine hope—in his book, for the "position" that "shows through" is that there are no genuine answers to any of the presumably "large issues." 131

McMurrin holds out a very faint hope, for perhaps the cosmos will "in some inscrutable way" turn out to be on our side after all, and perhaps it is a "fault of our finite knowledge and understanding and lack of faith" (in what he does not say) that leaves us with such a sad tale to tell. But the faithful have always known that lack of faith in God yields a sad tale, when one takes an honest look at the human condition. It is precisely the realization of the fragility of our understanding and the limits of our knowledge that opens up the possibility of faith in God. But, earlier, McMurrin had taken pains to dismiss all such reasoning as "just plain irrationalism," 132 whatever that means.

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128 The essays included in Religion, Reason, and Truth carry the subtitle "historical essays."
129 Ibid., xi.
130 Ibid., 280.
131 Ibid., xi.
132 Ibid., 13.
Liberal Slogans and Secular Dogmatism

But why would one turn to a book of essays on something called “the philosophy of religion” for answers to the great questions of life? Would it not seem that answers, if there are such, would come from prophetic revelations and the traditions that have grown up around such claims or directly from the deity? If there is a God who cares, would he not have let someone know? Have the heavens not been opened, from the Latter-day Saint perspective? Would there not be some traces left around for us to inspect? Does not prophetic faith rest on just such encounters with deity, and not on some merely human effort to figure things out?

McMurrin has an answer to that formulation of the question: “It is the fate of humankind that we can ask more questions than we can answer; and the questions that must remain unanswered, except by those who are blessed with a special knowledge that unfortunately many of us do not possess, are among the most important.” These questions—“most ultimate in meaning,” “most desperate in importance”—are precisely those that cannot be answered, McMurrin supposes, in any genuinely satisfactory way. Why? Because he begins by assuming that the terrible questions simply cannot be answered or answered satisfactorily; they simply cannot possibly be answered, even or especially by God, in the manner those “blessed by a special knowledge” think they can. Standing behind this circular reasoning is a dogmatism. Hence the assertion for which he is famous: “You don’t get books from angels.” McMurrin thus disregards the possibility of divine special revelation to prophets who speak for deity. Beginning with such a dogma—an article of his unfaith, against which he will apparently allow nothing to count—all religion seems to him to be entirely earthbound, whatever its loftier pretensions; it is simply man talking about man, sometimes in a loud voice. He claims to detest all dogmatisms, but his refusal to open up some questions amounts to a secular dogmatism.
McMurrin as Lapsed Liberal—Whatever Happened to Progress in History?

The best essay in Religion, Reason, and Truth is entitled “Time, History, and Christianity.” In it McMurrin struggles with the question of the soundness of the secular faith in historical progress that is so very prominent in the religious ideology of both liberalism and humanism—it being a key element in the nearly ubiquitous religion of modernity. Unfortunately, he has little to say about the process by which faith in historical progress became a core element of religion in the modern world and hence the key to liberal religion, with its faith in man. He has little to say about exactly why and how faith in progress was taken over by the Christian theologians who substituted it for older views. He offers an account of how belief in historical progress, a dogma that he correctly recognizes as a radically “unchristian idea,” took its rise in the secularized transformations of the understanding of God, divine purpose, and time found in the Bible.

Though wanting to believe in historical progress, for such would in his schema constitute a “genuine affirmation of life,” as well as reflect a wholesome “faith in man,” McMurrin simply cannot now bring himself to affirm this essential ingredient of liberal religion. Instead, he is keenly aware that liberalism has fallen on hard times precisely because faith in historical progress has turned out to be questionable or even untenable—for, in his language, an “optimistic faith in man was shallow and superficial.”133 Hence, a decline or collapse of faith in historical progress has forced him to turn away from a liberal religious ideology and affirm a brand of hallowed yet hollow humanism, which can be more easily separated from what has turned out to be a superficial “faith in progress.”

McMurrin seems to grant the cogency of the most radical criticisms of “faith in progress.” And without belief in historical progress one must jettison liberal dogmas and illusions, and retreat to the grim world of a naturalistic humanism. “The Christian world,” according to McMurrin, “could not return to a genuinely Christian view of history, so strong was the grip of modernism

133 Ibid., 78.
upon it." And so it is with McMurrin, whose final affirmations turn out to manifest life-denying pessimism.

But McMurrin has also striven to teach an entire generation of Mormon intellectuals that theirs is a life-affirming, optimistic faith—a faith in the essential goodness of man. He claims that Mormonism is deeply involved in elements of modernity and hence in some ways represents a brand of liberal religion. But liberal religion, he now admits, is burdened "by the false optimism of its own faith in progress" and by a naive and unwarranted faith in man.

Apparently, when once infected with a McMurrin-like passion for reliable knowledge—once having tasted of the acids of modernity—there can be no turning back to an authentically Christian faith or biblical understanding of history; one can only push on to the desperation of naturalistic humanism. Why? Because positivism, and something like it presumably has the final say, will not accept as meaningful any of the talk about God found in either philosophical theology or divine special revelations. Hence he laments that it is our fate to be able to ask more questions than we can answer; and the questions that must remain unanswered, except by those who are blessed with a special knowledge that unfortunately many of us do not possess, are among the most important. They are the most ultimate in meaning,

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134 Ibid., 114.
135 McMurrin, Religion, Reason, and Truth, 114. The full passage reads as follows: Belief in "historical progress," McMurrin argues, is "basically an unchristian idea and was never fully accepted by Christianity. But it was, nevertheless, in part a product of Christianity, and when it fell into disrepute, as recently as our own time, confusion and frustration followed in its wake. The Christian world, deceived by the false optimism of its own faith in progress, could not return to a genuinely Christian view of history, so strong was the grip of modernism upon it."
136 Ibid., 72–73. According to McMurrin, he once wrote "a dissertation designed to refute the logical positivists," which experience he describes as coming "dangerously close" to making him a positivist (ibid., x).
137 Ibid., 135.
where they have any genuine meaning, and certainly they are the most desperate in importance.\textsuperscript{138}

McMurrin apparently still assumes that positivism is somehow alive and well. But it was a fad that has fallen on hard times: it is now rather moribund except as an ideological crutch for social scientists and a few historians; it now appears as one more dogmatic delusion crafted by philosophers who were, among other things, anxious to end the quest for knowledge of first things with a system that claimed to possess the key to reliable knowledge. Positivism has been replaced by other somewhat less dogmatic ways of doing philosophy which do not always yield quite the confident denial of the meaningfulness of all God-talk. It would appear either that McMurrin is unwilling to confront such developments or that he has not quite adjusted to the shifting sands of opinion that constitute the literature of philosophy and theology. He would clearly have preferred that some things remain settled in order to provide a foundation from which he could then confidently punish the presumably primitive beliefs and crude superstitions of the faithful. But, if the past can teach us anything about our speculations, it is that they seem destined to yield to some seemingly more adequate or at least different account. To begin to sense our own situation in the flux of opinions may afford a kind of liberation that once was associated with Liberal Education and which has been suppressed by the rampant flowering of secular ideologies under the banner of modernity.

For McMurrin it appears that a skepticism grounded in what he considers reason has made a religion of redemption obsolete. At least in 1939, while McMurrin was still an employee of the Church, he claimed that

Reason arose in justified indignation at the moral pessimism of a religion of redemption and proclaimed a reality for temporal values, identifying morality with folkways and racial custom. The evolutionary nature of values was easily recognized as organic to the natural processes of the world, so morality was freed from dogma and abstractions of theology and given a new

\textsuperscript{138} ibid., xii.
meaning and life capable of achievement though relative in character. Accordingly, men turned toward the admirable task of creating a better social order, determined to find salvation in the realities of the temporal order rather than alone in an apocalyptic hope.\textsuperscript{139}

How did this new "temporal" (or secular, relative, evolutionary) ethic turn out? Not too well, it seems, for even as far back as 1939 McMurrin granted that,

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however great its service to the just cause of humanity, [it] has not been too satisfactory, for the axioms of positivism sounded the death knell of theism, and what was at first a healthy agnosticism has become a dangerous sophistry. God has disappeared from His heaven and with Him the eternal foundation of the moral law, for man and reason are upon the throne and morality is a transitory opinion. Perhaps the statement is too simple, but the problem is real, and its implication for the future of religion and moral progress is the most significant consideration challenging the human race.\textsuperscript{140}
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It appears that in 1939 McMurrin’s later pessimism had not yet blossomed. And he advanced the slogans of the then trendy Protestant liberalism. Hence he opined that “human nature is not depraved, nor is the world bad. They are whatever men make them in their eternal struggle to achieve the Divine.”\textsuperscript{141} Notice that there is no place for redemption from sin or mortality in such a formulation. He was, however, anxious to find a ground for his moral idealism by identifying what he then called “the will of God” with “an aspect of the world ground itself. All things by their very nature participate in the evolution of the universe, and morality can be no exception. But when firmly grounded in deity

\textsuperscript{139} Sterling M. McMurrin, “Toward a Christian Ethic,” \textit{Week-day Religious Education: A Quarterly Designed to Assist Generally and Professionally the Teachers and Directors of Week-day Religious Education} 3/4 (December 1939): 4.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 7.
its ideal can remain an absolute.” 142 But presumably the “world
ground,” whatever that might be, is in a kind of flux and is itself
evolving. And who knows where it will end up? A decade later,
after experiencing the grim realities of World War II, McMurrin
had become pessimistic about moral progress in history and seems
to have abandoned much of his earlier optimism and especially
his talk about the evolution of what he once called “the world
ground.” But positivism had removed the ground for a genuine
theism. He was eventually left with a barren naturalistic humanism.
Fortunately the Saints have not followed his lead in this regard.

The Liberalizing Role of History

Speaking of the “liberalizing power of the study of history,”
McMurrin holds that “there is no intellectual pursuit more calcu-
lated to make a free person of an ordinary person, to free him
from his own cultural bondage, and no history is more liberating
than the history of religion.” 143 The story of the rise of secular
modernity, and then of the challenges to it, including both liberal-
alism and humanism, is certainly one such instance. Yet perhaps
because we are close to it and it has become part of our own
understanding of the world through the explanations, categories,
and slogans it contains, we find it difficult to allow the lessons of
its historical character to free us from the bondage it inflicts upon
us.

I certainly agree that the serious study of the history of reli-
gion tends to free an individual “from the blinders imposed by his
own place and time” and thereby also allow a better access to
one’s own world. Such a freeing is possible to the extent that one
is able to distance oneself from the explanations, categories, and
fashions of one’s own world when approaching the texts that pro-
vide the window to the past. One must learn to listen to what the
texts have to say and resist the urge to tell them what they must
mean on the basis of what one brings to them as cultural baggage
from one’s own world.

142 Ibid., 6.
143 Sterling M. McMurrin, “Toward Intellectual Anarchy,” Dialogue 26/2
(Summer 1993): 209–13. This is a review of the Encyclopedia of Mormonism.
To speak of "biblical religion" in some confident, unequivocal way, as McMurrin does, is simply impossible from within the horizon of meaning of the Bible itself. To refer to the "theology" of the Christian (or Mormon) scriptures approaches those texts with categories quite foreign to their own perspective. McMurrin seems quite unconcerned with the hermeneutical problem when he tackles the past. Though unfortunate, such neglect is also understandable. It has not been at all common until quite recently for Anglo-American historians to give attention to their own historicity or to the historicity of the language of the texts they read and write. Hence the work of some scholars, whose training and disposition have served to blind them to the possibilities of the past as well as the future, has produced the narrow, stunted view of the range of possibilities that is so common in the literature influenced by positivism. And, as is well known, positivism in several varieties was once believed to have made belief in God impossible. From such a crimped perspective, it is indeed difficult, perhaps even impossible, to hear much of anything, except superstition, madness, or folly, in the texts that propose to tell us about the Gods and their ways.

Conclusion

A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue is, for many reasons, an undistinguished anthology—it's failure to look honestly, deeply, and self-critically at the real content of naturalistic humanism, its dreary litany of criticisms directed against the Church and Brigham Young University, as well as its brief, shoddy criticism and scholarly neglect of the Book of Mormon, provide us with something far more inaccurate and unseemly than interesting or genuinely challenging. And in no way does the content of A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue rise above the banal—not even as propaganda for a secular ideology, which it clearly is. I trust that my treatment of Sterling McMurrin's views on naturalistic humanism will have fleshed out something that was clearly missing in A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue—a genuine confrontation of the religious ideology of humanism with the faith of Latter-day Saints.
Lacking a candid account of naturalistic humanism, we have had to turn to McMurrin’s account, which turns out to be an unusually straightforward sketch of a proud, bleak, and dark message. He insists that “the matter of cosmic hope centered in belief in God is usually not a genuinely rational quest. Too often it is simply an instinctive, irrational drive that looks for vindication by reason.”\(^{144}\) So the hope that McMurrin holds out is not in God, since such a hope is not genuinely rational. And yet he admits to being “fascinated by theology, but distrustful of all theology and theologians.”

But I wonder. When I recently expressed my own distrust of theology and theologians—Mormon and cultural Mormon included—\(^{145}\) McMurrin was annoyed,\(^{146}\) as he was earlier in his career when he heard Hugh Nibley speak scornfully of theology and theologians. Why? Because some prefer the prophets to pronouncements of philosophers and other pundits about God? The problem I have with “theology,” especially that flowing from a philosophical culture, is that it is merely the words of man about divine things, rather than what God might actually have revealed. Hence the quest for knowledge of divine things by unaided human reason appears to me to be arbitrary, empty, and futile. Only God can save us.

If we have in mind something quite unlike what has traditionally been called “natural theology,”\(^{147}\) there are of course several intellectual pursuits engaged in by the Saints that can be called “theology.” Hence, Massimo Introvigne seems justified in saying that, “although Hugh Nibley has often argued that there is no such a thing as a Mormon theology (theology being intrinsically incompatible with continuous revelation), a number of Nibley’s followers have produced what in any other religious tra-


\(^{147}\) The label “natural theology” seems to have had its beginning with the Stoic philosopher Marcus Terentius Varro. It was brought into Christian circles through Augustine’s highly influential *City of God*. Augustine had in mind by “natural theology” the speculations of philosophers about divine things and not divine revelation, at least as understood by earliest Christians and by Latter-day Saints.
dition would be classified as theological apologetics.” Efforts to defend what is believed to be divine revelation or the texts that report such events are fundamentally unlike the arguments advanced as part of what has traditionally been called natural theology. Such efforts can be described as apologetic. These include efforts to defend the revelation from criticism, as well as a more or less rational effort to set forth its contents in an orderly fashion. Hence, it is clearly against what amounts to natural theology (or what David Hume called “natural religion”) that Nibley has directed his criticisms. Certainly neither Nibley nor I have an objection to apologetics, since we have, with many others, written in defense of the faith.

On the other hand, McMurrin is merely curious about (rather than accepting of) what he calls theology. And he is disdainful of apologetics, except of course his own apology for naturalistic humanism. And yet he seems determined to make a case for Latter-day Saints getting involved in something that approaches natural theology rather than attending to what God has revealed to or through prophets. In addition, he seems to assume that Latter-day Saints should be beholden to whatever ideology is currently fashionable in the culture, if it is presented as a fruit of rational endeavor. He seems to hold that a secularized notion of reason should call the tune and that the Church should do the dancing—the product being “theology.” And, unfortunately, this is at times what tends to happen. I am therefore even more distrustful of such endeavors (whether speculative, dogmatic, or systematic, or, as in the case of *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*, merely polemical) than is McMurrin, but for different reasons. I will, however, also admit to being fascinated by such literature, manifesting as it

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149 I have in mind various essays by self-proclaimed Mormon or (in some cases) former-Mormon “theologians.” See, for example, Paul J. Toscano’s *The Sanctity of Dissent* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), reviewed in this issue on pages 298-316; or Margaret and Paul Toscano’s *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), or many of the essays in Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). One might also include essays such as Janice Allred’s “Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother,” *Dialogue* 27/2 (Summer 1994): 15-39, and numerous others in recent issues of *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*. 
does pride in one of its most impressive, influential, and sometimes destructive forms.

Finally, Thomas W. Flynn, a senior editor of *Free Inquiry*, has provided an account of the Smith/Kurtz conference in a laudatory review of *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*. He claims that “it may be only in Utah, and most piercingly at BYU, that we can still observe the medieval spectacle of thoughtful men and women undergoing relentless and open assault from unassailable guardians of entrenched orthodoxy.”¹⁵⁰ But if we focus for a moment on the secular fundamentalism that is the more or less entrenched orthodoxy advanced under the banner of humanism by Kurtz and company, versions of which are more or less dominant in secularized colleges and universities, then the thoughtful men and women who are being openly besieged turn out to be the faithful Latter-day Saint faculty at Brigham Young University. Presumably this is not what Flynn had in mind. But, quite ironically, both his essay and the book he reviews—*A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*—provide exemplify such an attack.