

*Burn
This
Letter*

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Another List of
Problems with Historical
and Doctrinal Claims of
*The Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-Day Saints,*

with an
exploration of
what one might do if
one loses one's
faith.

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Translator's Note

I found this material posted anonymously (under the super bogus pseudonym Onuphrio Muralto) somewhere on the internet. It was written in Latin, which I happened to have studied in highschool, but the site that hosted the document appears to have gone offline, so I went back to the downloaded copy I had of the material and translated it into English so people who were interested could read it. It contains none of my own opinions, just the opinions of the original anonymous author. And don't ask for a copy of the original Latin because I deleted it.

—JU

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- Do you believe the men of Luther's time and later Caxton's time were inspired to bring the Bible to the public by translating it into the language of the people, taking it out of the hands of an elite group of priests able to read Latin or Greek, allowing the people to read it for themselves?
- Do you believe in the teachings of John Calvin, that God predestines us to heaven or hell, and that we show ourselves and others where we are going to end up through our good deeds?
- Do you believe the words of Jesus, when he taught that we should love God (Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament) with all our heart?

Do you believe that Jesus was right to emphasize the next great commandment, that we should love our neighbors as ourselves?

Do you believe that Jesus meant that our neighbors include the entire family of mankind, as illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan?

Do you believe that God is one person, with three natures (Father, Son, Holy Ghost)?

Do you believe that Jesus is the literal Son of God (or begotten, not made, or one substance with the Father)?

Do you believe that Jesus came down from heaven, incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary?

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Do you believe that Jesus ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father?

Do you believe that Jesus shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end?

Do you believe that Jesus was an exceptional teacher and clearly stated some plain and precious ways of thinking about how to live, how to treat one another with compassion, how to avoid hypocrisy, and how to stand up and speak truth to power? And that the rendering of these teachings into English can reach the sublime?

Do you believe that Jesus claimed to be God or the Son of God?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified?

Do you believe that people are inspired to write or create or teach, and that it can often seem to themselves and others that this was an external influence?

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets?

Do you say your prayers and read your scriptures on a daily basis?

So you don't pray on a regular basis?

Is not praying ethical? Especially not praying for sick people?

True Believer Blame Chart

Is it OK to pray because it feels good?

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost is a reliable way to know the truth?

Do you believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, or one true and living Church consisting of Latter-day Saints?

Do you confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins?

Do you look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come?

Do you believe that there is life after death?

If I climb up to the rim of a volcano, take some photos with my smartphone, then hurl it into a glowing pile of living, liquid lava, *where do those photos go?* What hope do we have of ever getting the photos back?

What if I forget to turn off my cellular modem and my photos get remotely uploaded to one of Apple's or Google's servers before my phone meets its maker? Couldn't God do something like this, with my soul or spirit or mind, before I die?

But what is wrong with believing something that makes you happy even if it is false or unlikely to be true? Is it ever OK to offer someone false hope?

Can faith healings reliably restore life and limb? What might this tell us about the odds of a literal resurrection?

Unique LDS Beliefs

Do you believe in any kind of protective charm that you might wear? Like *il occhio* of the Italians? Or that anything physical you wear can protect you from evil (beyond its direct physical effects, like a seatbelt or a surgical mask or face covering)?

Do you believe that such a thing could be useful as a spiritual reminder of promises made? Like a wedding band?

As the Catholics believe, do you pray for or do rituals on behalf of departed souls in Purgatory, that they might be freed from their spirit prison?

Do you believe that God partitions physical space regarding his worship?

Do you have a testimony of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and of His role as your Savior and Redeemer?

Do you have a testimony of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Do you sustain the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the prophet, seer, and revelator and as the only person on the earth authorized to exercise all priesthood keys?

Do you sustain the members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators?

Do you sustain the other General Authorities and local leaders of the Church?

Do you strive for moral cleanliness in your thoughts and behavior?

But what about your thoughts? Lust? Jealousy? Anger?

Do you obey God's law of chastity?

Do you follow the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ in your private and public behavior with members of your family and others?

Do you support or promote any teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Did past leaders or do current leaders of the Church live up to the standards of chastity and honesty and integrity that they expect from the members?

Do current church leaders teach doctrine or promote practices that are contrary to the eternal and unchanging will of the Lord, revealed to past prophets?

Why wouldn't anyone be allowed to state documented facts, in the twenty-first century?

Why go after "whistleblowers" for teaching widely documented historical facts that are all admitted in the Gospel Topics essays on the Church's own web site?

A Thought Experiment

Do you strive to keep the Sabbath day holy, both at home and at church?

Do you attend your meetings; prepare for and worthily partake of the sacrament?

Do you live your life in harmony with the laws and commandments of the gospel?

Do you strive to be honest in all that you do?

Are you a full-tithe payer?

Do you understand and obey the Word of Wisdom?

Do you have any financial or other obligations to a former spouse or to children? If yes, are you current in meeting those obligations?

Do you keep the covenants that you made in the temple, including wearing the temple garment as instructed in the endowment?

Are there serious sins in your life that need to be resolved with priesthood authorities as part of your repentance?

Do you consider yourself worthy to enter the Lord's house and participate in temple ordinances?

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#AllGodsMatter

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Introductory.

1. Honesty & Integrity Matter

This document was written by Onuphrio Muralto, someone who was born and raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a Christian restorationist sect founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith, more commonly referred to as Mormons or Latter-day Saints (LDS) by the outside world. If you are uninterested in matters of faith or Christianity, or Mormonism in particular, then this document may not be of interest to you.

This first part (“Honesty & Integrity Matter”) is an attempt to come to grips with what I have learned as an adult investigator of the Church who, for my whole childhood and adolescence, was told one version of the official divine narrative of founding events and founding documents by the Church, but discovered, mostly starting on a full-time proselytizing mission, that primary historical sources and critical, unbiased analysis tell a different, more nuanced and more human story.

Before I get into the weeds, just know this up front: Please feel free to skip this entire section if you still believe and you are starting to feel icky. But remember: *I didn't make the Church's claims false. I didn't make it false. Nothing I did made it false. If it turned out to be false, it wasn't my doing—it was already false.* I just heartbreakingly found this out by reading a lot, including materials on the Church's own website(s) and using my brain and my own moral intuition, my conscience. I simply chose not to ignore my conscience. That is my story. Your story may be different. Live your own truth. Follow your conscience.

The second part (“Life After Losing Faith”) discusses some of the things I have learned about life, theology, ethics and secular morality as I have spent a decade reconstructing my values. The third part (“Some

Specific Beliefs”) discusses remaining questions and assumptions about Christianity and what someone might believe after a long faith journey. These parts are not meant to be prescriptive, but descriptive and illustrative.

This part begins with an attempt to explain some of the dangers of faith in general, and believing without evidence or against evidence, which is all that faith really is. (If a claim is based on evidence and not faith, then we just state the reasons to believe the claim and show the evidence, we don’t have to claim extra special reasons to believe the claim. Most of the world runs on this paradigm most of the time.)

BELIEFS & REASON

I believe that I will never know everything in my lifetime, and that it is better to admit to not knowing something than to pretend to know something that I don't know. (It is also important to avoid pretending not to know something that we *do* know.)

“I would rather have questions that can't be answered than to have answers that can't be questioned.”

— Richard Feynman

Doubt & Belief

I believe that our credence in a proposition should be apportioned to the evidence. (David Hume.) *Believing in something in spite of a lack of evidence—or in the face of evidence against the claim—is not a virtue but a vice, a moral failing.* We should not pretend to suspend judgement, yet accept the belief in the hopes that evidence will someday appear; we should truly suspend judgement and wait until we can justify the belief with sufficient evidence.

In this sense, I think doubt is a much more powerful path to knowledge than faith. And I think people in positions of power know this or they wouldn't talk about it so often, using fear to control their followers and telling them that doubt is the enemy when really this ends up making the leaders and their followers the enemy of truth. This seems like a recipe for failure.

Why is it a problem to doubt things that are demonstrably false or unlikely to be true?

Believers do this all the time, especially in areas outside of their partitioned-off sacred beliefs: doubting the claims of thousands of other be-

lief systems; doubting things in their daily lives that could harm them or take unfair advantage of them.

If believing is so good and doubting is bad, then why “doubt your doubts” instead of “believing your doubts?”

What would have happened if Joseph Smith had “doubted his doubts” and held onto his sectarian (Methodist) beliefs, instead of inquiring, seeking further light and knowledge directly from God?

We would not have even heard about what he learned, centuries later, at this point in history. Life would be very different for a lot of people.

Doubt is a much more powerful path to knowledge?

Yes. This is how science works. This is how engineering works. This is how safety standards work. This is how the legal system works. This is how software development works, how debugging works, how quality assurance works. This is how consumer protection works. This is how people avoid being victims of scams. “Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts.”

“Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth. Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery. A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief. Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away the false. Let no one fear for the truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief. The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing; For truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure. Those that would silence doubt are full of fear; their houses are built on shifting sands. But those who fear not doubt, and know its use, are founded on rock. They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge; the work of their hands shall endure.

Therefore let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help: It is to the wise as a staff to the blind; doubt is the attendant of truth.”

— Minister Robert T. Weston

Think about it. If you claim you have the Truth, but you also feel that you must carefully shelter it from doubts (“doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith”) then you are really saying that Doubt could be stronger than the Truth, it could destroy it or diminish it. But that makes no sense. Doubt can only be stronger than the False. Doubt cannot be strong than the Truth.

Joseph Smith on Truth

Emphasis added:

“Mormonism is truth; and *every man who embraced it felt himself at liberty to embrace every truth*: consequently the shackles of superstition, bigotry, ignorance, and priestcraft, falls at once from his neck; and his eyes are opened to see the truth, [and truth greatly prevails over priestcraft; hence the priests are alarmed, and they raise a hue-in-cry, down with these men! heresy! heresy! fanaticism! false prophet! false teachers! away with these men! crucify them! crucify them!]

“I have stated above that Mormonism is truth, [in other words the doctrine of the Latter-day Saints, is truth; for the name Mormon, and Mormonism, was given to us by our enemies, but Latter-day Saints was the real name by which the church was organized]. Now, sir, you may think that it is a broad assertion that it is truth; but sir, *the first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is, that we believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another, when that truth is clearly demonstrated to our minds, and we have the highest degree of evidence of the same.*”

— Joseph Smith, Liberty Jail, Clay co. Mo. March
22nd, 1839, letter to Mr. Isaac Galland, PWJS. (pp.50-
53). Printed in Times & Seasons, Vol. 1 No. 4, pp.51-
56, Feb 1840

“One of the grand fundamental principles of ‘Mormonism’ is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.

“If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and *I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way.*

“Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst.

“We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true ‘Mormons.’ ”

— Joseph Smith (July 9, 1843.) HC 5:498-500.

Russell M. Nelson on Religious Freedom

Emphasis added:

“How can we have freedom of religion if we are not free to *compare honestly*, to choose wisely, and to worship according to the dictates of our own conscience? While searching for the truth, *we must be free to change our mind—even to change our religion—in response to new information and inspiration.* Freedom to change one’s religion has been emphasized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. *One’s religion is not imposed by others. It is not predetermined.* It is a very personal and sacred choice, nestled at the very core of human dignity. ... “Each religion should be free to

propagate itself among present and future generations, *so long as it does not use coercive or fraudulent means.*”

— Elder Russell M. Nelson,
Freedom to Do and to Be.

Elder Nelson (now President Nelson) would probably never think to apply this rule of avoiding *coercive or fraudulent means* to the Church of which he is a leader, but perhaps this exercise will prove a worthwhile endeavor.

Discouraging Honest Research

Why is it considered dangerous when an investigator has more information, not just selective—or unevidenced, or provably false—claims, to base their belief or unbelief upon? That should tell us a lot about an organization’s commitment to integrity if they *consistently use fear to discourage honest research*. Church members are told not to Google things, because “you can’t believe everything you read on the internet.” (What about the Church’s official website? Can we believe those things? Even if it is buried in there and hard to find? What about primary sources on a website like JosephSmithPapers.org, owned by the Church?)

They might as well take the explicitly anti-intellectual line “you can’t believe everything you read in the library.” (Of course this is only partly true, but probably much of the information in the library is not false. *We should always think critically to protect ourselves*, but the Church can’t say that!) What they really mean is, “Only believe *us*, or people who parrot the party line.” That sounds like the modus operandi of a party in a weak position, not the open and honest approach that should characterize a confident, powerful God and his loving followers. Think about it: any run-of-the-mill evil group (not the LDS Church and its members) can just use fear and undue influence to control their followers by telling them the same thing: only we have the answers, beware, beware, beware!

Joseph the Seer & Brigham the Lion of the Lord

I had no problem believing in the comic-book superhero versions of Joseph Smith or Brigham Young that I was taught growing up. According to the official narratives, who wouldn't want to believe in such magnanimous, brave, bold and godly men?

Unfortunately, from my study of the historical facts, the actual, nuanced versions of these men were not such clear-cut do-gooders. They may have been charismatic, gotten stuff done, and achieved many of their ambitions, but pure and virtuous? Maybe not so much. Let's meet this head-on.

POLYGAMY & POLYANDRY

Compared with his comic-book, whitewashed simulacrum, how does a factual Joseph Smith fare? Joseph Smith was clearly very creative, warm (when he wasn't threatened or double-crossed), charismatic, and a religious genius, but was he free of shortcomings?

For me, Joseph must be judged (among many other things) in light of the fact that he instituted polygamy in the first place, which is still staring at us from the canon in the 21st century, in D&C 132.

It is also very troublesome when honest investigators (myself included) learn that 11 of Joseph's "wives" were married to other men at the time of Joseph's "marriage" to the women. (This was certainly not spoken of at Church before 2013. Despite numerous correlated lessons discussing Joseph's teachings, only Emma is mentioned.) This polyandry contradicts the rules set out by God in the later 1843 revelation (D&C 132) dictated by Joseph, and makes plain why all the secrecy and public deception.

And let's not listen to the stories of the individual women coerced into "marrying" a much older man, or our hearts would break. Helen Mar Kimball, daughter of apostle Heber C. Kimball, was fourteen years old when forced into "marrying" the prophet of God, more than twice her age, all but giving up her future prospects for love with a peer. Another two (the Partridge sisters, aged 19 and 22) were under Joseph's legal care (their father had died) when coerced by their prophet to "marry" him. (Remember, they weren't really married to him; bigamy was a crime at the time.) There were other teenage "brides," such as the Lawrence sisters, aged 17 and 19, who were also under Joseph's roof.

In fact, Joseph's polygamy was secret enough that even the best scholarship today cannot determine exactly how many "marriages" he entered. The best guess is over thirty, perhaps 33 or 34. That we don't even know the exact number seems like a problem of its own.

Dynastic Sealings?

Some LDS apologists claim that these were *all* “dynastic sealings” only (despite the fact that *some* might have been) and Joseph did not have sex with any of these wives. I reject this. Do they have to posit a term that Joseph never used to justify Joseph somehow completely missing the point of D&C 132? (Which goes on and on about the seed or descendants of Abraham, innumerable as the stars.) So Joseph breaks the new and everlasting covenant by not attempting to have children? Are you claiming that Joseph misunderstood his own revelation? If the no-children interpretation is valid at all, or the real meaning, then subsequent polygamists have a tremendous amounting of repenting to do.

Perhaps Joseph was just “marrying” already married women (also a violation of the rules in D&C 132) to make sure they were married or sealed or adopted into the family of a worthy priesthood holder, to help exalt them in the eternities? (The atonement of Jesus Christ plus being married to an apostle, Orson Hyde, wasn’t enough for the exaltation of Marinda Hyde? She had to get with Joseph, while Orson was on a foreign mission, to be exalted?) These sorts of mental acrobatics to pretend dozens of “wives” were all platonic relationships just make the apologists look desperate and guilty of special pleading. What about other or later Mormon polygamists? They all had sex and *numerous* children with their wives. None of the tens (hundreds?) of thousands of descendants of polygamists in the American west, the author included, question that. In my view, to claim that Joseph did not have relations with *any* of these women is simply ludicrous. (It also means Joseph straight up broke the laws of God in D&C 132 and Jacob 2:26–33, to “raise up seed.”)

What would proof of sexual relations look like?

Sylvia Porter Sessions (Lyon Smith Kimball Clark) told her own daughter Josephine Lyon on her deathbed that Josephine “was the daughter of the Prophet Joseph Smith.”

(In addition, Sylvia Sessions Lyon's mother Patty Bartlett (Sessions Smith), still married to David Sessions, was shortly thereafter secretly married to Joseph as well. The author is a direct descendent of these three women: Josephine, Sylvia, Patty. This information is all corroborated by FamilySearch.org, a website dedicated to family history and owned by the Church. If you are naïve enough to think the records that are listed for Joseph Smith can just be changed at random by some anonymous internet troll, feel free (don't really do this) to make a free account and add some random woman like Eva Braun as a wife of Joseph and see if that change sticks.)

Young Sylvia was still married to and living with her young husband Windsor Lyon at the time of this short marriage to Joseph, 1842 to 1844. Josephine was born in February 1844, a few months before Joseph's death in June 1844. Who would remember better than Sylvia what type of relationship she had with Joseph? Why would she get it in her head that the relationship was physical if it had not been? Why would she need to keep a non-physical relationship a secret for forty years, especially when polygamy was common in 1880's Utah when she was on her deathbed? (And why would she later—after 1844 and years of only living in the Windsor Lyon household—also polyandrously marry Heber C. Kimball for a time after she had made her way to Utah?)

Imagine a Hollywood drama where a trodden-down mother character, whose life of adversity is now drawing to a close, who crossed a continent without motorized help or steam locomotives, calls her eldest surviving daughter to her deathbed to tell her a secret.... "Forty years ago, before Utah polygamy became more commonplace, there was a secret ceremony in Nauvoo, before you were born, wherein I was married to the Prophet Joseph himself. Less than a year later, I named you Josephine in his honor, because ... my beloved Josephine, you *are sealed or adopted as a daughter* to the Prophet Joseph." The whole movie falls flat and we wonder why the character would wait to tell her adult daughter this. According to apologists who refuse to admit of a physical relationship, this is exactly what happened. It boggles the mind. Sylvia was confused about the paternity of her daughter Josephine. How? The

simplest explanation is that the word *daughter* means *daughter*, and that Sylvia was conjugal with two men in Nauvoo, during a short period of time.

In 2016, Ugo Perego announced the results of his study involving Lyon descendants and Joseph Smith III descendants which showed that there is no DNA evidence suggesting that any of the Lyon study participants are Smith descendants. Individual descendants of the Lyon line who are already known to also be Smith relatives, such as the author, were excluded from the study. (The paper laments that there has been loads of intermarrying between Lyon and Smith descendants, such as the author's parents.) The study was done by volunteers on both sides and the money was raised independently by many of these same study participants. Why spend over ten thousand dollars to sequence all that DNA if Joseph being Josephine's father were not a real possibility? And why is this 2016 announcement newsworthy, and published on the Church's news site, Deseret News, if all this polyandry stuff is just a bunch of "evil anti-Mormon lies"?

If, as some apologists claim, Sylvia considered herself estranged from Windsor at the time she agreed to marry Joseph, but just could not get a divorce, and had truly given her heart to Joseph, then how could she give her consent to Windsor to get her pregnant (less than a year after her marriage to Joseph), since the DNA evidence tells Josephine's descendants that Windsor is their true ancestor? Was she having an unwanted relationship with someone she believed in her heart was not her true husband, for economic security reasons? Or did she believe she had two true husbands? It is all a giant mess, no matter how you slice it. My heart goes out to you, grandmother Sylvia, for all the heartbreak Joseph's confusing behavior likely caused you.

Celestial Relations?

What about Fanny Alger? Apparently Oliver Cowdery is trustworthy as a witness and scribe of the Book of Mormon, but is he trustworthy as a witness of the 1838 “dirty, nasty, filthy affair of [Joseph’s] and Fanny Alger’s”? Fanny Alger was living and working in Joseph’s home at the time of these relations, and she was about half his age. “Joseph’s love for his adopted daughter was by no means a paternal affection.” Emma drove her previously beloved adopted daughter out of the house because Fanny “was unable to conceal the consequences of her celestial relation with the prophet.” (Quotes from Ann Eliza Webb & Chauncey Webb. The Webbs took Fanny in when she was kicked out.) Doesn’t pregnancy—except in the case of Mary, mother of Jesus—mean having sex?

Charlie Foxtrot

A defender of the faith might reluctantly agree that early polygamy was “messy” or “being revealed to Joseph gradually” or some other euphemistic way of calling all the polyandry and unclear paternity and swapping of wives anything other than what it was. Those without such prudish inclinations would just admit it was a Charlie Foxtrot. Why else more or less officially hide it until the twenty-first century, when the internet makes it impossible to keep the kibosh on it?

A Righteous Man Could Not Be Guilty of Such Unrighteousness

How can a supposedly righteous man do such unrighteous things to young women (and adopted daughters) and married women, including infidelity to his wife? Both critics and believers might agree that *Joseph Smith could not both* (1) be a righteous man of God, perhaps a little under the angels in righteousness, *and* (2) do all the terrible things he was accused of, such as having coercive sexual relations with already married

women, or with teenage girls half his age (some of which were living in his home) while he was married to Emma, and lying to her about it. Yes, we can agree on that.

But which Joseph was the real Joseph? Was the real Joseph righteous, so I have to believe that the teenager part is a fabrication sown by Satan? Or was the real Joseph sexually adventurous, and the righteous Joseph was a fabrication or simply propaganda?

In Joseph's Own Handwriting

Go to josephsmithpapers.org (owned by the Church) and in the search field, type:

Burn this letter

Read the entire 1842 love letter. What other such letters in Joseph's own handwriting, discretely folded down into a tiny rectangle, were burned instead of kept?

What was he wanting to tell the Whitneys in person instead of in writing? Why did he need their comfort, but not Emma's, his only legal and lawfully wedded wife? Why did Brother and Sister Whitney need to bring their 17-year-old daughter Sarah Ann Whitney to comfort Joseph Smith, under cover of darkness? Why did it matter that "the nights are very pleasant indeed." Is the following religious-coercive language?

- "I know it is the will of God"
- Joseph wanted them to get "the fulness of [Joseph's] blessings sealed upon [their] heads"?

Don't Joseph's indefensible actions—all but abusing his position of power to prey on the vulnerable—show the risk of giving men religious cover to undertake whatever morally questionable policies or activities they want? Again and again, men seeking power make you wonder, are they just creating God in their own flawed image? Is it a sin if I refuse to

believe in the polygamy-championing God championed by Joseph Smith?

Just as the Pope believes he is leading by the will and inspiration of God, but many question the reliability of the Pope's insights, *it is certainly not a sin to refuse to believe every person who claims divine sanction for their words or actions*. I don't believe the Pope speaks for God; he is mistaken if he believes this. Could this be true for others who make similar claims of inspiration and divine authority, especially to dictate the will of God to others? Is it possible that some of Joseph's revelations were really a product of his own mind? Like the ones where he claims God is forcing him to secretly proposition teenage parishioners of his flock, as young as fourteen?

Villainy on Top of Villainy

Finally, would it be villainy on top of villainy to use your power as mayor to violate First Amendment religion rights and freedom of the press by literally destroying a printing press to prevent the public from finding out about your romantic misadventures, as in the case of Joseph Smith? How is the destruction of a press by a government official (Joseph was mayor of Nauvoo) not considered the pinnacle crime, a truly un-American and unpatriotic act?

To put a point on it: how would conservatives react if a powerful, liberal government official such as Clinton or Obama literally destroyed a conservative newspaper by dumping the printing press in the street and pieing (jumbling) the type, because they didn't like what the conservative paper was printing? Why would Joseph's all-powerful God need to resort to such tactics? *What claims of the single issue of The Nauvoo Expositor turned out to be false?* (See the Appendix and read it for yourself.)

A Legacy of Predation

Consider Joseph's legacy of polygamy, as it is still present with us today, in the twenty-first century. Warren Jeffs, leader of the FLDS church (just one of many active polygamous splinter groups) and protege of Joseph Smith, uses D&C 132 to justify his entire community's mistreatment of women and girls—and men and boys. *Without Joseph Smith's legacy of polygamy*, would there even have been a Warren Jeffs?

Jeffs received actual justice, with specific crimes brought to light—he was sent to federal prison for life plus twenty years *for sexual assault of a child, and aggravated sexual assault against a child*. Warren Jeffs is a convicted child rapist. (With claims he “married” 87 wives. Bigamy has been illegal in Utah and Arizona for over a century.)

Jeffs and his co-conspirators are essentially guilty of systematic sex trafficking, through religious coercion. *Is there any other way to put it except that Joseph Smith appears to have started this business?* In my view, until D&C 132 is disavowed by the Salt Lake City Church, and Joseph's polygamy and polyandry publicly admitted and atoned for, kept in the open, and taught to investigators—how is this doctrine and practice anything but an unhealed, festering ethical wound that is still with us?

Celestial Kingdom Polygamy Today

Women in today's mainstream Utah church still fret over whether they will have to share their husband with a sister wife in the Celestial Kingdom. *Will a totally-not-hypothetical righteous man who joins the church in adulthood and marries a previously-sealed widow receive all of the blessings of the highest degree of the celestial kingdom if he cannot be sealed to her, since she is sealed to a dead man?* What about a woman in adulthood who marries and is sealed to a righteous widower who is himself sealed to a dead woman? (Also not hypothetical. Two prominent, living church leaders are in this position.) Now all three get to have the blessings of the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom (assuming they are excited about

this arrangement). That there is a discrepancy when the genders are reversed seems like a man-made problem. This time, polygamy hurts men because it is asymmetric.

A Loving God & the Vulnerable

Are we willing to believe that something difficult (or repulsive) like polygamy is a principle put in place by God to test our faith? Or is it a test by men to manipulate their followers into committing to a system that is nearly impossible to escape from, as in the case of Warren Jeffs and his followers? Remember: fundamentalist polygamists living in the twenty-first century consider themselves believing Latter-day Saints. For me, crediting God for this questionable legacy—whether coming from Smith or Young or Jeffs—leads me to ask, is it really a virtue to try to force oneself to believe in such a polygamist God? *Would a loving God really command his servants to prey on the vulnerable, in the manner of convicted child rapist Warren Jeffs?* Should I be proud that I have an ancestor on the list of men who, in all of human history, have “fathered” the most children—surrounded by Muslim princes, African warlords, modern cult leaders including Rulon and Warren Jeffs, unethical fertility doctors, and anonymous lifetime sperm donors?

Hopefully this issue illustrates the magnitude of some of the problems that can be uncovered when an investigator is given more information than just the carefully crafted narrative that whitewashes and ignores problematic, unsavory, or scandalous issues. The historical record surrounding Joseph’s polygamy and polyandry is pretty clear, in terms of the breadth and the extent, and the linked Gospel Topics Essay (and footnote references of scholarly works) confirms all of these problematic aspects, even if the anonymous authors are disingenuous about the details:

“Although the Lord commanded the adoption—and later cessation—of plural marriage in the latter days, He did not give exact instructions on how to obey the commandment.”

What happened to Nephi's bold statement?

"I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them."

— 1 Nephi 3:7

WHAT *WOULD* BE A VALID REASON TO LEAVE A CHURCH?

Actually, that we even have to ask this just proves how controlling an organization must be to make us question our freedom of conscience. Christians outside of high-demand religions switch which church they attend at their leisure for all sorts of reasons. But in a high-demand religion like Mormonism it is harder to explain to loved ones and community members that one has moved on and left for any reason. Believers are routinely and systematically trained to assume you have been offended by something minor; or deeply sinned; or been misled by Satan; or that you are lazy and ignorant; or basically any bad thing they invented in their head—but they never think to ask someone who has left their real reasons for leaving, and the last reason they might surmise would be that someone could feel the need to leave because of integrity.

If matters of conscience or integrity are not considered valid reasons to leave, maybe that should tell us something. Thomas Wirthlin McConkie said “a cult is any organization that won’t let you leave with your dignity intact.” The fact that no one who is still a believer asks why someone stopped attending, or cares about the answer, should also tell us something. “When you play in the mud with white gloves on, the mud doesn’t get glovey.” (Thought-stopping, un-Christian nonsense I heard once in seminary.) Don’t bother talking with an unbeliever or treating them with love, like a human; don’t bother following the injunction of Jesus to leave the ninety and nine and find the one lost sheep; that lost black sheep may spread the stink of unbelief on you and make you lose your testimony too.

Now, using our imaginations: what would be a valid reason to leave another church (not the LDS Church headquartered in Salt Lake City), if we started to suspect that this other church were a man-made organization which we felt mostly inclined to respect but were starting to have misgivings about?

1. Would serious problems with past (or present) hateful policies and doctrines (not to mention, culture), disavowed by later Church leaders, be a valid reason to leave a Church?

I believe a whitewashed Brigham Young fares no better than Joseph and his make-believe, whitewashed twin, when compared to Brigham's actual, historical record. I have moral issues with Brigham's *outright racism, officially supporting slavery of blacks and native Americans, as Governor of the Territory of Utah.*

Governor Young taught as prophet and President of the Church that God wanted slavery on the basis of skin color, and in 1852 Young pushed for the Act in Relation to Service and a month later the Act for the Relief of Indian Slaves and Prisoners. Some white Mormon Utahns (my ancestors on both sides, or at least their rich neighbors) kept our black and brown brothers and sisters as chattel slaves for a decade, until 1862. (I was not taught this about the Territory of Utah under Brigham Young and learned about it in my thirties.)

This doctrine is built on top of Joseph Smith's unique, foundational Mormon scriptures—the *entire narrative arc of the Nephites and Lamanites* in the Book of Mormon, e.g. 2 Nephi 5:21; the curse of Cain in the Book of Abraham and the Book of Moses. These may have recently (1980's) had their minor tweaks to whitewash the "white" into "pure," but the hateful, hurtful stories—baldly equating dark skin and sin—remain.

Let us pause and ponder the idea that God could have told Brigham not only to outlaw slavery in the Territory of Utah but to strive to lift our dark-skinned brothers and sisters up to a full level of humanity. "The white saints would have revolted! Society would have been turned on its head!" In my view we would then not be giving the Pioneer Saints their due. They could cross the plains, marching thousands of miles on foot to build Zion in the desert, at the command of Brigham, but if asked by their prophet and their God, somehow they could not treat other humans with Christlike love and dignity, and bring African or Native

American Indian human beings within the blessings of that Zion? I'm sorry, I refuse to believe it.

Today's leaders seem to pick and choose what they like about Brigham Young, claiming credit for and praising his impressive or positive accomplishments, but feeling free to leave his weird or maleficent doctrines in the past where they belong.

Even worse, these reprehensible teachings about our dark-skinned brothers and sisters—that they could not receive the blessings of the temple and enter the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, but *were made to serve white people for eternity*—were taught for over a century after the end of the Civil War, as doctrine, over the pulpit at General Conference. To claim otherwise requires pretending that these facts do not exist.

“Frederick Douglass told in his Narrative how his condition as a slave became worse when his master underwent a religious conversion that allowed him to justify slavery as the punishment of the children of Ham. Mark Twain described his mother as a genuinely good person, whose soft heart pitied even Satan, but who had no doubt about the legitimacy of slavery, because in years of living in antebellum Missouri she had never heard any sermon opposing slavery, but only countless sermons preaching that slavery was God's will. *With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion.*”

— Steven Weinberg

Christianity was definitely weaponized in America (long after the American Civil War) in a concerted effort to hurt people who were not of white European ancestry, and to promote literal white supremacy. Mormonism absolutely played its forceful and strident part in this even decades after the 1960's civil rights movement—the late seventies, the dawn of my own generation! *Should we wait for God to catch up with the ethics of society, or should He be ahead of the curve? by decades or by centuries? Or do we have to wait for those who claim to speak for Him to get past their*

own hurtful theories and personal opinions (or pass away even) before we can hear what God really has to say? Or does God change his mind?

“Acknowledging serious errors on the part of past prophets inevitably raises questions about the revelatory authority of contemporary leaders.”

— “Why Race is Still a Problem for Mormons”
The New York Times, August 19, 2012.

Remember, I am not the (only) one judging Brigham harshly. *Today's church leaders are disavowing the “policy” (a century-plus ban on temple, priesthood and celestial blessings for African men and women) based on Joseph and Brigham’s offensive doctrines and teachings.* Yet sadly these doctrines and narratives remain canonized in Joseph Smith’s Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price.

Can I keep my integrity and love for all humanity, and still associate myself with such a constricting, of-the-times, and small-hearted organization? Especially an organization that ignores or pretends that these offensive narratives aren’t still staring at us in the twenty-first century from their holy books? And making trivially provably false claims at a 2020 General Conference (Elder Cook) that the Church has always stood against slavery and racism? Is telling a misleading narrative in General Conference not considered a reason to publicly admonish someone, if it paints the church in a positive light? If it reinforces things that are clearly not true, but feel true, that we want to be true?

As late as 1972, President Harold B. Lee gave an interview where he reaffirmed that the doctrine of the curse of Cain (resulting in black men and women being denied the blessings of the priesthood in this life and the next) came from God, and not from man. (This is understandable, because the doctrine of equating the curse of Cain with black skin is unique to Joseph’s still-canonized Pearl of Great Price revelations, and can still be found there.) This was not a personal opinion of some rogue members of the Church. It was repeatedly credited to God himself by the head of the Church himself. *Yesterday’s prophets, including at least eleven*

Church Presidents, are today's apostates. (If any Church leader tried to teach what the past leaders taught, and tried to deny the priesthood to blacks, and publicly tried to defend such a doctrine and policy as divine, using just past leaders' hateful words, today, in the twenty-first century, he would absolutely be excommunicated. Yet if I point out this awful double standard, then I am the one who has lost the light, and I might get a phone call from my bishop, just for stating super clear and poignant facts. Charlie Foxtrot.)

2. Would serious problems with historical claims of a foundational document of scripture be a valid reason to leave a Church?

Specifically, Joseph Smith's historical claims regarding the Book of Mormon—and Joseph's identification of the Western Hemisphere peoples as Lamanites, as in *the internal stated purpose of the book*, to bring the Lamanites to Christ. If there are no Lamanites, or were none in the nineteenth century, then that is quite strange: who then is to be brought to Christ?

The Emperor's New-World Clothes

Briefly, Elder B. H. Roberts presented the sum of his Book of Mormon studies to the First Presidency, Apostles, and a handful of General Authorities at a secret multi-day meeting in 1922. There are a lot of very concrete and sort of obvious problems with any honest, scientific study of the Western Hemisphere peoples, from a Book of Mormon historicity point of view. Roberts' written materials were buried in the Church Historian's vault for decades and denied to enquiring historians until some family members with a parallel copy allowed his studies to be published in 1985. These issues are still ignored or suppressed in the mainstream "official" narrative, yet they are easy to find with only a little research, and not subtle or hard to understand. To the point where the Church's public strategy is now to deny that historicity matters at all any

more, much to the chagrin of the faithful who thought the Book of Mormon historical for over a century, and believed the book to matter entirely or in large part because of this!

All of the issues Roberts wrote about a century ago are still relevant, and more have been added over the years—e.g. DNA of indigenous Western Hemisphere peoples connecting them genetically to Asia, not the Middle East, and a quantitative genetic map of how the various peoples spread from Alaska southward over thousands of years.

Leaders of the Church back then did not value Roberts' integrity and careful facts, and they do not today. Since B. H. Roberts, too Church leaders have known in detail about the issues with Book of Mormon (lack of) historicity but spent a century doubling down on the official (Joseph Smith) narrative. Don't let anyone convince you that the leadership is unaware or that they are just true believers themselves. Many or most of the top leaders know. And if they are ignorant it is willful at this point.

3. Would simple, concrete proof of incorrect “inspired” translations of ancient documents into English be a valid reason to leave a Church?

Facsimiles 2 and 3 in the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, as published in today's edition of LDS scriptures, include real Egyptian characters, and a list of Joseph Smith's claimed English interpretations, originally published by Joseph Smith in official church periodical *The Times & Seasons* in 1842. According to present and past BYU Professors—and any professors of Egyptology, LDS or not, who have been asked for their opinion—and the Church's website, none of the translations match, not even close.

A Farrago of Nonsense

“None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mentioned Abraham's name or any of the events recorded in the book of

Abraham. Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the book of Abraham ...”

— Translation and Historicity
of the Book of Abraham Essay

To take one example, the most damning problems exist for Facsimile 3, which also contains Egyptian characters with bogus English interpretations. Figure 2 of Facsimile 3 is supposed to represent “King Pharaoh” but is actually Isis, a female god, as indicated above her head, as Joseph points out, though he has mistranslated the hieroglyphics. (One can also look up Isis in an encyclopedia and see that the image of her in the facsimiles matches ancient depictions of Isis.) *What are the odds that the Facsimiles have been clearly misinterpreted and incorrectly reconstructed by Joseph but somehow the body of the English text of the Book of Abraham (which refers to these images in its text!) still has some connection to any ancient document, extant or not?* Remember: if we have a document that claims to be legitimate, even one inconsistency proves a forgery.

“Scholars have identified the papyrus fragments as parts of standard funerary texts that were deposited with mummified bodies. These fragments date to between the third century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., long after Abraham lived.”

— T & H of the B of A Essay

Apologists like John Gee and Hugh Nibley get paid by the Church to make smokescreen claims about the minutiae surrounding the Book of Abraham and the extant Joseph Smith Papyri (or the supposed “missing” papyri). These claims are multitudinous, and would take hours to cover in detail. Real Egyptologists like Robert Ritner have spent hours castigating John Gee (Ritner’s PhD student at one point!) for his sloppy excuse for “scholarship.” But none of this matters here. *Why is there even one obvious mistranslation?* And why have the Facsimiles published in the scriptures not been updated to include modern translations now that the Church employs its own BYU Egyptologists? Why employ them?

What happened to Article of Faith number 8, believing in a book of scripture “as far as it is translated correctly?” Isn’t lying by omission and continuing to knowingly publish a false translation of the Facsimiles in the scriptures a form of dishonesty? (Besides being a form of blatant cultural appropriation by reflecting a knowingly inaccurate portrayal of a unique pagan and polytheistic black Egyptian funerary religion as Abrahamic and Semitic or worse, white? Claiming Abraham was white is a form of double cultural appropriation.)

Am I wrong about the facts here? Is there room for refutation, regarding Figure 2 of Facsimile 3? I do not believe that God provided Joseph Smith with this false translation of this Egyptian, and I hope the reader does not either.

“Joseph’s translation was not a literal rendering of the papyri as a conventional translation would be.”

— T & H of the B of A Essay

As far as I am concerned, further light and knowledge about the papyri have been revealed, and continuing to believe that the English text of the Book of Abraham was inspired by anything to do with Ancient Egypt (besides Joseph’s fecund imagination), in the face of evidence against, is a litmus test which shows if we are willing to update or relinquish our beliefs when new information is presented to us, or if we will just dig our heels in and ignore evidence that conflicts with our beliefs, at our convenience—and at our peril. If you believe Joseph’s interpretation is divine, then you are forced to believe the truth of the caption to Facsimile 2, figure 11, “If the world can find out these numbers, so let it be.” Well, BYU Egyptologists can read those symbols (they are not numbers), and we know what they say, and the Lord through Joseph said that they “will be given in the own due time of the Lord.” That time is now (actually over a century ago) and the interpretations have been given and you are forced to believe the scholars who have found out their meaning. There is no way out of this but by doubling down, darkness and contradiction. Repent, relinquish, move forward.

“When an honest man discovers he is mistaken, he will either cease being mistaken, or cease being honest.”

— attributed to Oscar Wilde

Remember; believing without evidence might be faith, but believing in the face of contradictory evidence is delusion, and makes the world around us a worse place. It hurts ourselves, our relationships and damages young people. I believe we should root out delusion using the light and knowledge God has poured out on us.

Finally, despite a lengthy quasi-scholarly attempt at bolstering the book’s translation and historical merits, the Church’s essay makes the claim that

“The *veracity* and value of the book of Abraham *cannot be settled by scholarly debate* concerning the book’s translation and historicity. The book’s status as scripture lies in the *eternal* truths it teaches and the *powerful spirit* it conveys. The book of Abraham imparts *profound* truths about the nature of God, His *relationship* to us as His children, and the *purpose* of this mortal life. The truth of the book of Abraham is ultimately found through careful study of its teachings, *sincere prayer, and the confirmation of the Spirit.*”

— T & H of the B of A Essay,
emphasis added

I present “a non-literal rendering” of this paragraph “catalyzed” by “reflection,” a “translation” (using a “broader definition” of the word):

Even when the facts fly in the face of your feelings, then feelings should still trump facts.

For me, this is the textbook definition of special pleading, intellectual dishonesty and motivated reasoning: start with the result you want (“I love the Book of Abraham”), and use emotion instead of logic to strike down any evidence that contradicts it.

“I never guess. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Inevitably one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

— Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,
as said by Sherlock Holmes

Even the Old Testament warns us about the danger of relying on our feelings:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”

— Jeremiah 17:9

Can Fiction Teach True Lessons?

I want to make another important point here. The feelings we have about what a book teaches us—about what it means to be human, or how we connect to the divine—have zero to do with the provenance or historicity of the book itself. The example I use is that I learned something profound about life and death by reading *Harry Potter*, especially the end of book seven. It moved me and motivated me to see life as more precious, to want to make better use of my short time on earth, especially to live my life in a way that helps others. These teachings are true, or at least, they feel true and they resonated with me. But the teachings and feelings have nothing to do with whether Harry Potter was himself historical or fictional, or whether Platform Nine and Three Quarters is a real place muggles can visit at Kings Cross Station in London.

I am not trying to be flippant, I am trying to counter the poisonous, manipulative teaching that other people or institutions should be able to control you by telling you that a work of literature cannot move you with powerful feelings unless it is either literally divine, or actually historical, or both. This is false. All sorts of art and literature, that don't even claim to be divine, can move us. It happens all the time. So why must something be divine to move us? A work of literature can move us, and claim to be divine and historical, but *not be* any more divine or historical than a work of fiction that does not claim to be divine or historical. Historicity is a separate issue.

4. Would a very long list of problems—of similar magnitude—be a valid reason to leave a Church?

Would a shorter list be more or less convincing? *Is more evidence of more problems suddenly less of a valid reason to separate oneself from an organization with a questionable commitment to intellectual integrity?*

Imagine a court of law where a defense attorney tries a defense like this: “I would like to thank the prosecutor for the mountains of evidence showing the guilt and crimes of my client. Clearly the more things added to the pile, the weaker the prosecution’s case becomes, because it makes me feel bad. I think the prosecutor is a mean, lazy, lax person and a petulant and unruly child of Satan.” The defense would be laughed out of the courtroom by the jury and the judge would give him quite an earful. Perhaps the attorney would be disbarred.

For a list of many more facts for the reader to research, that could each be considered their own rabbit hole, see: Appendix of Homework Problems. And if you have good answers, I would love to hear them.

“I think for the Church to remain strong, it has to reconstruct its narrative. The dominant narrative is not true. It can’t be sustained.”

— Richard Bushman,
June 2016 Fireside.

This is Painful Stuff. It Doesn’t Make Me Feel Good.

These bad feelings are not proof of Satan or proof of falsehood. Please go learn about cognitive dissonance.

Other true believers experience the exact same bad feelings when they attempt to learn unapproved facts about, or attempt to leave, other high-demand groups, for example the Jehovah’s Witnesses, or Scientology. Why would God supposedly withdraw good feelings (allowing Satan to serve up bad feelings) and expect a JW to rely on this as the truth-telling mechanism that demonstrates that Satan is using heretical factual information to “mislead” the JW? Don’t Latter-day Saints already consider JWs to be misled? *Are these supernatural forces confused about which Church is the true Church?* Or are uncomfortable feelings irrelevant to the truth value of a given historical or factual proposition?

DO FACTS DESTROY FAITH?

This is a really important and genuine question.

“Not everything that’s true is useful.”

— Dallin H. Oaks

(I am not trying to take anything out of context. Read the original full quote and Oak’s detailed defense if you like.)

Oaks clarifies and says, “Not everything that’s true is useful to say or to publish.”

“See a person in context; don’t depreciate their effectiveness in one area because they have some misbehavior in another area—especially from their youth. I think that’s the spirit of that. I think I’m not talking necessarily just about writing Mormon history; I’m talking about George Washington or any other case. *If he had an affair with a girl when he was a teenager, I don’t need to read that when I’m trying to read a biography of the Founding Father of our nation.*”

— Dallin H. Oaks, emphasis added

I deeply disagree and I think hagiography is not helpful, except to parties with a conflict of interest. If George Washington or Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin or Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr. or William Jefferson Clinton or Barack Hussein Obama II or Donald John Trump did something that we would consider repulsive or improper or illegal today, it should be spoken of in the open and acknowledged. It may or may not overshadow everything the person did and it does not necessarily have to take away from what they accomplished. But ignoring or hiding some serious indiscretion by a person in a position of power (whitewashing) and passing it off as a mere foible (especially if it

relates to a possible pattern of abuse of power, or fraud) is un-American and deserves pushback.

I think when Oaks says “Not everything that’s true is useful to say or to publish,” he means “Not everything that’s true is useful to the Church when you share it.” *This is only the case if true information hurts the Church.*

Therefore, for example—even if Oaks does not like it—if we are discussing Joseph Smith, it is absolutely relevant that towards the end of his life Joseph had dozens of clandestine, illegal “marriages” and parallel sexual relations with many females, many of whom were married to other men, or were teenage girls. He was not faithful to his lawful wife Emma. It tells us a lot about his character and his integrity. *If this feels like an inconvenient fact when we are trying to make a case for how great Joseph Smith was, then how much more important is it not to hide it?*

Frankly, Oaks’ rhetoric sounds like something a leader would say when he sees an unraveling of power of a group who is used to controlling the narrative.

If faith claims cannot hold up to scrutiny, then is that a problem with the scrutiny, or with the claims?

If Joseph’s behavior cannot abide the light of scrutiny, then hiding the facts does not make the problem go away, it just turns it into a landmine that causes people to stumble when they step on that explosive fact at a later date. This does not sound like the plan of someone possessing the truth, it sounds like someone calling darkness light and lying by omission to prop up a broken narrative.

“If faith will not bear to be investigated, if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined, their foundation must be very weak.”

— George A. Smith,
Journal of Discourses,
vol. 14, p. 216

This lack of forthrightness has resulted in legions of bright, previously faithful people of integrity—who sacrificed and served in all sorts of callings at all levels in the Church, and paid tithing to the tune of tens or hundreds of thousands of hard-earned American dollars—leaving the church over “church history” in the last 20 years, in the age of the Internet.

Do facts destroy faith?

No? Then scrutiny is not a problem.

Yes? Then it is not true faith because only poisonous false-faith is based on falsehoods or half-truths.

“If we have the truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed.”

— J. Reuben Clark

I believe that full facts, in context, cannot destroy faith. False-faith, that must be shielded from certain facts, is flimsy indeed.

“Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church. “Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, ‘Don’t worry about it!’ “Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her *testimony* as a response intended to avoid the issue.”

— M. Russell Ballard,
2016 Speech to CES Teachers

(This also reads like an admission of guilt, a playbook of how things were done for decades, until those manipulative techniques stopped working, or worse, started backfiring!)

Understanding the Journey

Even if you are not convinced by a critical interpretation of the issues I have mentioned, and you maintain belief, I hope you know I *do* understand because I have been there. It is a long journey from there to here, from faith to settled doubt. However, I hope this exploration of facts with its pointed questions will allow you to understand where a post-Mormon or inactive member is coming from, and to feel that it can spring forth from a position of integrity.

In that spirit, I encourage the reader to study any subject without limits and without fear that some idea they come across will hurt them simply because it disagrees with their preconceived notions. Also, a reminder that quality of evidence matters, and that “You don’t get gold by piling shit really high.” (Zack Weinersmith) But before you dive in, please first learn about Logical Fallacies. We all make these common mistakes and cannot overcome them without learning how to identify and then avoid these forms of faulty, irrational, emotional thinking.

The next part will walk through what one person’s journey might look like, as they come to grips with reconstructing their values in a world where those values are no longer dictated from on high, but must come from within and without. This is not meant to be prescriptive but introspective and descriptive. Your mileage may vary.

2. Life After Losing Faith

Dear Believing Family,

I have left too many things unsaid since I stopped attending church over a decade ago. Since then I have not stopped learning and growing spiritually, and studying any subject without limits, including church history, theology, philosophy, neuroscience, ethics, positive psychology, Eastern philosophy and religion, early Christianity, and more.

A SHARED DECLARATION OF MEANING

Kindness	Beauty	Truth
Love	Nature	Reason
Family	Art	Logic
Humanity	Wonder	Honesty
Respect	Curiosity	Integrity

Let’s start with the most important things first. I believe in kindness, beauty, and truth. I believe in love, family, and humanity. I believe in nature, art, and wonder. I believe in reason, logic, and honesty. These things were taught me by my parents and my tribe and are reaffirmed by the best of every tribe that has existed or will exist. To me, they make up a shared declaration of meaning and a constitution of humanity.

“Humanism is the radical idea that all people everywhere are God’s elect: wondrous and rare creatures worthy of praise, and absolutely worthy of respect and love.”

— Anonymous

I believe that unconditional love has been shown me in my life, specifically by my parents and siblings and spouse, and that it is my responsibility to learn how to show unconditional love to others around me, especially my immediate family.

I believe that curiosity and wonder are not just nice things to seek in life, but make us uniquely human. To lose that spark is to lose our humanity.

But I especially believe that a life well lived depends on a foundation of honesty and integrity. Truth and reason may not be the only important thing or even the most important thing—kindness counts for a lot—but I think *kindness depends on not being dishonest*, because dishonesty is a form of violence, even when it is unintentional.

FAITH CRISIS OR TRUTH CRISIS?

As a well-intentioned truth-seeker, over a period spanning nearly two decades, I have investigated the historical claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and discovered that *events unfolded differently than the official story*. This is a problem with with the official story, *not a problem with learning the full story*. The leaders of the Church encourage a struggling questioner to get the false impression that they are alone in their doubts, when hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of former faithful members have gone through some of the same struggles.

The rhetoric of blaming people of integrity who develop doubts and leave has only intensified in recent years, and the organization seems uninterested in allowing open and rigorous dialogue, instead hiding in the shadows of the dark ages, excommunicating sincere folks for speaking honestly, and generally pining for the past when they could control the information. Since the September Six were excommunicated or disfellowshipped in 1993 (or earlier in 1954 with the publication of the *Chartered Course in Church Education*), the Church has only doubled down on anti-intellectualism and cut off many more outspoken individuals of integrity as apostates. *The leadership has made it clear that they do not want me nor those like me*. They do not want well-informed people who understand nuance and understand the humanity of the leaders of the church. They do not want people in Sunday school who possess a litany of historical facts to speak up, even a little, or to correct the record, even a little. Would these facts rock the boat, steady the ark, send a sword and not peace, or thresh the nations? *Do the leaders value empty platitudes about light and truth over actual honesty and integrity?*

See the previous part, which covers a handful of substantive questions in agonizing detail. Or for an apologetic take, just start with the Church's own Gospel Topics Essays on their website, which show the type of issues the Church has waited until the twenty-first century to officially own up to. (The linked site just lists links back to the individual

articles on the Church's website. If you feel nervous about reading articles published on the Church's official website, then I don't know what to tell you.)

Humans Are Human

If you follow all of the logic in the previous part about problems with the official narrative, and you make the emotional journey—which can take years—you may eventually arrive where I have arrived.

One simple possible explanation renders convoluted explanations unnecessary and makes all of the problems go away in one fell swoop: perhaps Joseph Smith was a deeply creative innovator, seeking to break out of the constraints of nineteenth-century theology, but he was still very much working within those constraints, and within his own human limitations. If God was inspiring him, perhaps that influence was hit or miss. Perhaps later leaders were in a similar situation. *Is it somehow blasphemy to suppose that perhaps the human leaders of the Church are simply human?* In fact, absolutely all of us are in this situation.

For someone undergoing this shift in worldview, it may leave you staggered, as it did me. Many new questions appear and the world opens up to us. The possibilities are exciting if a bit terrifying. How do we start to make sense of the world if we find our previous foundation has turned to sand under us?

IDENTITY & VALUES

I have learned from personal experience that conflating identity and values is one of the worst mistakes an individual can make or be taught to make. No one should be forced to disentangle or reconstruct their values when the identity constructed for them by other men fails them. Life is already hard enough without this extra man-made struggle. We should be able to talk about moral values on the level—without resorting to ideology and name calling—as has been done in the Enlightenment West for centuries. It may seem convenient when someone supplies us a set of values and an identity in a single ready-made package, but this is a shortcut that leads to smallness of spirit and can damage an individual's spiritual growth and hurt the people around him. It too often leads to tribalism and hate instead of openness and curiosity. And for some people, it can implode their values when their old group identity implodes.

One-Stop Complete Spice Mix

If someone knocks on my door (non-pandemic times) and asks me if I have heard the good news about their specific one-size-fits-all, one-stop, Complete Spice Mix that supposedly works for every possible dish and for every possible cuisine and for every possible life, I will ask them if they are telling me they think it is even possible that a one-size-fits-all belief system or philosophy can work for everyone? Are you telling me, “Just adopt this spice mix, this meaning and purpose and program and your life will turn out... amazing”? Or will it end up tasting boring if not wrong, for some dishes and some people, just like everyone who uses the same Complete Spice Mix?

Pluralism people, pluralism. Knock on my door and offer me a delicious new single spice, or a new spicy idea or an interesting thought technology and I will give up time and money to work hard to add it to my life and proudly add it to my spice cabinet. But tell me to throw out

everything in my spice cabinet and replace it with Complete Spice Mix and I will say a very big “No thank you.”

The Divide & The Divine

At bottom, there are a few different ways that people may look at the world. Some may see all of the chaos, especially in the human world, and think, “Certainly someone must be in charge of all of this. Someone must be pulling the strings. Someone must have all the answers.” For some people this is a conspiracy or a secret cabal of Illuminati. For many this is God, the supreme font of Goodness—and paired more often than not with God’s self-created rival, Satan, or some supreme font of Evil.

Others may look around and think, “There is definitely no one running the show here.” In my adult life I have found myself moving from the former camp into the latter. Unfortunately I find myself looking around and thinking, “No one has all the answers. In fact, we have only barely begun to ask the right questions.”

Do You Still Believe in God?

This is just one example of a wrongheaded question, in multiple ways, which will be discussed again later. Buried in this question is an assumption of a moral high ground on the part of believers. *What is the problem if I abandon supernatural beliefs that are no longer helpful to me, if not outright hazardous or demonstrably false?* Will I instantly become a lost soul?

THE MYTH THAT THERE ARE NO HAPPY OR MORAL UNBELIEVERS

I think the real problem is that believers are systematically and repeatedly scared by powerful organizations—with a vested interest in propagating this myth—into accepting a false premise that abandoning all supernatural belief will leave one at sea morally, unmoored to kindness and truth, swept up in a storm of moral relativism.

This is pernicious and easily shown to be false. Clearly believers (or conniving men and women masquerading as believers) can be deeply unhappy or even immoral; and clearly the faithful can and often do lead happy lives; and clearly there are moral and hard-working atheists contributing to a better world, some of which have made exceptional contributions (Albert Einstein, Kip Thorne, Thomas Paine, Bill Gates); and sometimes there are people who lose their faith and spin out of control in rebellion, experimentation or even self-destruction. But clearly bad outcomes are not the only possible outcomes, for example ex-member of the Church Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand.

The thought-stopping yet plausible-sounding proposition that “Wickedness never was happiness” can be arbitrarily flipped around to say “Happiness never was wickedness.” If people are happy and do not hurt others, then what is the problem? The only way to claim that there are no truly happy atheists is to assert that all atheists who claim to be happy only have some sort of counterfeit happiness, where authentic happiness is reserved for those who hold supernatural beliefs. This sounds like a weird form of mental gymnastics to ignore the actuality: people are people, and may or may not find a path through life that makes them happy. Phases will come and go, with some periods in life being more challenging or unpleasant, or rewarding than others. This applies to all people of all religious or non-religious persuasion. I mean, if I stood up and publicly claimed that though religious people claim to be happy, they are all only enjoying a temporary, counterfeit happiness,

how deeply offensive and obviously false is that? Yet Church leaders say this over the pulpit all the time about unbelievers, and pretend that it is a brave instead of a shallow thing to proclaim.

“Say nothing of my religion. It is known to my God and myself alone. Its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life; if that has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one.”

— Thomas Jefferson

But pay attention to the vacuous rhetoric and the constant refrain of fear spewed by the faithful about doubters: that unbelievers cannot be happy. It is broad and deep and frequently preached, especially by leadership. *What could motivate someone to perpetuate such a false, offensive, and arrogant myth?* Perhaps their own fears? Perhaps the epistemological weakness of their own superstitious position?

Michael Martin on Morality

From Martin’s philosophical treatise *Atheism: a Philosophical Justification*, p. 13, emphasis added:

“Although the divine command theory purports to provide an absolute analysis of ethical discourse, in practice it does not. *Although one is supposed to follow the commands of God, there is wide disagreement over what God commands, and there seems to be no rational method to reconcile these disagreements.* So if it turns out that there is no unique rational method in ethics if God does not exist, it does not follow that there is one in practice if God does exist and if one accepts the divine command theory.

“So far I have argued that acceptance of atheism does not entail moral anarchy and that several varieties of ethical absolutism are compatible with atheism. I have also maintained that if it turns out that an ethics without God is relativistic, the relativism might be quite tolerable. Furthermore, I have stressed

that any problems that one finds with atheistic ethics should always be put in perspective by comparing these with the enormous problems connected with the divine command theory.”

How Do Unbelievers Ensure They Are Living Moral Lives?

This is almost a great question, better phrased as, “How do people of any persuasion, even the religious, ensure they are living moral lives?”

The short answer is that we must all make this decision every day, for ourselves, as individuals, whether we are proud of our supernatural beliefs, or whether we strive not to have any supernatural beliefs.

A surrogate myth, or a big part of how the aforementioned myth—that there are no truly *happy* unbelievers—gets perpetuated, is by claiming that there can be no *moral* people unless they have supernatural beliefs. The only way to do this is by purposely and dishonestly ignoring millennia of rich conversation about this exact topic.

The Ancient Greeks openly discussed this in their schools and academies. The Greek Stoics (and later Roman Stoics, including Emperor of Rome Marcus Aurelius) openly taught a philosophy that gave up on attempts at metaphysical speculation and instead focused on practical ideas for how to live the good life. (William B. Irvine has collected this wisdom into a contemporary volume of insight for the lay reader, *A Guide to the Good Life: the Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*.)

For several millennia, Buddhism and other Eastern schools of thought have also discussed how to be moral and grounded in a reality where our individual desires constantly come into conflict with the world around us, and how to accept and adapt to change. Enlightenment writers returned to the topic of secular morality often: Spinoza, Hume, Kant, many more. Other deist writers, such as Paine, Jefferson, etc. worked to better the place of humanity in a world where God no longer intervened.

More recently, moral philosophy is undergoing something of a renaissance in the mainstream, as writers and public speakers and the gen-

eral public vigorously and openly discuss how to be good without supernatural metaphysical beliefs. Peter Singer, John Rawls, and other contemporary philosophers write and teach about ethics and how we can, as individuals and as societies, reduce the suffering of ourselves and other species. There are also the fields of positive psychology; a *Philosophy and the Science of Human Nature* course at Yale University (free lectures by Professor Tamar Gendler on YouTube); popular writings on moral psychology by Jonathan Haidt; and on and on.

If it comes as a surprise that these ideas are out there, are interesting and compelling and not particularly scary or heinous, then perhaps this is deliberate. Perhaps well-intentioned but close-minded, small-hearted regressives with a metaphysical axe to grind are either pretending that these conversations are not happening, or that they are bad, or that they are unimportant, since they (the believers) *already have all the answers*. Frankly, this sounds like something a third-grader would say, or some religious leader living in the dark ages, or some would-be theocrat pining for the return of a pre-Enlightenment, top-down system, where—surprise!—the theocrats happen to be in charge.

“The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

— W.B. Yeats

“Religion is at its best when it makes us ask hard questions of ourselves. It is at its worst when it deludes us into thinking we have all the answers for everybody else.”

— Archibald Macleish

I may be overstating this, but I certainly believed I should stay away from unsanctioned ideas growing up (*Ooooo, the philosophies of men, Ooooo, be scared!*) and I don't believe this was by accident. Until I went to college, I basically never met an adult who sought to dissuade me of the notion that any secularism was a lost cause. Yet I had plenty of adult friends at college who were irreligious yet moral and loving people. *How*

was I to reconcile what I had been taught about unbelievers being incapable of living compassionate, moral lives? It feels so short-sighted, bigoted, sheltered, and embarrassing even to write that sentence.

What Is Wrong with Not Believing Unlikely Things?

What is so virtuous about believing unlikely things?

“Both the faithful and atheists lend their beliefs to identical propositions (2+2=4, apples fall from trees in a downward direction, the Earth goes around the sun, etc.). The faithful, however, also lend their beliefs to an additional number of propositions (bathing in the Ganges River can wash away sins, or Bahá’u’lláh was a messenger from God). What atheists believe is a subset of what (most) of the faithful believe. Obvious exceptions include the claims of creationists and other antiscientists, but in most cases, there’s nothing that an atheist believes that a religious person doesn’t also believe. The faithful just lend their beliefs to additional propositions.”

— Peter Boghossian

Why put more credence in something because it is more unlikely? If that is such a good idea, then why not “believe all things?” And not just one creed? There is no virtue in this approach to epistemology. It is ripe for exploitation.

W. K. Clifford, in “The Ethics of Belief,” argues that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence.”

FINDING MEANING & PURPOSE IN LIFE

If we reject an old identity and decide not to believe something simply because a person in a position of authority says it, we may still have some practical questions about how to live our lives.

“What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of life?” On the face of it, this sounds like a reasonable question, but again this is an innocuous question that actually contains billions of reasonable questions. “What is the meaning of *my* life? What is *my* purpose?” The answers to these questions are different for billions of different askers.

Religions Rely on God for Meaning

Supernatural Nihilism says that without God or without an eternal soul, life is incoherent or meaningless. If one loses one’s belief in God, is one left with no opportunity to have a meaningful life?

“Supernaturalist theories are views that meaning in life must be constituted by a certain relationship with a spiritual realm. If God or a soul does not exist, or if they exist but one fails to have the right relationship with them, then supernaturalism—or the Western version of it (on which I focus)—entails that one’s life is meaningless. In contrast, naturalist theories are views that meaning can obtain in a world as known solely by science. Here, although meaning could accrue from a divine realm, certain ways of living in a purely physical universe would be sufficient for it.”

...

“Nature seems able to ground a universal morality and the sort of final value from which meaning might spring.”

...

“[In the context of nihilism,] While a number of philosophers

agree that a universally binding and warranted morality is necessary for meaning in life, some do not.”

— “The Meaning of Life,” Thaddeus Metz, SEP

Nihilism, Optimistic Nihilism

Nihilism means life has no inherent meaning. This can cause us feelings of existential dread.

In a poignant and beautifully animated 2017 video, YouTube science and education channel Kurzgesagt explains their take, in this partial transcript, where I have added italic emphasis here and there:

“We counter existential dread with Optimistic Nihilism. What do we mean by that? Well, to summarize, it seems very unlikely that two hundred trillion trillion stars have been made for us. In a way it feels like the cruelest joke in existence has been played on us: we became self-aware only to realize *this story is not about us*. While it is great to know about electrons and the powerhouse of the cell, science doesn’t do a lot to make this less depressing.

“OK, but so what? You only get one shot at life, which is scary, but it also sets you free. If the universe ends in heat death, every humiliation you suffer in your life will be forgotten. Every mistake you made will not matter in the end. Every bad thing you did will be voided. *If our life is all we get to experience, then it’s the only thing that matters*. If the universe has no principles, *the only principles relevant are the ones we decide on*. If the universe has no purpose, then we get to dictate what its purpose is.

“Humans will most certainly cease to exist at some point. But before we do, we get to explore ourselves and the world around us. We get to experience feelings. We get to experience food, books, sunrises, and being with each other. The fact that we’re even able to think about these things is already kind of incredible.

“It’s easy to think of ourselves as separated from everything, but this is not true. We are as much the universe as a neutron star, or a black hole, or a nebula. Even better actually, *we are its thinking and feeling part, the sensory organs of the universe*. We are truly free in a universe-sized playground. So we might as well aim to be happy and to build some kind of utopia in the stars.

“It’s not as if we’ve found out everything there is to know. We don’t know why the rules of the universe are as they are, how life came into existence, what life is. We have no idea what consciousness is, or if we are alone in the universe. But we can try to find some answers. There are billions of stars to visit, diseases to cure, people to help, happy feelings to be experienced, and video games to finish. There is so much to do.

“So wrapping up, you’ve probably used up a good chunk of the time available to you. If this is our one shot at life, there is no reason not to have fun, and live as happy as possible. Bonus points if you make the life of other people better. More bonus points if you help build a galactic human empire. Do the things that make you feel good. You get to decide whatever this means for you.”

Existentialism

Perhaps this is simplistic, but

“For, Nietzsche [existence] is found in the reverberations of the phrase ‘God is dead,’ in the challenge of nihilism.”

— “Existentialism”,
Steven Crowell,

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

This modern twentieth-century world, where the power of religion was on the wane, served as a prelude to later writers and philosophers who fought to allow for a world where the passion of the individual could shine forth in the very real void of the cold, dark universe.

“Jonathan Webber argues that ‘as originally defined by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values’.”

— “Existentialism”,
Steven Crowell,

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Be Wary of the Stories We Tell Ourselves

“If the meaning of life that you think you have found is in the shape of a story, it’s wrong. It’s a human invention.”

— Noah Yuval Harari

So maybe *any* story you tell yourself is just going to be a story, or a human invention. Maybe we cannot escape that.

Not Worrying about Meaning in the Moment: Mindfulness

Well maybe there is one small way to escape this problem of telling ourselves a story. Perhaps we can work on living our lives more non-verbally. Perhaps we can clear our minds and let go of stories about the past and the future and live a little more of our day in the present. Perhaps we can learn to let go of our striving and our yearning and our doing, even for small parts of our day, and just be content *being*.

Believers of top-down systems love to roll their eyes when they hear that someone who lost their belief in one of the organized religions of the West still felt a spiritual or introspective yearning and became interested in the contemplative aspects of Eastern thought. Adherents of Western or Middle-Eastern religions that tell us that we already have all the answers—including my past self—don’t need to be curious what anyone else has to say, including millennia-old traditions followed by

over one fifth of the people on the planet—counting Hinduism and Buddhism combined, and not counting secular people who already practice some form of secular Buddhism or meditation.

Mindfulness meditation, often based on *vipassana* or insight meditation from Theravada Buddhism, is now definitely a mainstream idea in 2020, and the public is aware that many celebrities and CEOs meditate. I would of course caution anyone who has cast off old beliefs for lacking evidence from running into the arms of another organization that would just as quickly plaster onto them a new group identity. However, there are some interesting possible ways you might grow in wisdom, based on ancient, tried-and-true methods, such as Stoicism and Secular Buddhism, neither of which make supernatural claims, or Sam Harris's *Waking Up* app which also steers clear of such pitfalls. You could read *Mindfulness in Plain English* by Henepola Gunaratana to learn a little about what is going on, and what is not going on, when someone sits and just pays attention to what their mind is doing, trying to focus on the breath. These are just ideas but there are loads of resources to learn how to sit and pay attention to your inner world and the present moment. It is pretty simple yet somewhat difficult, and takes practice. Perhaps you may find it worth the attempt.

TELL YOUR OWN STORY ANYWAY

If the section about problems with faith claims of the LDS Church really is moving us in a direction of facts, then we can think of Mormon theology as a remix of a lot of ideas: New Testament Christianity, Restorationism, *Antiquities of Freemasonry*, echoes of Swedenborgianism, frontier folk magic, mound-builder myth, universalism, dispensationalism, etc. If Joseph Smith got away with being celebrated as original for mixing numerous existing ideas, then why can't we do the same for our own belief system and for our own lives?

Everything is a Remix

Filmmaker Kirby Ferguson emphasizes that Everything is a Remix. But unsurprisingly this is a very old idea. No myth or story is truly original, for as the author of Ecclesiastes told us a long time ago,

“There is no new thing under the sun.”

— Ecclesiastes 1:9

Pragmatism: Formulate Your Own Mythos

If we are going to be telling ourselves stories, and we are being honest with ourselves and acknowledging that *this what we are doing*, then we just need to make sure that the story we repeat to ourselves is a healthy and effective story.

The more I have studied, the more confident I am that I will not run into some simple belief system in the future that can magically restore me to my pre-crisis state of having all the answers. (Compare James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*.) In response, I have informally adopted *pragmatism*, or the concept that ideas should be evaluated and cobbled together to see how they work in my own life.

Even articulate, careful thinkers—who have spent decades formally debating the meaning of life as a philosophical carcass to be sliced and diced—seem to have settled on some hybrid of Subjectivism and Objectivism, a grab-bag approach. From the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on the Meaning of Life (emphasis added):

“Perhaps when we speak of “meaning in life,” we have in mind one or more of these related ideas: certain conditions that are worthy of great pride or admiration, values that warrant devotion and love, qualities that make a life intelligible, or ends apart from base pleasure that are particularly choice-worthy. *Another possibility is that talk of ‘meaning in life’ fails to exhibit even this degree of unity, and is instead a grab-bag of heterogeneous ideas.*”

“Subjectivism is plausible since it is reasonable to think that a meaningful life is an authentic one. If a person’s life is significant insofar as she is true to herself or her deepest nature, then we have some reason to believe that meaning simply is a function of satisfying certain desires held by the individual or realizing certain ends of hers. Another argument is that meaning intuitively comes from losing oneself, i.e., in becoming absorbed in an activity or experience. Work that concentrates the mind and relationships that are engrossing seem central to meaning and to be so because of the subjective element involved, that is, because of the concentration and engrossment.”

“[Subjectivism and objectivism in the study of the meaning of life meet in a hybrid theory in] Susan Wolf’s pithy slogan: ‘Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.’ This theory implies that no meaning accrues to one’s life if one believes in, is satisfied by, or cares about a project that is not worthwhile, or if one takes up a worthwhile project but fails to judge it important, be satisfied by it, care about it or otherwise identify with it.”

“There have been several attempts to theoretically capture what all objectively attractive, inherently worthwhile, or final-

ly valuable conditions have in common insofar as they bear on meaning. Some believe that they can all be captured as actions that are creative, while others maintain that they exhibit rightness or virtue and perhaps also involve reward proportionate to morality. Most objectivists, however, deem these respective aesthetic and ethical theories to be too narrow, even if living a moral life is necessary for a meaningful one. It seems to most in the field not only that creativity and morality are independent sources of meaning, but also that there are sources in addition to these two. For just a few examples, consider making an intellectual discovery, rearing children with love, playing music, and developing superior athletic ability.”

“More recently, some have maintained that objectively meaningful conditions are just those that involve: transcending the limits of the self to connect with organic unity; realizing human excellence in oneself; maximally promoting non-hedonist goods such as friendship, beauty, and knowledge; exercising or promoting rational nature in exceptional ways; substantially improving the quality of life of people and animals; overcoming challenges that one recognizes to be important at one’s stage of history; constituting rewarding experiences in the life of the agent or the lives of others the agent affects; making progress toward ends that in principle can never be completely realized because one’s knowledge of them changes as one approaches them; realizing goals that are transcendent for being long-lasting in duration and broad in scope; or contouring intelligence toward fundamental conditions of human life.”

“Are these pluralists correct, or does the field have a good chance of discovering a single, basic property that grounds all the particular ways to acquire meaning in life?”

— “The Meaning of Life,”

Thaddeus Metz,

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Perhaps it is premature to say, but I think the scholarly consensus in the philosophical community is that hedonism and selfishness and meaninglessness are not the only possibility for a life not dependent on God. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Does this survey of secular thought mean that the author has given up on God? I think that is a natural question, but again, I will pick it apart. Remember, I care a lot about asking the right questions.

But Do You Still Believe in God?

Again, this is a broken question in multiple ways. The first is that it really presupposes a single coherent definition of God and how he wants us to worship him (discussed later under *Ignosticism*) and the negative space surrounding the question is that there is only one God that someone might believe in, the God of the questioner. The question is so thick with assumptions that if my believing family asked if I still believed in God and I responded that I had found Zeus, they would either be offended or assume I said this in jest.

The question really contains multitudes. A better wording might be, "But do you still believe in gods?" See *Appendix: How to Make Someone Feel Like an Unbeliever* . That section asks dozens of questions that demonstrate that the reader (presumably a Christian or Mormon believer of some stripe, or an unbeliever raised in such a culture) and the author have a tremendous amount of *unbelief* in common. And the list could be made ten times longer.

DISAPPOINTING DEFINITIONS OF GOD

The exercise of enumerating the broad and expansive view of the divine—from all of human history and all of the world's cultures—brings us back to a Western or perhaps Judeo-Christian view of God. I will summarize several centuries of theological discussions (poorly) and lay out my opinion as an example of one possible journey for someone with an introspective or spiritual bent who cares about these things, but suddenly finds themselves unburdened by other people's expectations.

Narcissism, God & the Devil

Most definitions of God are carefully designed so that he gets all of the credit and none of the blame. There is enough blame to pass around—war, famine, torture, suffering, disease, natural and man-made disasters—that for belief in a benevolent deity to continue, there also had to be an eternal, supernatural, superhuman source of evil: Lucifer, Loki, Shaitan, Chernobog, Iblis, Mara, el Diablo, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, the Devil, Satan.

But, which is more likely:

1. That God himself created a rival, Satan, because perhaps God was so amazing that he needed the challenge, for some confusing, weird or unknown mysterious reason, or
2. That men of every belief system keep reinventing their own version of Satan to pin God's follies on, to maintain belief in a hoped-for benevolent being, to avoid coming to grips with the cold hard realities of a universe that doesn't actually care about us on an individual basis? (There is also the possibility that there might be an omnipotent, omni-malevolent God in charge of everything. The responsibility falls on believers to demonstrate

that this is not the case, though I don't personally believe this. I lean more toward a God with a composite yin-yang nature.)

I sometimes wonder if believers don't actually believe—or worry, in practice—that Satan and his minions are much more powerful than God. (I hope I am not mischaracterizing this, but in LDS theology, the Devil is allowed to reign over the lone and dreary world in which we now live unless we as individuals gain secret knowledge from human messengers and God's true representatives. Otherwise we are up the creek without a paddle, and Satan has us in his power.) *Only by inventing some future world, where all is finally made right, can the balance come out in favor of God and the forces of Good.* That should tell us something.

To me, giving God credit for the few glimmers of good brought forth by nature or humanity, but assigning no other responsibility or blame to an AWOL God, seems disingenuous and lazy. Let's hold God to a higher, less obviously man-made standard, not a double standard. (See any text or encyclopedia entry on *theodicy* or *the Problem of Evil* for more on this.) Perhaps an actual, powerful, compassionate God would take responsibility for the evil in the world (if there even was any?), and would not pass the buck (and blame the devil), like a weak-ass, narcissist politician. In my opinion, this just sounds like projection of men and their own foibles, shortcomings, and vain hopes onto the divine.

An Aside about Not Believing in an Actual Devil

Often, believers are so certain about the reality of Satan that they love to look down on people who are not superstitious and do not believe in an actual devil. In fact, this is canon for Latter-day Saints: in 2 Nephi 28:22 the devil says to unbelievers “There is no hell. ... I am no devil, for there is none.” (This is supposed to be bad and is supposed to be a misleading, flattering lie, according to God's faithful, who can see through the lie.) Believers then may repeat the thought-stopping (non-canonical) phrase: “When you don't believe in him (the Devil), then that is when he has got you.” But apply that sloppy faux logic to God: “When you don't be-

lieve in him (God), then that is when he has got you.” QED orthodox believers! Doubt for the win, yet again!

A Hidden God and the Need for Revelation

“A God made by man undoubtedly has need of man to make himself known to man.”

— Baron D’Holbach,
The System of Nature,
quoted by P.B. Shelley

God is all-powerful, yet he relies on a small, elite group of humans, or texts, or traditions, to reveal himself to the rest of mankind. What is the problem with a powerful God who acts in the open, in an obvious manner? Believers may reply, “Don’t tell God what to do; don’t tempt God; God works in mysterious ways. Don’t ask for a sign.” Then they turn around and say, “Nature is obviously trying to tell us over and over about the power of God.” Another double standard? Perhaps the believers are limiting God and what he can do? It sounds like this definition is designed to make God more difficult to discover the harder we look? This leads to the next failed definition.

The God(s) of the Gaps

“If ignorance of nature gave birth to gods, knowledge of nature is made for their destruction.”

— Baron D’Holbach,
The System of Nature,
quoted by P.B. Shelley

We understand lightning because we understand electricity. We don’t need Thor nor Zeus to explain electrical storms. And the more we know about the laws of nature, the less we need to rely on a metaphysical entity, like God, to keep the universe running. This shift began with

Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, and culminated with Newton, when his laws of celestial mechanics caused quite a stir, with some claiming that if the motions of the heavens could be understood mathematically, and no entity need be posited to make the planets and the stars move in their orbits—and that an apple falling from a tree followed these same principles—then that would be the end of God.

When Darwin later showed how species were a fluid and not a concrete “thing,” and that nature on her own could create new species without intervention of a human or divine agent, over incomprehensibly long enough periods of time—the world of religion reacted violently, and arguably still has not recovered, with retrenchment into explicitly anti-science, Creationist camps. (Remember that generally, the religious are the ones who react to empirical, scientific facts as a threat to God; the scientists are just trying to formulate useful patterns with predictive power.)

Yet, as the gaps in our knowledge of the material world get smaller, the God of the Gaps gets smaller. Not looking good for this definition of God.

Not only that, but using these unwarranted leaps (“science can’t explain this, therefore the God of Abraham exists” and other arguments from ignorance or arguments from incredulity) by an apologetic believer are vulnerable to the obvious flaw that inserting a *specific* god into a gap in knowledge opens the door to inserting *any number of gods* using the same flawed reasoning. If you think you have shown by argument that “yada yada yada, therefore we need to posit that God / Jesus Christ exists with these attributes” there is nothing in the structure of your argument to prevent a Hindu from repeating back “yada yada yada, therefore Brahman is Lord.” And nothing to stop a pagan or satanist from saying “yada yada yada, therefore Odin exists and we should worship him” or “yada yada yada, therefore Satan exists and we should worship him” or even some combination of contradictory claims! You need to try harder, and use less weak-sauce special pleading, or emotion masquerading as reasoning, believers.

God Needs Money

Believers claim God is omnipotent, yet their organizations ask weekly if not daily for money. A few minutes of thought could yield numerous ways that prophetic access to God could be used to make money instead. Individual stocks have been a very lucrative investment for anyone who bought and held the right ones for decades. Just one example among thousands of possibilities. (Ironically the Utah Church has done precisely this and it has come to light that Ensign Peak has very successfully invested billions of USD in Apple, Tesla stock, etc. yet they still feel like their God has the need to ask poor people for tithing because apparently this same limited-power God cannot bless people financially who are not tithe payers? Even when counter-examples abound?) It sounds like God is all-powerful, except when he is not. Or the religious who claim to speak for God are forced to weaken their claims when this failure at stock-picking is pointed out. ("God does not help pastors pick stocks! That would be too obvious and would not promote faith amongst my fold. But God will help me sell the *prosperity gospel* to my >sheep parishioners!")

Pantheism or Deism

These conceptions of God, as impersonal and infinite, certainly paved the way for atheism, and in their day, were considered dangerous and blasphemous ideas. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake as recently as 1600 AD for ideas on Pantheism. Baruch Spinoza was banished from his local Jewish community and his Deist writings banned by the Catholic Church. Today, the ideas of a God who set things in motion a long time ago; or who works through the laws of nature; or is congruent to reality itself—feel like somewhat superfluous hypotheses. They feel a bit tautological, but in their day they may as well have been outright atheism. Yet their honest adherents were sincere in their beliefs, and many paid a higher price than some who would today claim to be persecuted for their supernatural beliefs.

Agnosticism

If agnosticism just literally means not knowing if God exists, then I can firmly say I hold this view. However I think some people assume that this means that no one should be able to claim so much certainty about God one way or the other, which might be ignoring the evidence. It sometimes sounds like claiming to be agnostic is a sort of cop-out, or a diplomatic move, to avoid identifying as an atheist in believing circles. I think most agnostics are *not* on the fence about the likelihood they will find God at some point in their lives, but they say *agnostic* instead of *atheist* to smooth over interactions with believers.

Remember however, that most self-proclaimed agnostics would agree with the statement: “I don’t believe that there are any gods that exist,” (essentially, *the* atheist position) even if they don’t claim the harder atheist stance, “there are no gods that exist,” itself almost a straw man, because it is nearly impossible to prove such a negative.

But I constantly feel the need to clarify that I have the right to change my mind if someone comes along with a good definition of God, armed with adequate evidence to demonstrate their case. Maybe that makes me an agnostic?

What About Atheism? Is That the Only Remaining Possibility?

Maybe I am just an unsatisfied atheist, or a reluctant atheist. I wish I were wrong sometimes, but I also I don’t want to ignore the evidence.

I also don’t like the label *atheist*. Hopefully thousands of words have made it clear why I don’t care to be forced to adopt an identity formulated by the cultural momentum of a believing majority. Are you an *asan-tist*? (One who does not believe in the literal, personal Santa?) How about an *asatanist*? *Why don’t you adopt an identity that proclaims the many thousands of things you don’t believe?*

“There would have been atheists even if no theists ever existed —they just wouldn’t have been called ‘atheists.’”

— SEP entry for Atheism.

The Religious Consensus is The Atheist Consensus

The most compelling and super simple point made by atheism is this: the seeds of atheism are sewn by every sect’s and every religion’s treatment of all the other sects and all the other religions. Everything the religious believe about other religions and sects (but not their own) and how they are bogus for various reasons (call this The Religious Consensus) is precisely what atheists believe about every religion and every sect: their beliefs are man-made; the believers are misguided; their beliefs lead to evil; parishioners are misled and preyed on by conniving, designing men and women; and on and on. Yet this is The Atheist Consensus. *Therefore ... The Religious Consensus is The Atheist Consensus.*

In other words:

I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.

— Stephen F. Roberts

One simple sociological proof that most common-place ideas about god(s) are likely mistaken is the following: people who claim to have found God have somehow (!) all found the god they went looking for. In other words, no one goes into their closet to pray to Allah and comes back saying they have found Jesus. This seems to indicate that not only are these local gods in contradiction with one another, but that the simplest explanation, that people find only what local god they are looking for, could very easily be explained naturalistically. If it were more commonplace for god B to reveal himself to someone seeking to know god A, then maybe we might expect something supernatural at play. In fact we should expect god X, that seeker of god A had never even heard of,

to be able to reveal itself to seeker of A if god X were an actual omnipotent being, but again, this not the common experience. Is there any research about this? I would love to learn more about this phenomenon (or it's lack of occurrence).

Theism in All Its Disappointing Flavors Leaves Much to Be Desired

Though I often find the ideas of atheism compelling or easier to defend than multiplying complexity by positing unnecessary metaphysical entities, I would love to be open to what comes my way in the next decades of my life. I don't want to be limited by labels and tribal affiliations. I have had a enough of that in my life.

After all these years, I would still love to have a handy god to believe in and I will never forget the (false) comfort of being a believer, and I still want to be supported by a personal, transcendent, divine power, but I feel backed into the corner by striking lack of evidence to fall back on the null hypothesis, that of waiting for better evidence for all of the given gods that I have ever come across.

In other words, what would it take for you to become a devoted follower of Zeus? There you go. Maybe we are not so different.

IGNOSTICISM

or Theological Noncognitivism

From Wikipedia:

“Ignosticism or igtheism is the idea that the question of the existence of God is meaningless because the word ‘God’ has no coherent and unambiguous definition.”

When I read this, I thought, I could agree with that label. Just like 7-Up had an ad campaign as the Un-Cola, this label is like the Un-Label. This puts the onus on the believers, not on me. You offer a definition of deity, and I will consider and study it and get back to you with a yes or no. Let’s keep the conversation open. I am not afraid, neither do I need to attack you.

Unfortunately most definitions of God that people offer up today suffer from one of two problems:

1. Implicitly they are trying to reassert their—or some other man’s—authority over God’s relationship with you. “Yada yada yada. ... ergo God exists, so go to Church—or go to *my* Church.” See more below.
2. When this is pointed out, they may disingenuously switch away from their real intention, exercising authority over your relationship with God, and instead temporarily present a “God-Light” definition that is more like Pantheism or Deism, and harder to argue against. “Surely believing in something is better than believing in nothing? I am concerned for your soul,” they say. Really they seem more concerned with their own Church, or their own shaky metaphysical beliefs, or challenges to their own epistemological position, or their standing in a faith community, or the like.

Faith in God, or Faith in Leadership?

LDS apostle James E. Talmage wrote in a letter once, regarding a potential schism or apostate branch forming (emphasis added),

I am convinced that *the evil one* is acting upon the minds of certain men and women in this locality, thereby seeking to undermine their *faith and confidence in the leadership of the Church*.

(I am not trying to pick on this quote or Talmage, just using it to illustrate a point.)

So it looks like *faith in leaders* is supposed to be a good thing. But could this sometimes be faith in the arm of flesh? Could it be a form of idolatry, if it is not faith in God? Similarly, is faith in a book of scripture always congruent to faith in God, or is it sometimes actually just faith in a product of men? For example, if it is one of the many dozens of “wrong” books of scripture, from any of the world’s great religions, pick your poison. (To make this more obvious I would probably have claimed as an LDS believer that faith in the Quran was actually faith in men, or faith in the teachings of the devil, or both.) If one’s relationship with God is intermediated by men or their writings, how is that faith in God and not faith in man? Does faith in God require a “team” or faith in the teachings of men, as an intermediary?

Theistic Religious Skepticism

Why can’t people have faith in God without resorting to the teachings of men? Is God not powerful enough for every person to experience directly for themselves? If not, wouldn’t that be putting limits on the power of God? Who would want to believe in such a limited God?

What about the clear cases (nonstop, every day, all over the world) where one man claims the other is experiencing God incorrectly and mistaking the influence of the Evil One for divine inspiration? How do we even get off the ground, when *both men share the same shaky epistemology*—namely, that invisible, personal feelings are enough to impart di-

vine sanction? (And not just divine sanction for one person, but generally sanction to tell others what to do—often, sanction to tell the entire world what to do: with their time, money, families, and more!) Is God the author of this confusion, or men?

Which is more likely:

1. Is God the author of exactly one of the hundreds of competing, mutually exclusive belief systems, and man or Satan is the author of the rest, but we cannot know (or even agree on an objective criterion about) which precise system is actually true, with great certainty?
2. Or is man the author of all of these systems?

Are all of the proponents of (1) (“I happen to be right, the rest are Satan-influenced”) just trying to keep their power over other people? *Why are so few people advocating (2) and telling people to experience God directly and not taking any man’s word for it?* (I think that is the definition of Skepticism. Sure, some believers will say “try asking God yourself” but they will tell you that you got the wrong answer if you say God told you something which they disagree with, or if God failed you and gave you no answer.)

Why isn’t there a stronger movement of *theistic religious skepticism*? Is it an impossibility or self-undermining to spread such a message? *But what if that is the true nature of God? What if God wants us to seek him directly, if we lack wisdom?*

I’m not saying I necessarily profess this, just wondering aloud why all of the air time is taken up by proponents of (1) above.

Perhaps 1 and 2 may create a false dilemma. Maybe ...

3. ... God is inspiring all of these systems to some degree (whatever that means) and using imperfect men, who are just trying to do the best they can. *But we should exercise caution when people claim exclusive access to God.*

I cannot claim to have an answer yet, to the nature of God or how I connect to that power, but I am working on it. In the meantime I feel like there are areas where humanity has made more progress, and it has generally been by assuming less about the world around us, and avoiding multiplying complexity, especially metaphysical complexity, and generally avoiding supernatural speculation at all. Remember: Isaac Newton is famous for his world-changing contributions on optics, physics and calculus, not his time wasted in attempts at theological speculation nor his failed explorations in alchemy.

THE DIVIDE & THE DIVINE, PT. 2

Somehow the world (or some fraction of humanity) in the last five hundred years really *has* begun to ask the right questions, and to understand when they are getting closer to the right answers. We have Doubt instead of Faith. We have Reason instead of Superstition. We have Science which is just the act of Trying to Prove Ourselves Wrong instead of Assuming We Are Already Correct (aka Faith). We have some amazing knowledge gleaned from this process. We actually have some pretty good answers to some specific, very narrow questions.

Better yet, we have an approach to explaining how we got the answers, which is transferable between people—science and philosophy allow us to teach others how to extend the knowledge of mankind by building on the work of others, who *show their work* instead of claiming divine revelation. This allows people to dig in and question assumptions and grow our knowledge—by every once in a while overturning yet extending previous understandings. Since nothing is sacred, anything can be thrown out or reworked. But only with sufficient, high-quality evidence.

“The more false we destroy, the more room there will be for the true.”

— Robert G. Ingersoll

Maybe we connect with the divine when we stop worshipping our own Ignorance, and stop filling in the Gaps of our Knowledge with Unwarranted Certainty. (In believer-ese, unwarranted certainty is called Faith in God, and really is worshipped like a galaxy-sized golden calf.) In this sense, maybe God is real—where “God” is just the word for “the stories we tell ourselves about our own divine nature.” Maybe God has revealed himself to us in the absence of proof. Maybe God is Doubt. Maybe that is where we find the answers. Maybe when we let go of our

stubbornness and exercise real epistemological humility (not the fake humility of the creeds) we will finally have begun to find God.

But instead of the Being with All of the Right Answers, he is now the Being with All of the Right Questions?

Stop Beating Around the Bush

“But do you believe in God?” Let’s just take the bait and go along with what the questioner is asking, “Do you believe in the God of Abraham, as worshipped by orthodox, believing Latter-day Saints?”

Let’s just make this clear. I am not trying to be cagey about answering an innocuous-sounding yes-or-no question. I am trying to push back on the idea that there is only one definition of God—top-down, direct-acting revealer; monotheistic and gives a lick about human beings; did miracles in the past but fewer today because of unbelief (Mormon 9:19–20—a concept which is honestly a lousy, cynical, victim-blaming cop-out, revealing so much about how a weak-ass, man-made god can only function in a society of credulous pushovers); works in our hearts through personal feelings; will judge us one day; can provide an eternal existence beyond death; has a coherent definition at all, etc. These assumptions deserve to be called out and addressed one by one (next big chapter).

Being a Secular Christian

I still consider myself a Christian, in that I strive to follow the moral teachings of Jesus, not later teachings of men who sought to deify him. I enjoy reading and pondering his teachings. But I also believe there is a tremendous and obvious problem with modern Christianity and Mormonism, wherein so-called followers of Christ do not understand, study, or grok the basics of his teachings about helping the poor, loving all of mankind (“Who is my neighbor?” Samaritans i.e. foreigners), being meek, rejecting hate, turning the other cheek, and so forth. Much of modern Christianity, at least in the USA, often comes across as chest-

thumping tribalism, just a bunch of people patting themselves on the back for being on the right team, and using that team pride as an excuse to spread fear and scream hate at people who are different (and vulnerable), and this un-Christian behavior is often ignored if not *encouraged* by some of the most horrible political leaders, some of whom are unabashedly un-religious—strange bedfellows indeed with rabid, unprincipled, Pharisaical, parastic, uncharitable religious leaders. This situation seems to be the opposite of Jesus’s teachings. Not everyone who professes to be a Christian is guilty of this, but far too many are. And they especially love vilifying and scapegoating unbelievers, often very vocally. And the truly Christian ones are often silent about it because the loud and brash ones are kind of scary, perhaps loaded down with weapons, the absolute opposite of a submissive Jesus carrying the weight of his own cross.

Christian Atheism

For some perspective, a 2009 survey of Americans who do not believe in God (about 20 million) showed that 14% identified as various types of Christians, or about 3 million people. To put that in perspective, the LDS Church in 2009 claimed a membership of nearly 14 million, and surely some of those Cultural Mormons who do not believe are actually numbered among the Christian Atheists. Activity rates in the church have been estimated at between half and a fourth, or no more than maybe five million active LDS members. So if there are “a lot” of active, believing church members, there are also “a lot” of unbelieving, secular, cultural Christians.

The next part will dig through all of this in detail. It is not meant to be definitive, but just meant to catalogue what someone who studied much in the intervening years might learn about in the course of their studies. All of this is up in the air.

3. Some Specific Beliefs

This section contains more of the questions my (birth) tribe (Latter-day Saints) would probably care about, interspersed with *my answers*.

Again, a disclaimer: not everyone who has doubts or stops professing a belief in the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints needs to believe the same things as me if they stay or leave. Believe in God, believe in Christ, believe in the words of Jesus. Believe in things that make you a better person that treats others with love and respect. We all win if this is the case.

PROTESTANT OR CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

Do you believe the men of Luther's time and later Caxton's time were inspired to bring the Bible to the public by translating it into the language of the people, taking it out of the hands of an elite group of priests able to read Latin or Greek, allowing the people to read it for themselves?

Yes.

Do you believe in the teachings of John Calvin, that God predestines us to heaven or hell, and that we show ourselves and others where we are going to end up through our good deeds?

No.

Do you believe the words of Jesus, when he taught that we should love God (Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament) with all our heart?

No. I think the genocidal god of the Old Testament is not worthy of our love or respect. History was clearly written by the (military) victors here. And I think many Christians agree in practice by ignoring or de-emphasizing arbitrary parts of the Old Testament.

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

— Richard Dawkins

I think it is pretty strange how obviously different the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are, and how most Christians seem patently unconcerned by this.

Do you believe that Jesus was right to emphasize the next great commandment, that we should love our neighbors as ourselves?

Yes.

Do you believe that Jesus meant that our neighbors include the entire family of mankind, as illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan?

Yes. For the Judeans, the Samaritans were foreigners and Jesus meant that foreigners are our neighbors too. In fact, the foreigner is the hero of the story.

Do you believe that God is one person, with three natures (Father, Son, Holy Ghost)?

No. It is likely non-Biblical and was developed by the early church fathers in the second and third centuries. The history of the development of theologies in this era (the blasphemies and counter-blasphemies, culminating in the creeds handed down to the present day) is actually quite fascinating and teaches clearly how Jesus became God.

In fact, imagine being born in Japan and taking a class on Western religion. You learn about Judaism and their innovation of monotheism, versus a lot of polytheism in many cultures around the ancient world. Then you learn about Christianity and the development of the Trinity, which to an outsider (or even Mormons!) sort of makes no sense. Then you learn about Islam as a response to this man-made theological confusion, which restores a sort of refreshing take on monotheism, especially the mono part. From the outside it all looks like factionalism, but at least Judaism and Islam—as monotheisms (that’s funny, pluralizing that word)—understand how to count to one.

Do you believe that Jesus is the literal Son of God (or begotten, not made, or one substance with the Father)?

No. This is a very strong claim with thin evidence, only the text of the Gospels and Epistles, where the story—going from Paul, to Mark, then decades later to Matthew/Luke, then to John even more decades later—seems to grow and change, exactly what one would expect from a developing theology. I invite anyone interested in the subject to study what is taught about the scholarly consensus in textual criticism at any seminary in the United States. Read any books by Bart D. Ehrman where he teaches the public the same things he teaches his students about scholarship of the New Testament. This information is widely available and broadly understood, and has been for several centuries, except by groups who have a vested interest in purposely ignoring or suppressing this information. The evidence is found directly in the text of the New Testament itself.

Do you believe that Jesus came down from heaven, incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary?

No. I'm not sure Latter-day Saints believe this. Although this varies across LDS scripture and if you count the Lecture at the Veil from the time of Brigham Young then answers to this question vary (who is Jesus' father for LDS).

Do you believe that by Jesus all things were made?

No, I don't believe that the universe—or even just our galaxy or solar system—was created by a Nazarene born 2000 years ago.

Do you believe Jesus was made man?

Sure. There is a lot of writing about whether Jesus existed but the scholarly consensus is that he did exist, that he was born in the middle of nowhere in Judea (Nazareth) and that he taught of a coming kingdom, and that he was crucified.

Do you believe Jesus was buried?

Not sure. I am agnostic about this. It is possible the bodies of crucifixion victims were left on the cross to be eaten by scavengers. Why would the Romans care what Jesus' followers wanted, or the Jewish religious leaders traditions about the Sabbath? The Romans had just tortured and brutally murdered Jesus as a warning to other people not to step out of line. Leaving the bodies of crucifixion victims to be ravaged is not a stretch. This form of torture and execution is one of the most horrifying and brutal displays of inhumanity ever devised by sadistic, powerful men.

Do you believe that Jesus rose again (literally) according to the scriptures?

No. This is one of the strongest empirical claims of believers, with disappointingly thin evidence. Negative evidence of something (text of

verbal reports (in Aramaic) of a missing body, reports largely made by illiterate men, and all written down decades later in a different language, Greek) is not very strong evidence for something so important and so unusual.

“What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence.”

— Christopher Hitchens

“Is it more probable that nature should go out of her course, or that a man should tell a lie?”

— Thomas Paine

If reanimation of corpses were possible we would probably see it more frequently in the last ten thousand years of oral and written history. The obvious response is that this is precisely what makes it miraculous. I think it is fine to *hope* that Jesus rose again. It is a lovely thought, that finally someone triumphed over death and that he wants to help me in that department. In fact losing this belief was heartbreaking for me personally. But is that the same as it actually being true, regardless of our powerful feelings? Hardly.

If the answer is that you believe or claim to know that Jesus rose again, but you admit that this is an area where you have to take it on faith, then I would like to see an admission that there are millions of possible (and contradictory) beliefs you could hold, all also based on the sandy foundation of “I assert it by faith,” and you still need to explain why you believe this one thing, but not those millions of other things.

For example why don't you believe in the following resurrected miracle-working Son of God? “Before he was born, his mother had a visitor from heaven who told her that her son would not be a mere mortal but in fact would be divine. His birth was accompanied by unusual divine signs in the heavens. As an adult he left his home to engage in an itinerant preaching ministry. He went from village to town, telling all who would listen that they should not be concerned about their earthly

lives and their material goods; they should live for what was spiritual and eternal. He gathered a number of followers around him who became convinced that he was no ordinary human, but that he was the Son of God. And he did miracles to confirm them in their beliefs: he could heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead. At the end of his life he aroused opposition among the ruling authorities of Rome and was put on trial. But they could not kill his soul. He ascended to heaven and continues to live there till this day. To prove that he lived on after leaving this earthly orb, he appeared again to at least one of his doubting followers, who became convinced that in fact he remains with us even now. Later, some of his followers wrote books about him, and we can still read about him today. But very few of you will have ever seen these books. And I imagine most of you do not even know who this great miracle-working Son of God was. I have been referring to a man named Apollonius, who came from the town of Tyana.”

— Bart D. Ehrman
How Jesus Became God

As another example, many billions believe that the Buddha achieved nirvana and gained divine powers, and many believing monks believe it enough to commit their lives to the practice, live a life of asceticism, shave their head, etc. Surely they just know in their hearts or they would not sacrifice so much to follow a Buddhist path? How can this be any different than Christian believers who are confronted with the (lack of) historical evidence but assert the right to believe propositions with or against evidence?

If you start to resort to reason and logic to debunk or refute those many other thousands of religious claims, including the nearly ten thousand of claims (6,372 deities, 2,845 goddesses and 3,304 churches) you have never even heard of (“Odin can be explained by thus and such; Allah is just one understanding of the divine by men of their time; Catholics misunderstand this or that but mostly worship the same God, etc.”) then I will remind you that you are an atheist with respect to

Norse mythology and the same approach can be turned on your own beliefs. In fact, *not doing so* is called special pleading and is not a virtue.

Do you believe that Jesus ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father?

Sure. What does this even mean? How could this be false? He doesn't seem to be anywhere around these parts, physically, down here on earth.

Do you believe that Jesus shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end?

No, but wouldn't this be great? He is welcome to come any day now and I will happily bow the knee. In the meantime, maybe we should focus on what we can accomplish together as human beings?

When believers are asked if they believe that Jesus will return by a certain date, things get weird. Some people are wise enough not to consent to a specific date, which makes me wonder whether they really think that he won't actually return by *any* specific date. (The year AD 3000 perhaps?)

Those who have mentioned dates—the list is endless—never promise to close up shop and stop believing that he could come later when a given date inevitably arrives and Jesus is a no-show. This is disingenuous and shows me that people claim to believe something they wouldn't bet large sums of money on. NASA and SpaceX have bet billions of dollars on the laws of Newtonian and relativistic physics and launched expensive rockets on the basis of that certainty. This is what confidence looks like.

In my opinion, people need to stop claiming they *know* that Jesus (or Isa, or Vishnu, or Maitreya, or Amitaba, or Cthulhu) will return (without offering a specific date) and instead say what they really think, that they *hope* someone powerful will return and fix all of our problems, Real Soon Now™. At least this is honest. And if a member of mankind were to return to judge us, Jesus is as probably almost as good as any other I could recommend.

Do you believe that Jesus was an exceptional teacher and clearly stated some plain and precious ways of thinking about how to live, how to treat one another with compassion, how to avoid hypocrisy, and how to stand up and speak truth to power? And that the rendering of these teachings into English can reach the sublime?

Absolutely. I think more people of all backgrounds should regularly read the New Testament, especially the three synoptic gospels. Or just read the Jefferson Bible.

“Trop peu imité, trop oublié, trop meconnu.”

— Thomas Paine,
regarding Jesus

Do you believe that Jesus claimed to be God or the Son of God?

No. But my opinion on this hardly matters. The textual record is before us. It is pretty clear that three of the four gospels contradict the later account of John. Logically, either

1. The synoptic Gospels purposely omitted one of the most important messages from God to man—that Jesus claimed he was actually the Son of God, and one with the Father, not just teaching about a coming Son of Man, as the Jesus of Matthew, Mark and Luke plainly and repeatedly does—in these gospels, Jesus never once refers to himself as the “Son of God,” only devils or other people do so, and he never comes out and says it,
2. *or*—The account of John was an attempt to rewrite history by someone pushing a theological agenda. Was the author of John more likely to be God or just a man? In other words, if you believe John’s later report spoke God’s truth, then why are the synoptic gospels obviously lying by omission? Because of God, or because of man?

Should we wrest the scriptures and fabricate a fifth Gospel, one that does not and did not exist, that freely mixes and matches parts of the four Gospels, to eliminate the contradictions between them (such as which day Jesus was crucified)? By what authority are we doing this? What would happen in a court of law if we did this with multiple eyewitness testimony?

I would go so far as to say that many Christians don't actually believe the gospels, as written, and instead believe in this fifth, non-existent, fabricated gospel. Most probably are not even aware of the obvious contradictions.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified?

I don't think I know what this means. And I don't think something this vague is useful, except to manipulate people.

Do you believe that people are inspired to write or create or teach, and that it can often seem to themselves and others that this was an external influence?

Sure. But my definition of inspiration is broad enough to include the music of The Beatles, which any person with functioning ears would clearly admit is inspired. I mean, Paul McCartney even said the music and melody for "Yesterday" came to him in a dream, and initially he was convinced that someone else had written it, after he first sat down and played it on the piano. He was genuinely concerned that he had plagiarized it (cryptamnesia).

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets?

Not in the usual sense, only in my broad sense above. But I do not think this means prophets or teachers have been given divine authority over me or others, save by the persuasiveness and soundness of their argu-

ments and the moral power of their words and actions. No one will ever take away my moral autonomy nor my moral responsibility. People who let others take away their moral responsibility are literally morally irresponsible.

Do you say your prayers and read your scriptures on a daily basis?

No. I don't have a problem studying any book, secular or sacred, but re-reading holy books critically is a different endeavor and not something I would do too regularly, without a specific research topic in mind.

So you don't pray on a regular basis?

Never say never, but I wouldn't say regular.

Is not praying ethical? Especially not praying for sick people?

If prayer or faith healings are actually effective, then it should absolutely be required by law to pray to the Right Deity in the Right Way by the Right People to heal the sick, especially at hospitals. If this is not the case and prayer is not effective, then why do we pray to a Divine Being? If he is perfect, eternal, and unchanging, then are we attempting to change him? If the goal is to bring our will into alignment with his, then how is asking for blessings via intercessory prayer an effective way to do that? If he requires us to beseech him before he can be benevolent, then how can he be perfect or all-powerful? This sounds like human narcissism or projection and not godliness.

Not praying for sick people is definitely unethical, but only if prayer is effective. If all studies to date show that prayer is not effective, or even barely effective—and as honest adults, we should welcome the cold hard facts—then what are we praying for? For selfish reasons? Because we are desperate? Because it makes us feel better? That is fine but we should be clear that this is our intention instead of being dishonest about it. We should stop pretending that not praying is any kind of problem.

If you think I am wrong and you feel that you know that prayer works, then you should welcome studies that apply high standards (like an FDA drug-approval study) that are designed to prevent us from fooling ourselves. (I don't know—sometimes I think believers want nothing more than to fool themselves.) All such properly designed studies show the same negative results: intercessory prayer has no obvious measurable positive outcomes for healing the sick. How can you claim to *know* something that is easily falsified but you are opposed to hearing news about the results of a study that could only confirm your supposed knowledge? Because it is not knowledge, it is feelings. And no one wants to be told that their deep feelings are founded on fiction and self-deception. That is natural and human, but that does not make it true. Again, if praying or faith healing makes you feel better and does not prevent you from seeking medical help, that is fine, but those feelings have little bearing on the objective efficacy of prayer.

Finally, if prayer works then we should only have to pray once. If we have to keep praying to Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ, then how is that different than if we have to keep praying to the Flying Spaghetti Monster in the name of Charles Darwin? “Praying to the FSM in the name of Darwin did not work. I tried it.” “Well, you have to *keep* praying to the FSM in the name of Darwin. Then count all the hits, and ignore all the misses.” What is the difference? This sounds so bleak and blasphemous, but only because it is so clear and obvious. Confirmation bias works in a very un-mysterious way. Who is more cynical: priests and institutions, for building gigantic social structures on the flimsy foundation of confirmation bias and motivated reasoning, or me for simply asking pointed questions about it?

True Believer Blame Chart

It works for any belief system!

	I am Faithful	I am Unfaithful
Bad Happens to Me	Divine Trial	Divine Punishment
Good Happens to Me	Divine Blessings	False or Temporary Happiness

Is it OK to pray because it feels good?

Yes. Also, not praying rote prayers feels good, and not feeling guilty about not praying feels good. And not talking to myself out loud or in my mind but pretending that the FSM is talking back to me—that feels good.

You have freedom of conscience. Do what feels right and does not hurt anyone. Pray when it is right, not out of a sense of obligation or neediness to a God who supposedly already knows your needs. Pray many prayers of gratitude, both alone and as a group. Pray to have your awareness and attention more open to opportunities to help others. Pray for lovingkindness and an open heart and mind. Pray to do better today than we did yesterday. Pray for insight into how to avoid falling back into bad habits. But don't pray because it is supposedly necessary, or because it gets you into heaven, or because you think you have any power to sway an omnipotent being, or because someone is policing your thoughts, or because someone is training you to police your own thoughts.

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost is a reliable way to know the truth?

No. What people mean by this is usually that in some areas, feelings should trump facts and logic (motivated reasoning), or that the emotion of elevation (please go learn about this) is unique to their sect, which is

patently and trivially untrue. Great films, even Pixar and Disney movies; or great music, art or literature, even fiction; or the birth of a child; or a non-denominational wedding—any of these can be as moving as anything from my own past peak personal religious experiences. And people fall asleep during important sermons sometimes, so how inspired or inspiring are those meetings, really?

Do you believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, or one true and living Church consisting of Latter-day Saints?

I think the Roman Catholic Church and the Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have roughly the same combination of inspiration and man-made parts. Which is to say, not 100% Godly Inspiration and not 100% Devil-influenced, Man-made Whore of Babylon, but both somewhere in-between. Shades of gray people, shades of gray.

Let me take this opportunity to ask any believing LDS readers the following: if you believe that the Catholic Church is in apostasy and has been since the first century AD or so, and this occurred because men gradually or even rapidly substituted their own worldly ideas and changed the rituals to meet their needs, in place of what was originally divine, and that Peter, James, and John took the priesthood keys with them— then do you grant that such apostate organizations (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches) would likely never know or acknowledge that they are in apostasy?

Then what about other organizations? If we grant that the LDS Church as founded by Joseph Smith was at some point fully divine and not in apostasy for some period of time, then is it possible that a future continuance of that organization (or even the Church during Joseph's lifetime) might fall into apostasy unknowingly, perhaps by changing rituals or forgetting core doctrines, ignoring their own scriptures, or denying everlasting covenants? Such as the Community of Christ? Or pick your poison Church claiming to be the true church of Jesus Christ?

(Would any Church survive that claimed to be a false Church? Who could even claim such a thing?)

Do you confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins?

I don't believe that an all-powerful, loving God would be constrained in whom he can save based on something that requires finding other humans who know the right information about Jesus and being baptized by them in the right way, by the right supposed authority, and then entering this information into a single, specific, computerized corporate database.

As to forgiveness, I think people can err against themselves and others and should work on improving and avoiding hurting others but I don't think any kind of extra helping of guilt and shame and perfectionism is necessary or healthy, and a ritual has essentially no bearing on this. A ritual may be helpful in other ways, especially if it engenders love (and not just judgement for an outside group), but by what mechanism is the ritual binding, except the voluntary, non-compulsory submission of the believer? Can we really believe that an eight year old can make such moral decisions with eternal consequences, and this can be considered completely consensual, but an adult can only reverse that decision and leave the LDS church with a notarized letter, or the help of an attorney, or both?

Do you look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come?

Already discussed above. I would sort of hope that this is possible, although I think living forever in heaven, knowing that so many people will end up suffering in hell, seems like a sad, strange, man-made afterlife. (At least Joseph Smith's teachings about the afterlife have a place of joy for people outside of his Church. Except certain apostate Saints; those hellions are rewarded with a special joyless afterlife, Outer Darkness. Bizarrely, even Trump, Obama, Hitler, Mao and Stalin may fair better.) But just remember that even Christians who believe in the

resurrection and the possibility of an afterlife disagree on the details, as much as the Pharisees and Sadducees.

I also think the unevidenced promise of an afterlife as a carrot and a stick, and the idea of a God who will finally make things right at some far-future point (but certainly not in the present) is one of the most cynical, pernicious vices perpetuated against people, manipulative and underhanded, playing to people's base desires and fears. I think people should be encouraged to treat one another well for its own sake, and because they want to be loving to others in the here and now, with no expectation of future rewards. This sounds like a higher law. Indeed some religions teach these sorts of things.

There is a famous story told in Chassidic literature that addresses this very question. The Master teaches the student that God created everything in the world to be appreciated, since everything is here to teach us a lesson.

One clever student asks "What lesson can we learn from atheists? Why did God create them?"

The Master responds "God created atheists to teach us the most important lesson of them all—the lesson of true compassion. You see, when an atheist performs an act of charity, visits someone who is sick, helps someone in need, and cares for the world, he is not doing so because of some religious teaching. He does not believe that God commanded him to perform this act. In fact, he does not believe in God at all, so his acts are based on an inner sense of morality. And look at the kindness he can bestow upon others simply because he feels it to be right."

"This means," the Master continued "that when someone reaches out to you for help, you should never say 'I pray that God will help you.' Instead for the moment, you should become an atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and say 'I will help you.'"

— ETA source: Tales of Hasidim Vol. 2 by Mar

I don't have a problem with people genuinely believing that someone's soul continues in some form after death and I respect that idea in the abstract, because I genuinely believed it in the past, but I question where they got that impulse in the first place, and if they would come to that independently of their culture or religion. Do elephants believe in life after death? They may mourn or even remember the lost who came before them, but do they posit an elephant graveyard in the sky?

What about the billions of people who believe in reincarnation? What about other concepts of cosmic continuation? How do you know they are not true? Have you prayed about all of these prospects and received specific answers?

Do you believe that there is life after death?

Where do our thoughts or memories or consciousnesses go when we die?

“When you can discover where the fresh colors of the faded flower abide, or the music of the broken lyre, seek life among the dead.”

— P.B. Shelley

To answer a question with a question:

If I climb up to the rim of a volcano, take some photos with my smartphone, then hurl it into a glowing pile of living, liquid lava, *where do those photos go?* What hope do we have of ever getting the photos back?

Whatever the answer to that question is, that is my answer to where we go when we die. You may think that this question is contrived, but I think the question of “where we go when we die” is ill-conceived and just begs the question. Where does fire go when it burns out? (To beat a dead analogy horse, as you breath and burn calories, you literally burn oxygen to stay alive. When you starve the brain of oxygen, it dies just as

a fire is smothered. The fire doesn't go anywhere. Fire is a process that is sustained. Life is a process that is sustained. Mental activity is a metabolic process that is sustained.)

What if I forget to turn off my cellular modem and my photos get remotely uploaded to one of Apple's or Google's servers before my phone meets its maker? Couldn't God do something like this, with my soul or spirit or mind, before I die?

We know exactly how this communications technology works. It is absolutely wonderful, but absolutely not a mystery nor a miracle—except to intellectually dishonest people who idolatry their own ignorance and see this as a badge of honor. Smartphones function by well-understood principles, based on Maxwell's Laws and Shannon's Information Theory and solid-state physics, and applied and computational mathematics. No one who is honest and curious and dedicated cannot learn in a week or maybe a few years how every part of digital photography, mobile telephony, computer science and cloud storage works. No magic need be posited. No hand-waving or pretend secrets are warranted.

There are no such detailed courses of study regarding the afterlife. It is all pie-in-the-sky speculation. Nothing that can be concretely hypothesized and tested.

And more importantly, there is good evidence from fundamental physics that strongly excludes any new, unknown forces or particles, stronger than gravity (which has less effect than the electromagnetic forces from the traveling neurotransmitters in the synapses of your brain cells), that could provide such a mechanism to get the information out of your skull and into God's rarified spirit storage anywhere on earth or beyond. (Unless we are living in a simulation. But in that case I would still like to hear details of how to hack The Matrix.)

But what is wrong with believing something that makes you happy even if it is false or unlikely to be true? Is it ever OK to offer someone false hope?

For example a government official telling someone their missing family member is still alive after decades missing? Especially if the official knows this is false? What is the harm?

Can faith healings reliably restore life and limb? What might this tell us about the odds of a literal resurrection?

As alluded to earlier, faith healings (that are not deliberate fraud) probably mostly work by a combination of (1) *selective memory and confirmation bias* (remembering the times when it did work and ignoring the failures—or giving God credit for a failure anyway; after all, we simply did not have enough faith for the healing to occur); (2) the *placebo effect*, which is a real thing and causes people to report feeling better when they receive some kind of intervention and attentive care, of any kind at all; and (3) *regression to the mean*, where much of the time, common maladies heal or improve on their own.

Sometimes conflicting religions or sects—who blame others’ incorrect beliefs on Satan, or on delusion or fraud, or all of the above—or even followers of the Flying Spaghetti Monster—may all claim faith healings occur in their ranks. If a given religion claims that 99% of “outside” faith healings are mistaken, or are fraud, or somehow are not divine, or are done by inadequate authority, or via diabolical powers, or count for “their team” anyway, even if performed for an “opposing team,” then how much of a stretch is it for an unbeliever to push that number up to 99.99% and claim that all faith healings likely have a single common, simpler and naturalistic underlying provenance?

I have never personally seen firsthand any evidence that a human amputee has had a limb miraculously regrow, nor have I seen—with my own eyes—someone declared dead for say, an entire week, restored to life. I’m pretty sure most true believers would steer clear of such claims,

and I would suspect fraud without really strong, high-quality evidence to the contrary. Could *faith* exist in the face of regular, miraculous human limb regeneration? No, that would then become *fact* if we could investigate it carefully and the claims somehow still held up. It would go from being miraculous HLR to medical HLR, a common part of modern science. Perhaps we would grow bored of it, just as organ transplants are no longer news. (Maybe certain fundamentalists would object to it, like anti-science anti-vaxxers. “Regrowing a limb is not God’s will!” Just as it is now in 2020, which becomes clearer after every failed limb-regeneration faith healing.)

If we are not seeing reliable limb regeneration through unspecified divine intervention, what are the odds of decaying corpses (putrefying for years, decades, or centuries) being literally restored to vigorous life? Perhaps in the future HLR or life extension or cryogenic resuscitation will be possible, but as of 2020 I see no evidence of any of this.

UNIQUE LDS BELIEFS

Do you believe in any kind of protective charm that you might wear? Like *il occhio* of the Italians? Or that anything physical you wear can protect you from evil (beyond its direct physical effects, like a seatbelt or a surgical mask or face covering)?

No.

Do you believe that such a thing could be useful as a spiritual reminder of promises made? Like a wedding band?

Yes. I understand this feeling and I lived it. But now, having purchased underwear independently as an adult, and having been married to a woman who does not connect spirituality with her undergarment shopping, I can state what nearly every 21st century adult believes: Who wants to let a bunch of octogenarian men dictate what items of clothing are allowed to directly touch their skin? Especially women? This seems like exactly the kind of pharisaical rule-following Jesus railed against. It doesn't seem to have much direct connection to faith in Jesus; or our ability to be spiritual. In fact, it seems a bit materialistic and petty, if not outright creepy, to care about a grown stranger's or family member's undies. In particular it doesn't seem to help us to love our neighbors as ourselves—it seems like a shibboleth (“celestial smile”) whose actual purpose is to reinforce in-group/out-group dynamics. And claims of unchanging standards of modesty are provably false, where past designs went to the ankles and the wrist, showing a clear history of changing with the times.

And speaking of the original garment design, what is to stop other cults from using this technique to control their members, using the same symbol marks in the same locations? If Warren Jeffs can get FLDS adults to wear his prescribed underwear instead of having freedom in that domain, and God doesn't strike him down immediately, then what areas of

his followers' lives can he not control? He literally has them by the balls. If the FLDS Church is not an inescapable, oppressive cult, then nothing is a cult. And Jeffs is just using the techniques pioneered by whom?

As the Catholics believe, do you pray for or do rituals on behalf of departed souls in Purgatory, that they might be freed from their spirit prison?

No. I am not against the idea of an ecumenical love for all of humanity, even departed souls, but I think time and money are better spent on the living, and focusing on the present and the future. For example, helping the poor: "Ye have the poor with you always."

Do you believe that God partitions physical space regarding his worship?

No. I think there are many places that can bring us peace and stir reverence and awe, and just as Joseph Smith wrote of a sacred grove, I believe we should regularly seek out solitude in beautiful and peaceful places, including in nature, for our spiritual growth and healing. I also believe that our most sacred spaces should be open and welcoming to any who don't directly vandalize or defile or disrupt them—as Hindu temples, Buddhist temples, or Protestant or Catholic cathedrals and mission churches have invited visitors for centuries, and even LDS temples before they are dedicated. Or our National Parks and wild places. Only private residences, entertainment venues with paid entrance fees, paid private clubs, non-profit offices with a humanitarian mission, or revenue-generating businesses have any reason to exclude outsiders.

Do you have a testimony of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and of His role as your Savior and Redeemer?

If hope counts, I would say I can hope for good things. I can hope that a just and loving God would know my heart, in the case of an afterlife. If some zombie corpse or astral projection of Jesus of Nazareth is involved in that, I would sort of be surprised, but I would welcome it. Would you

be just as surprised as me to see Zoroaster or Manu or Mohammed or Cthulhu or Anubis sitting and weighing your heart on Judgement Day? Then why be so certain of Jesus?

Do you have a testimony of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Joseph Smith had some good ideas here and there, but so do lots of people. There were other Restorationist churches of the time, but Joseph introduced some unique ideas into Christianity. Most of what is unique to his belief system is often not good (see part 2. Honesty & Integrity Matter). And what is good about his church is mostly not unique. Much of the Church's self-image and its members' esteem of their membership is simply a construction of successful public relations and propaganda, and is constantly way off-base from how the non-believing 99.8% of the planet views Mormonism: as provincial and small-minded, if they have even heard of it. I think a loving God who cannot exalt 99.8% of the world is not very powerful or not very loving. (Again accounting for the fact that Latter-day Saints believe that most of humanity will continue in one lesser form of eternal bliss or another, which is a respectable and ecumenical belief.) This does not nullify the benefits of Church membership and the community it provides, it is just a reminder that lots of non-LDS people believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and lots of them get benefits and community from their church participation.

Do you sustain the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the prophet, seer, and revelator and as the only person on the earth authorized to exercise all priesthood keys?

This specific \$100B+ Corporation Sole is owned and controlled by its owner, the current living President of the Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He leads the church and it makes sense that he has a legal right to do so. But personally, I do not believe a retired lawyer, car salesman, or surgeon has any say over

my relationship with God, or the rest of humanity's relationship with God, except by the persuasiveness of their words and actions. And claims of being a prophet or seer leave a lot to be desired. (Claiming that someone got something right after the fact but ignoring misses is not prophecy, this is simply textbook confirmation bias. False prophets do this all the time.)

Do you sustain the members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators?

Most of the same applies here.

Do you sustain the other General Authorities and local leaders of the Church?

I don't think their opinions and philosophies of men mingled with scripture carry any more weight than my own opinions and philosophies of men mingled with scripture, for me. And why would my local lay leader, who doesn't even know me, and who is likely an entrepreneur or professional, and has not studied philosophy nor theology, have any say about my relationship with God? What a strange notion. Do you think he has read the scriptures significantly more than I have? *The History of the Church*, from cover to cover? I have read the entire Old Testament twice. Have most members, even the very faithful, studied these things? They are probably too busy with Church callings. Is this by design?

Do you strive for moral cleanliness in your thoughts and behavior?

I strive to treat my wife with the same love and respect and honesty that she has always shown and I hope continues to show me.

But what about your thoughts? Lust? Jealousy? Anger?

I try not to let these thoughts spend more time in my mind than I ought to. However, I don't guilt and obsess about them. In the past, this would cause me panic attacks from undiagnosed Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or the like. (I am lucky I didn't have too big of a problem with Scrupulosity, but at some points I was probably borderline.)

This culture of feeling like Satan is feeding you evil thoughts that you must resist can be really harmful to certain people. Instead they should be taught something more psychologically healthy like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or basic mindfulness meditation, and how to gently accept, sit with, move on and clear their mind, not feel shame or guilt about stray thoughts, and not identify with their thoughts. Policing thoughts (and asking strangers about it) is one of the cultiest, most Orwellian things an organization could do.

Do you obey God's law of chastity?

I believe I am more loyal to my wife than Joseph Smith was to Emma or any of his dozens of illegal "wives." (Including two of the authors own ancestors, exploited women who were legally married to other men at the time.) And I don't have to invent any novel doctrines, any secret rituals or revelations, or any new and everlasting covenants to justify any licentiousness or misbehavior and pass it off as the will of God.

Do you follow the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ in your private and public behavior with members of your family and others?

I believe I follow the teachings of Jesus as taught in the New Testament, inasmuch as those teachings have been accurately passed down to us and unchanged by the hands of men. Inasmuch as the Church accurately portrays those teachings, I am in harmony in public and private. Inasmuch as Church leaders or LDS scripture (or the culture) have ascribed sayings

to Jesus which he has not said (polygamy, racism, or “Got hates gays,” “God hates immigrants”), I might not follow those teachings.

Do you support or promote any teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

I don't really promote any practices or doctrines outside of my own family. And if I did, it would be well within my First Amendment rights. But am I allowed to ask pointed questions that the leaders would not want asked?

Here are a few:

Did past leaders or do current leaders of the Church live up to the standards of chastity and honesty and integrity that they expect from the members?

And if they don't or didn't, why can no one say so?

“It's wrong to criticize leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true, because it diminishes their effectiveness as a servant of the Lord.”

— Dallin H. Oaks

If the evidence points in the direction that Joseph Smith blatantly broke God's law of chastity—and the law of the land against bigamy—and the entire edifice comes crumbling down, then that is Joseph's and the current Church leader's problem, not my problem for mentioning it. I'm sorry Oaks, yes you are thinking like a lawyer, but if sharing historical facts diminishes the effectiveness of the leaders, then perhaps you need a better strategy and a more solid foundation? Perhaps the leaders of the Church sowed deception for two centuries, and now they are reaping the whirlwind of mass defections? *Perhaps the damage is self-inflicted?*

Do current church leaders teach doctrine or promote practices that are contrary to the eternal and unchanging will of the Lord, revealed to past prophets?

Why would fundamental teachings of past prophets about the nature of God (“Adam is our father and our God, and the only God with whom we have to do?” or God being a racist who curses with dark skin, or God being a polygamist) now be considered heresy? Especially when the teachings about racism and polygamy are still canonized in scripture?

If I understand correctly, the question in the Temple Recommend Interview about *supporting or promoting any teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to the those of the Church* is really about making sure no one is practicing polygamy or joining polygamist splinter groups. *How strange, when D&C 132 has not been removed from the canon!* Weirdly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, D&C 132 is contrary to the teachings, practices, and doctrines of today’s Church. In other words, what do we do when the scriptures themselves are plainly at odds with the leadership? Not a great situation to be in.

“What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.”
(D&C 1:38)

Maybe leaders should just stop both (1) making such strong claims to be revealing God’s everlasting, unchangeable Word (in practice, stopping such strong pronouncements seems to be a policy they now hold to officially, likely dictated by the PR department and followed today, since D&C 138 was added over a century ago), but also (2) claiming continuing revelation, reserving the ability to update policies and teachings, rejecting old ideas if they are no longer working in the real world. I may be partial to (2) because it allows an organization to move away from fundamentalism. However, some old ideas that stick around under the guise of (1) are bound to cause problems, and removing them may cause

even more problems. (D&C 131, turn the page, D&C 133. Hmm.... That doesn't inspire confidence for people who need to believe their group has all the answers. But it would look a lot more like humility, to me.)

Why wouldn't anyone be allowed to state documented facts, in the twenty-first century? Why go after "whistleblowers" for teaching widely documented historical facts that are all admitted in the Gospel Topics essays on the Church's own web site?

Why is apostasy so much more dangerous for a member to be guilty of, requiring an Orwellian kangaroo "court of love" (even the name is Orwellian) but crimes, like murder, fraud, and sexual assault do not trigger such a mobilization of resources? What a strange inversion of priorities and morals. And the fact that writing about this feels so risky just proves how fearful the leaders must be—of widely available information. Beam and mote and all that.

If there is one major change that the Church could make that would make me feel much more welcome, it would be *a seismic cultural shift toward transparency and honesty, and to stop going after people for "apostasy" for just sharing facts and asking honest questions.* If someone is spreading fabrications or blatant misinformation, then this should be pointed out and corrected. But there must be room for a difference of opinion. It seems some Church leaders often cannot tell the difference between facts and opinions, and that is a deeper problem. (And often local lay leaders who have been given the same whitewashed pseudo-history are prone to thinking a corrected factual version is somehow misinformation. Their only criterion for whether a statement of fact feels true to them is whether it paints the Church in a positive light, not whether there is evidence to back up the statement.) For example, if my facts are straight in this document, but you disagree with my beliefs and opinions, or you have different answers to my questions, or my questions make you feel uncomfortable, then that is fine. *But that does not make me an apostate, if I am not telling lies, nor trying to gain a following, but rather simply pointing out falsehoods.* Enough of The Inquisition already.

A Thought Experiment

Imagine a second hypothetical Church, call it the Church of S, that did as much harm as the LDS Church: canonized racism; homophobia; transphobia; history of violent rhetoric toward outsiders, including secret oaths against the government of states or nations, to violently avenge the blood of its martyrs; mandatory sacred underwear; secret rites that are protected by death threats (or were, in the past and only changed in the author's lifetime) but are not taught to eight-year olds who join the Church until they are stuck in the system for about a decade, or new converts until at least a year in; theological and organizational misogyny that proactively and purposely squanders every woman's potential; illegal polygamy and underage coercion (child rape) by early leaders, or secretly "marrying" married men's wives (including two of the author's own ancestors); allergy to outside information and manipulating generation after generation using ethically questionable coercive techniques and thought-stopping; lying and covering up its documented history; excommunicating people for pointing out the true facts of said history instead of excommunicating child rapists; lawyering up and covering up child sexual abuse; spending tens or hundreds of millions of dollars of sacred tithing funds (billions? we can't know because of the secrecy) to pay off settlements for such CSA cases; telling the very poor and indigent to donate to the organization *first*, before paying for food and shelter, even when the organization is fast approaching a hidden net worth of around a quarter trillion dollars; a documented decades-long scheme involving dozens of shell companies and false reporting to the SEC, to obfuscate this enormous wealth from the public and especially from faithful members; vilifying other churches for paying their clergy yet not paying their own local lay clergy, but secretly paying their top clergy quite well (though no extravagantly); etc. and always claiming to be right about everything, to be led supernaturally and be unaccountable to laws or to mankind. Now imagine that this second Church also teaches some good things, so it is not immediately obvious that the organization has so many negative externalities. They strive to create worthwhile

communities. They help you move into the neighborhood, etc. Now imagine that this second Church calls itself the Church of Satan. *Is this actually worse than a Church that does all of these awful things in the supposed name of Jesus Christ?*

Back to the boring belief questions.

Do you strive to keep the Sabbath day holy, both at home and at church?

I spend more time with my family on Sunday than my bishop or stake president do. I don't think God cares what day of the week it is—every day we should love, and serve, and work, and rest, and grow, in sustainable ways that work for us as adults. However I think ceasing work at least one day a week to spend time together with family or on self-improvement is a wonderful idea, and two days a week is even better.

Do you attend your meetings; prepare for and worthily partake of the sacrament?

I do not attend LDS Church services. The pandemic has put a damper on that for many people. And I have vocational, personal, and family commitments. That seems like enough for me.

Do you live your life in harmony with the laws and commandments of the gospel?

As taught by Jesus in the synoptic gospels, I believe I do. Except I do not keep the Law of Moses, as his followers may have during his time.

Do you strive to be honest in all that you do?

Yes.

Are you a full-tithe payer?

I believe I render to God that which is God's and I render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's—I pay my taxes. Does the Church?

Does the church use tithing money or money made from tithe-money investments to build or bail out multi-billion-dollar great and spacious buildings that are temples to commerce? Instead of helping the poor? *Why is there any homelessness whatsoever in Salt Lake City?* Does the church's wholly-owned for-profit subsidiary, Ensign Peak Investors, invest in equities in the stock market, and claim that this is rendering to God that which is God's? I can and have done that. My wife and I are working to secure our financial future, so we can stand up and help others as occasion requires, especially our family, and avoid being a burden on society. And generating loads of tax revenue to help society as well. Does the Church (and by implication, Jesus himself, at the head of it) give more than they take, in the temporal sense? *Why not?*

Do you understand and obey the Word of Wisdom?

I believe I keep the word of wisdom better than Joseph or Brigham ever did. I completely avoid tobacco and I do not drink alcohol, not even mild drinks (beer) nor wine. But even if I did drink, it would be between me and my doctor, and my family, and God, not other men.

And why are some parts of the Word of Wisdom—regarding eating healthy, not eating meat in the summer, etc.—selectively (not) enforced? Is membership in an organization necessary to live by a code of health, or to receive the relevant health blessings? What if that code of health could be improved, or updated, for example avoiding addictive stimulants like caffeinated drinks? Or eliminating sweetened or artificially sweetened drinks from a diet, which could prevent substantial, deadly, long-term health problems? What about regular exercise? *Why not make a really great code of health based on the best up-to-date science, and judge people for failing to live up to that? Instead of offering false full-health promises to members for just avoiding a few grandfathered-in vices but neglecting the complete care of their bodies? Put all that nagging to better use? Why isn't my bishop getting on my case about losing weight, the way my doctor would? Moreover, why is a bishop not released from his calling for being dramatically overweight? Why is a*

culture of looking the other way for chronic weight-related health problems a good thing? Why persecute a healthy person for occasionally drinking responsibly, like Joseph Smith did? All of this sounds like custom and not revelation, and the increasing level of detail is like a fractal of strangeness.

Do you have any financial or other obligations to a former spouse or to children? If yes, are you current in meeting those obligations?

No regarding former spouse. Yes to children.

Did Joseph Smith really support all those wives, including two of the author's own direct ancestors? What happened to them after Joseph died?

Why was the author's great great great grandmother Josephine told she was the daughter of Joseph Smith by her own mother Sylvia, but no financial resources were ever made available to Sylvia nor Josephine, when Joseph died? According to Joseph and the apologists, Sylvia is not even a former spouse but an eternal and permanent spouse. And Patty, Sylvia's own mother, was also Joseph Smith's wife. Where is my fraction of the 2/34th share of Joseph's inheritance? That's right, those secret relationships were not real husband-wife relationships, and were only ever legally adulterous relationships, so Sylvia and Patty's descendants get nothing but a tangled family tree.

Do you keep the covenants that you made in the temple, including wearing the temple garment as instructed in the endowment?

No. I also do not keep the penalty covenants that my parents made in the temple in the 1970s and 1980s that have since been removed from the ceremony. Nor do I swear an oath against the United States Government to avenge the blood of the prophets. Do you? Why or why not? Thousands of past saints made these promises. Why were these solemn priesthood covenants important enough to include in the ceremony then, but critical to remove in the intervening years? Was God confused

about the importance of these unsavory aspects of the Temple ceremony in the past but only wised up recently? Or was this the work of men?

Are there serious sins in your life that need to be resolved with priesthood authorities as part of your repentance?

No. And see the part above about policing thoughts and shaming and guiltning people.

Do you consider yourself worthy to enter the Lord's house and participate in temple ordinances?

No. I think it would not be the best use of my time. Except being a spectator at a wedding which of course is not a waste of time. (It's not like I don't know the words of the sealing ceremony. It's not like I would cause a scene or vandalize the temple. Asking someone with concerns of conscience to give 10% of their income to an organization they are not aligned with, in order to attend a wedding of a loved one, and pretending that this does not tear families apart, is ungodly. Name one wedding venue that makes such financial demands of their clients and somehow remains in business. An organization with the power to do this sounds not unlike a mafia.)

Would you believe in God given sufficient evidence?

I am always open to talking about this, but I think it will not be anything new or impressive, just more of the same teachings and policies of men. Or vague personal impressions and emotional testimony bearing. I have been there, I have done this. Read and pray, pay and obey—I understand and spent years doing this.

Do you have a problem with changing doctrines?

I am fine in principle with a Church that updates its policies and doctrines, to avoid stagnating and being stuck in the past. However I think

people who identify with the group could use a reminder about how many core teachings have been modified by this point, in 2020.

State a current doctrine or policy you think could never change (for example, as of 2020, doctrines about our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters not being offered exaltation because they cannot marry someone of the right gender) and how long you think it will stay that way before a future leader turns it around. I will give examples from the past. *What possible disavowals will occur under future leadership, decades or centuries hence?* (Note that I am not complaining that these harmful policies, doctrines, or rituals were changed, just rebutting the having-it-both-ways narrative that these are eternal or unchanging ideals, and that any currently unchanged doctrines or policies will always remain that way in the future.)

- **White supremacy (black priesthood and temple blessings ban):** practiced for over one hundred years (but still scriptural in 2020, in the Book of Abraham).
- **Penalties:** practiced for one hundred and fifty years.
- **Blood oath against the US Government:** practiced for over eighty years.
- **Lamanites the *principle* ancestors of the American Indians:** taught proudly for over 180 years (now “*among* the ancestors of the American Indians”). *If quietly changing this, in the introduction to the Book of Mormon, is not gaslighting, then what would be?* Also, is the dark skin of the American Indians still supposedly because of past wickedness (2 Nephi 5:21) or is that a thing of the past?
- **Revelation preventing baptism of children of same-sex-married couples:** official policy for three years, then reversed by revelation.
- **Polygamy:** practiced for about fifty to seventy years (but still scriptural in 2020, in D&C 132). Still practiced by Mormon splinter groups. Two prominent current Church leaders are sealed to more than one woman for eternity.

What does the author expect from God at this point?

I am trying to avoid preconceptions or limits on what God will show me or how God will manifest to me in the coming years. However I have high standards for God and *I want to believe in a God that is not contingent on my narrow notions of divinity*, nor contingent on my petty human emotions. I don't want to believe in a God who is dependent on intervening humans who just can't wait to tell me their human opinions about how to live my life. So you could call me a Non-interventionist Non-contingencist Igtheist.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

— William Shakespeare,
said by Hamlet

4. Conclusion: Religious Censorship

Thomas Paine, the author of 1776's hit pamphlet *Common Sense*, hoped that a revolution in religion would follow the American revolution in government. Even after the US Constitution was ratified in 1789, persecution for religious beliefs continued to rage across Europe. In England in the 1790's, several people who published and circulated Paine's incendiary, pro-reason, anti-sacred-cow polemic *The Age of Reason* were prosecuted and received jail sentences of up to eight years. One horrified and repentant bookseller was torn away from supporting his wife and family and imprisoned for an entire year "to protect the name of the English Church" and Christianity. He considered himself lucky to have the sentence reduced from three years.

Asael Smith, my own direct ancestor, took a copy of *The Age of Reason* to the home of his own son, Joseph Smith, Sr. in the early 1800's (before Joseph Smith Jr.'s 1805 birth) and tried to persuade him not to get caught up in the religious fervor of his Methodist-leaning wife, Lucy Mack Smith, who records (rough draft, ch. XIII) that her father-in-law threw the book down in their main room and said, "read it until you believe it." This advice appears not to have been taken. (This anecdote has been edited out of Apostle Orson Pratt's 1853 edition as well, dovetailing with this theme of religious censorship. And let's not get into Brigham Young's command to literally burn all copies of Lucy's book until he could edit it to his liking, which he was luckily never able to do.)

Centuries have passed, yet a powerful fear of words, and a taboo against reason, and an even greater imbalance of institutional power, and a related inability to engage ideas on the level without resorting to deflection, or shoddy logic, or gaslighting, or hand-waving, or just outright feelings-based fear-mongering, or name-calling childishness—are still alive and well in the world of high-demand religion. Well-educated leaders who should know better frequently resort to these cheap, manipulative, fallacious tactics.

The modern LDS Church still tips its hand, and top leaders sometimes secretly use lay bishops and stake presidents to target and excommunicate individuals of integrity for apostasy, despite the PR releases that claim these are local issues. (In 2014, Christine Jeppsen Clark publicly claimed her father, general authority Malcom S. Jeppsen, was directly involved in pushing for the 1993 excommunication of Avraham Gileadi, a BYU professor.) In fact, some of these excommunication trials are foregone conclusions. Why else all the work to attempt to suppress their surreptitious recording?

The leadership are clearly afraid of unsanctioned ideas infecting the membership. Is it a stretch to imagine that if the leaders had their way, they might exercise governmental power, Brigham-Young-theocracy-style, and apply temporal sanctions (imprisonment, burning books, destroying presses) to silence dissent, if they could (in some Orwellian twisted attempt to *protect* supposed freedom of conscience)?

Leading up to an apostasy trial, leaders repeatedly require outspoken critics to make the choice between total community ostracism *or* being forced to self-censor by deleting posts, shutting down podcasts, blogs and websites, and making public retractions, the modern equivalent of destroying a press. This does not sound like the tactics of a group possessing the truth, *it sounds exactly like the tactics of a group suppressing the truth*. (Especially when the aforementioned leaked audio recordings

show that the accused asks repeatedly if they have misstated any facts so they can be corrected, and the leaders respond with crickets.) What happened to “truth will out”?

I understand the idea of stopping the spread of outright lies, but attempting to stop the spread of facts (especially facts corroborated by the Church’s own websites) is just bone-headed and bad for PR. And attempting to use spiritual coercion to stop the spread of opinions you disagree with is simply—wait for it—religious censorship and religious abuse.

These actions by leadership attempting to curb “apostasy” may work in the short term, yet the remaining harmful policies, doctrine, white-washed history, and unsympathetic rhetoric about doubters has led tens (if not hundreds?) of thousands of amazing, empathetic, dedicated, educated, Christlike, hard-working individuals to walk away—or run away—from their once-loved Church for a host of powerful reasons.

The same inability to listen to the Johannine voices in the wilderness—in the trenches working to save souls and marriages and the lives of the vulnerable and marginalized (children, women, minorities, the LGBTQ community, doubters, historians), and instead anathematizing those working at the fringes—is also hampering the work of attracting intelligent, compassionate tithe-paying converts to build a faithful and vibrant future for a once stalwart Church. How could people of integrity stay, and worship, and commune, in good conscience, once they know the harm that is caused, once they sink into the sandy foundation of incomplete information and faith-promoting spin, and discover the deeper bedrock of inconvenient hard historical facts?

Temples lie mostly empty, endlessly renovated when they are not open only by appointment; yet more are announced, with an increasing number yet to be built! Genealogical names, whose work is already done, are recycled. Tithing revenue growth in the developed world stagnates or

falls. The public relations department plows forward, staging sycophantic photo-ops—with a profane, foul-mouthed, ungodly, uncompassionate, orange-skinned, rich-man king-man in an expensive suit—all in the name of supposedly forwarding the work of humble, compassionate, loving Jesus, in the name of feeding the poor and the hungry. But where is the meekness, the turning of the other cheek? Where is the power in submission? The willingness to close one's mouth and listen? The rich king-man in a suit certainly models the opposite. Why would the Kingdom of Heaven need to beg for scraps at the table of a knock-off Caesar? We would expect the Sanhedrin to play sycophant to Rome, but not the true disciples of Christ themselves.

Where is the living Christ in all of this? Instead, the lawyers, car salesmen, and Pharisees run the show, and sit on expensive, plush red chairs—the literal chief seats in the upper rooms of the temple—while their soon-approaching-one-trillion-dollar multi-corporation-shell-game empire fails to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and help the needy—unless accompanied by a PR release—all in the supposed name of Jesus. Courts “Pilate”d by pawns cast out the real prophets and put them to an open shame. Stake presidents cut off the sincere and honest from fellowship for bravely presenting facts, and for calmly but firmly arguing for healing and acceptance—banished for integrity, or for telling their own story. Then more negative national news and self-inflicted bad PR erupts, the cycle renewed.

The typical faithful-in-the-pews knows very little about any of this, because they are carefully shielded from unsanctioned ideas, but in the age of the Internet, these stories and headlines are becoming more and more impossible to ignore or to avoid stumbling across.

Much of the world has come a long way in the last two centuries since the imprisonment of *The Age of Reason's* booksellers. Yet those who entertain independent thoughts are still at risk of self-censoring, instead remaining silent, effectively letting some local lay-leader busybodies bully us into strapping our minds into their time machine, and rocketing back to the 1790's, when an American patriot's thoughts on matters

of conscience were almost silenced through intimidation and ham-fisted attempts at government overreach and religious censorship.

Freedom is the freedom to say “ $2 + 2 = 4$.”

— George Orwell

Some of us stay silent because we have so often heard the thought-stopping phrase, “critics can leave the Church but they can’t leave it alone,” which is really just a way of saying, “critics can leave the Church, but we can’t and shouldn’t leave them alone.” It’s just a way of inverting the Goliath Church vs. individual critic David reality and trying to garner sympathy instead of owning up to legitimate criticism. It is disingenuous, lax, and lazy and it is done on purpose by crafty, threatened men who thus reveal their own actual doubts and fears, despite talking a big game.

Critics are accused of being anti-Mormon, but now we are seeing the President himself dismiss decades of attempts to control the nickname “Mormon” and to give it a positive spin, instead decrying it with absolute negativity, even placing it on the lips of Satan. What could be more anti-“Mormon?”

If I could preach one thing over the pulpit, that I have learned in my own journey, without fear of reprisal, I would preach the undeniable fact that *we are all human and just doing the best we can, so let's work this out together and let the best ideas win*. Yet repeating this anodyne idea around the wrong people will result in ironic accusations of religious persecution, by me, against the faithful.

Sadly, even otherwise loving, wise and intelligent believers have surrendered their own conscience to (what 99% of the world would consider) a man-made organization, so I don’t really see this simple idea (of discussing ideas on the merits) being accepted universally, any time soon. Not when the believers’ otherwise open, intellectually curious, and

compassionate viewpoints are tragically limited by associating with cynical, powerful, regressive know-it-alls who base their world-view on shutting down conversation, and telling others what to think. (No matter how poorly this works out in practice in the real world, no matter how often previous regressive views promoted at some point by past leadership have been freshly disavowed by the current leadership.)

These same faithful, nuanced believers, if pressed on a specific issue, may claim that *the prophets and apostles are imperfect servants doing the best they can, just like the author and the reader*, but with two giant asterisks—the first: these special leaders happen to speak for God, so we must still do exactly as they say. The second asterisk—the get-out-of-jail-free card for the leaders—is that if we ever find clear evidence that a leader was wrong (perhaps evidence unearthed by a later leader), then the earlier leader must have just been speaking as a man and doing the best he can, so we should still cut him some slack and shut our mouths and keep quiet, or *we are wrong*, and *we are at risk*.

If we try to respond intelligently, to point out the obvious dangers when powerful men are given such license, no matter their good intentions, we will quickly be labeled as nothing but *evil, lazy, lax, unruly, scary, no-good, dangerous, worthless apostates* who will end up suffering in some horrible, lesser glory, if not actual outer darkness, for eternity, cut off from the presence of God and His love. (And even if we as doubters eventually make it to the telestial kingdom, in the meantime we will be showered with hurtful, divisive rhetoric for breaking our parents' hearts by simply daring to stand up and speak our truth, to do what is right and let the consequence follow—or even for the “sin” of simply failing to attend our repetitive busywork meetings, and for the “sin” of failing to line the coffers of the already-rich, instead using our own resources to care for our own families, or those in need around us.)

Will the powerful keep showing their true colors, shooting the “apostate” messengers for daring to challenge the children of Israel in their idolatry, of claiming the mathematical postulate that men who claim to speak for God are not congruent to God himself? That therefore we should worship God and not man? That those who claim to speak for God have created an impossibly high bar for themselves, and they should not be surprised when criticism is forthcoming?

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

— Galatians 6:7

They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

— JSH 1:19 / Isa. / Matt.

If reading this has upset you, and you consider the author full of hubris, consider the following: (1) I do not claim to speak for God, and (2) I don't have to tell people not to criticize me to avoid falling off a precarious pedestal. *In fact I welcome correction, because I am not afraid of admitting that I might be wrong about something. I prefer to correct and move forward.* Those who don't are the ones full of hubris. Why would God's true followers be full of such deep hubris?

Appendix: Homework Problems

This is a fill-in-the-blank workbook. If you have some good answers, you can post them at reddit.com/r/exmormon. Remember to show your work.

EARLY CHURCH

Question 1. Higher Authority.

“While translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery read several passages concerning authority and baptism, prompting them to pray about those subjects. According to later accounts, John the Baptist appeared to Smith and Cowdery on the ___ **day of the month of ___ of the year 182___** and bestowed on them the “priesthood of Aaron,” which gave them the authority to baptize; he then promised that they would later receive a higher authority to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost. “Historical records describing the reception of this higher authority are generally less specific and more complex. ...”

— Priesthood Restoration
Joseph Smith Papers Project
(bold emphasis added)

From a link on that page, we learn from the minutes of a June 183___ conference of elders:

“Brs. **Lyman Wight** John Murdock Reynolds Cahoon Harvey Whitlock & **Hyrum Smith were ordained to the high**

Priesthood under the hand <of\> br. Joseph Smith jr.* * *
Joseph Smith [Sr.] John Whitmer **Joseph Smith jr. & Sidney**
Rigdon were ordained to the High Priesthood under the
hand of br. Lyman Wight”

— Minutes, circa 3–4 June 183___, p. 4
Joseph Smith Papers Project
(bold emphasis added)

Yet the dominant narrative is that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood under the hands of the resurrected Peter, James, and John on the ____ day of the month of ____ in the year of 18____. According to the headings in the Church’s own scriptures (2020), section 27 is said to be dated to August 1830. However the Church’s Joseph Smith Papers Project website states that the earliest publication of the verses corresponding to our current D&C 27:8–14 were first published ca. Aug. 183___ as D&C 50:2–3, which

“... includes a revised and expanded version of a revelation originally dating to circa August 1830; text published in 183___ mentions John the Baptist bestowing the first priesthood and Peter, James, and John ordaining Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to be apostles.”

— Revelation, circa August 183___
Joseph Smith Papers Project

So what was meant by the June 183___ conference where Joseph Smith was ordained to the High Priesthood, if Peter, James and John had restored apostolic keys by 1830 by laying their hands on the heads of Joseph and Oliver? (B.H. Roberts in a footnote in the 1902 History of the Church vol. 1 p. 176 explains it away by saying they were ordained to the office of “High Priest” or the “High Priest”hood. Clever.) Why would a printed revelation from the 1830 Book of Commandments (and the handwritten record of that revelation, from Revelation Book 1, Page 35–36) need to be amended to double in length, ____ years after the fact?

What events were transpiring in Kirtland in 183__ where reemphasizing this authority would even be necessary?

Question 2. Urim & Thummim.

The Church taught me that Joseph Smith translated *The Book of Mormon* using the Urim and Thummim. The irreverent animated comedy show *South Park* in an episode from 2003 (and Fawn Brodie in 1945 and Richard Bushman in 2005) told the actual story: every eyewitness or scribe mentioned that Joseph's method for translation involved his black and brown seer stone in a top hat with the plates nowhere in sight. The Church allowed and still mostly allows its members to believe (as of 2020) the Urim and Thummim version of the story. Since Joseph's death, some leaders even said they did not have the stone, and the Church directly and indirectly encouraged the old narrative through Church artwork, etc.—until the year 20__ when a photo of this very black and brown seer stone—which had been in the Church's possession for __ years—was finally published by the Church. This same black and brown stone was used by Joseph to (defraud people/not defraud people) (circle one) in the years previous to the publication of the Book of Mormon.

Question 3. Glass Looking by a Disorderly Person & Impostor.

Defenders of the faith try to claim that Joseph's early work as a treasure digger had little to do with his later sacred calling as a prophet. However, published affidavits from a court case in Bainbridge, New York ([link to the Church's Joseph Smith Papers Project](#)) in the year 182__ show all witnesses in agreement (those who believed he was a fraud, as well as paying clients who believed in his abilities) about the fact that *Joseph continued to offer paid services as a treasure seer during that time*. This falls squarely in between the earliest events of his calling as a

prophet in the first vision in 18____, and his later work on the Book of Mormon in the late 1820s.

Question 4. Source Documents.

Joseph Smith claimed to translate an ancient document, the golden plates, in the years 1829–1830. The document was not available for others to inspect. Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto* in the year ____ which he claimed was a document written in medieval times by _____ that he claimed was translated from the Italian. Only later did Walpole acknowledge his authorship; there was no Italian document and the book was a popular work of fiction. Joseph Smith gave the golden plates back to Moroni in the year 18____. We know this from a primary source dated 18____.

Question 5. Apostasy, Adultery & Projection.

In a July 2, 1839 address to the twelve apostles, Discourse 2 or “A Key to Mysteries” (Joseph Fielding Smith’s *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*), recorded independently by Wilford Woodruff, Willard Richards, and William Clayton, Joseph Smith states

I will give you one of the Keys of the mysteries of the Kingdom. It is an eternal principle, that has existed with God from all eternity: That man who rises up to condemn another, finding fault with the Church, saying that they are out of the way, while he himself is righteous, then know assuredly, that that man is in the high road to apostasy; and if he does not repent, will apostatize, as God lives.

In other words, a man who exercises independence and uses reasoning and his own conscience to determine a course of action, undeterred by people who claim divine sanction over him—and having enough integrity to stand up for what he feels is right—will probably not let the leaders tell him what to do, and the “problem” (from the leaders’ point of

view) will probably only get worse. Joseph is right about this. By this time in 1839, Joseph had excommunicated over ____ brethren from high-up positions, for apostasy—that is, refusing to do everything exactly as Joseph commanded, or “to refuse to take counsel or direction.”

The principle is as correct as the one that Jesus put forth in saying that he who seeketh a sign is an adulterous person; and that principle is eternal, undeviating, and firm as the pillars of heaven; for whenever you see a man seeking after a sign, you may set it down that he is an adulterous man.

By this time in 1839, Joseph had engaged in sexual relations with at least ____ girl(s)/women who were not Emma, while still married to Emma Smith the entire time. (Bigamy has never not been illegal in any United State, including Missouri, Ohio and Illinois.) Joseph Smith would go on, two to six years later, to have more such relations with over ____ more women while remaining married to Emma, his only legally and lawfully wedded spouse. What is the definition of adultery again? (Do we have to play word games and say some sign seeker—or a given apostate—may never have had relations with a woman other than his wife, but it still counts as adultery because surely he committed adultery in his heart? Gold medal mental gymnastics! Pillars of heaven as firm as a bounce castle!)

Question 6. Dr. John C. Bennett & Nauvoo Abortions.

The faithful may ask, if Joseph Smith supposedly had sex with so many women, wouldn't at least one of them have become pregnant? The marriages may have been chaste, right? Maybe? On August First of the year 1842, the following affidavit was published in the Times & Seasons. It was signed by a very prominent Church leader, none other than _____.
_____.

“On the seventeenth day of May, 1842, having been made acquainted with some of the conduct of John C. Bennett, which was given in testimony under oath before Alderman George

W. Harris, by several females, who testified that John C. Bennett endeavored to seduce them and accomplished his designs by saying it was right; that it was one of the mysteries of God, which was to be revealed when the people was strong enough in the faith to bear such mysteries—that it was perfectly right to have illicit intercourse with females, providing no one knew it but themselves, vehemently trying them from day to day, to yield to his passions, bringing witnesses of his own clan to testify that there was such revelations* and such commandments, and that it was of God; also stating that he would be responsible for their sins, if there was any; and that he would give them medicine to produce abortions, providing they should become pregnant.”

** presumably a revelation similar or identical to what we now know of as the 1843 revelation on the new and everlasting covenant of polygamy, which later became D&C 132, still canonized by the mainstream Utah church*

In 1842, John C. Bennett was kicked out of the church (and out of the first presidency, and out of Nauvoo, where he had even been mayor) for doing a poor job of keeping Joseph’s publicly-denied but clear-to-us-after-the-fact polygamy in the dark and propositioning too many women who then publicly complained of his advances. But this produced an affidavit wherein _____ spilled the beans on the fact that Bennett, a doctor, claimed he had the technology (a medicine) to produce an abortion in any impregnated plural wives. _____, the signer of the published affidavit, would not “marry” plural wives until August 1843, when he married two more women in addition to his first lawfully married wife. He died less than a year later when another first presidency member spilled the beans. Bennett was absolutely in Joseph’s inner circle right up to this time. Remember, by this point (April 1842) we now know that Joseph had relations with at least ten women besides Emma, his only legal and lawful wife. Where did Bennett get the idea of having celestial relations with more than one woman, since Joseph had been practicing this sort of thing for a year or so (really, much longer) by this time? Did Joseph somehow not know about Bennett’s medicine? Joseph

had to have known that he was a medical doctor. And what would stop Joseph from forcing any pregnant “wife” to use such abortion technology, considering the lengths to which Joseph went to keep everything so secret? Why did Joseph allow Bennett to be publicly shamed for these extra relationships, and did nothing to defend him, despite Joseph’s own revelations on the doctrine, and his own existing secret “marriages”?

Question 7. Elias & Elijah.

Joseph Smith claimed (D&C 110) to be visited in the Kirtland Temple in succession by both Elias and Elijah in 183____, in the same night, who are the same prophet in the Old Testament (Elias in _____ means Elijah, which in the language of the Old Testament, _____, means _____). To cover for this problem, Joseph later said that Elias was an office or a calling that different prophets held. Approximately ____% of biblical scholars consider Elias and Elijah to mean something different.

Question 8. Swine.

The Book of Mormon mentions swine being useful to native Americans who were supposedly descendants of the Jews, yet at least ____ of the books in the Book of Mormon mention that the Nephites kept the Law of Moses. For nearly _____ years, Mormons have never had a problem with pork products, so why would Joseph Smith’s Nephites? Wait, what? The law of Moses (permits/forbids) (circle one) the eating of swine. Perhaps they were not eaten but were used to search for _____, a fungus that grows underground.

MODERN CHURCH

Question 9. Lawyering Up.

The Church employs the law firm of _____ whose website (as of December 2020) lists over ____ attorneys. During his lifetime, Jesus employed ____ lawyers.

Question 10. Second Anointing.

Most members are unaware that for a very small number of very faithful couples, the promises of the temple are actually fulfilled in this lifetime in a secret ceremony that extends or culminates the Endowment. Russell M. Nelson received this ordinance in the year 19____. Tom Phillips left the Church after he and his wife had received these blessings and told their story publicly in 20____, so we know a lot more about it. If leaders of another Christian sect claimed (on the down-low) they could perform a ceremony where the recipient, until the day they died, no longer needed to repent nor required the atonement of Jesus Christ to be purified, even if they “shall commit any sin or transgression ... and all manner of blasphemies” but would still absolutely enter the highest degree of heaven after they die and “be gods” (unless they shed innocent blood, see D&C 132:19–20,26–27), how would believing Saints react? How would this not be blasphemy? Church leaders claim to speak for God (D&C 1:38) but according to their scriptures, if they are sealed “by the Holy Spirit of Promise,” “then shall they be gods.” How is this not a recipe for megalomania and narcissism? If the Pope said as much, Saints would absolutely pile on him.

Question 11. Paul H. Dunn

As a General Authority, the dynamic and widely-beloved Elder Dunn spoke in General Conference over two dozen times between 1964 and

1987. Yet at least ____ of these addresses (as well as many books, ____ of which were published by Desert Book) contained fabricated or embellished faith-promoting stories. Can the Holy Ghost testify to the truth of fiction? (Y/N) (Circle one.) Dunn was placed on emeritus status in 1989 after his actual credentials and background were finally investigated and reported by Boyd K. Packer's nephew Lynn Packer, a BYU School of Journalism professor and investigative reporter. Lynn Packer's teaching contract with BYU was not renewed as a direct punishment for telling the truth about Dunn's fraud, lies, and deceit. Paul Dunn's 1998 obituary published in the Deseret News repeated the same specific false claims about his experiences as a professional baseball player and war hero that had been debunked in the 1989 *Arizona Republic* article. Which is more Christlike: (a) telling fabrications in General Conference? or (b) covering it up and punishing someone for documenting the truth? (Circle one.)

Question 12. 1911 BYU Student Protest.

Church leaders fired two BYU professors for teaching biblical criticism and two more professors left in protest. A full ____% of the student population signed a petition to reinstate the professors and teach real scholarship (the professors were not restored). If the same thing happened today, perhaps ____% of students (in your opinion) would risk getting kicked out of BYU to sign a petition in favor of academic freedom, in opposition to the leaders.

Appendix: How to Make Someone Feel Like an Unbeliever

OK, the author clearly has some reservations about the LDS Church, and believes in some good things or tries to believe in all sorts of reasonable things, *but does the author believe in God?*

DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?

Well-intentioned people ask this dishonest question in what they believe to be a good-faith effort to judge one's soul. What it often means is:

Do you believe in *my* God?

or more transparently:

Do you believe in worshiping *my* God, in my *specific* way?

Funny image of rabbit god v. duck god, but the picture is the same picture

And even this is actually a poor question because it contains multitudes. Let me rewrite it and be more honest. And now, dear reader, you can answer for yourself, along with me.

Do you believe in Gods?

“PAGAN” GODS

#AllGodsMatter

- Do you believe in any of the many gods of the Hindus?
- Not even Brahma the great creator, or Shiva the destroyer?
- Do you believe that Siddhartha Gautama reached divinity and gained supernatural powers by achieving a state of nirvana, becoming the Buddha?
- Do you believe that later bodhisattvas became enlightened Buddhas and gained supernatural powers?
- Do you believe in the dogmas or supernatural claims of Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism (including the Zen school), or any supernatural claims of Dzogchen in the Indo-Tibetan Schools of Buddhism?
- Do you venerate any of these Buddhas or Bodhisattvas at a shrine on a daily, weekly, monthly, or annual basis?
- Do you believe in the literal reincarnation of individual beings into other individual beings, controlled by an unspecified mechanism of cosmic karma?
- Do you believe in ancestor worship or venerate the dead by participating in a *shi* ceremony, as practiced by ancient Chinese tradition?
- Do you believe that all things are inhabited by *kami* or spirits and gods and should be venerated at shrines, as many traditional Japanese Shinto practitioners do?
- Do you believe in any of the gods of the ancient Greeks, with Zeus and Hera at their head?
- Do you believe in Pan? Bacchus? That we should indulge our animal side with gluttonous and/or licentious celebrations?
- Do you believe in any of the gods of the ancient Romans with Jupiter (Jove) and Juno at their head?

- Do you believe in any of the Norse gods, such as Thor, Frigg/Freyja, Tyr, Odin, Baldr?
- So you don't believe they will return and restore the earth during the events of Ragnarok?
- Do you believe in any of the claims or practices of the Celtic druids, before their oral traditions were lost to written history, or erased by the Greeks and Romans?
- How about the detailed beliefs of other cultures who have since been erased in the sands of time?
- Do you believe in any of the polytheistic religions of the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere?
- Not the Inca? The Aztecs? The Hopi? The Navajo? The Maya? Olmecs? Any other tribes from the past or present?
- Do you believe in any of the polytheistic religions, practices or claims of the African, Australian, Polynesian, Maori, or Indo-Australian indigenous peoples, with their hundreds of gods or great spirits?
- Not even that medicine men or witch doctors have the power to heal you of your ailments?
- Or that they might pronounce curses on you?
- What about execration magic, like the Ancient Egyptians practiced? Or Voodoo?
- Do you believe in the great prophet Zoroaster, and his dualistic teachings of good and evil, and of coming judgment?
- That we are descended from Manu, the first man, as the Hindus, believe?
- How about the Manu(s) of Theosophy, where God has repeatedly revealed his will through a new messenger, a new Manu?
- Do you have a guru, as in Transcendental Meditation? Do you receive a unique mantra or saying which you must keep secret and never reveal (which, unsurprisingly, happens to be the same as the mantra or saying of all other acolytes)?
- What about the Urantia Book? Surely this could not have been written by conventional means, without external influence?

- Can automatic writing be divine? What about *Oahspe: A New Bible*?
- ...
- Do you claim to know (or find it highly probable) that all of these gods are false gods or non-entities, invented by people, even if you haven't heard of 90% of them?
- Do you know what the term is for someone who makes this claim? (That these supernatural entities I have never heard of are unlikely to be anything other than man-made?)

The term is *unbeliever*. With respect to these questions, I fall under this label. How did you do on this particular religious litmus test?

THE GOD (OR SLIGHTLY VARIED GODS?) OF ABRAHAM

- Do you believe that God's full message was given to Moses, and that God stopped speaking to his children with the death of the Old Testament prophets?
- Do you believe that we should keep the Law of Moses in our daily lives, as interpreted by a studious rabbi—adjusting for the fact that the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed centuries ago?
- Do you make use of a phylactery with the words of Moses as a protective charm or to enhance your prayers?
- Do you believe that Allah is God and Mohammed is his (last) prophet?
- So you don't believe in the Quran as a holy book, teaching us how to organize society and live our lives? Do you not rely on an imam to interpret this for you and issue legally binding fatwas?
- Do you believe in the teachings and holiness of Bahá'u'lláh (founder of the Bahá'í faith), that God sent him as a messenger or Manifestation of God, in the nineteenth century?

- What about the writings of Andrew Jackson Davis in the nineteenth century, “the Poughkeepsie Seer?” Surely such an uneducated man could not have dictated so many thousands of pages of material without external influence? What about his prophetic predictions that seem to be correct?

CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX CHURCHES

- Do you confess and regularly recite the Nicene Creed, that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three in one, one in three?
- Do you follow the Apostles’ Creed or recite it regularly?
- Do you plead to Mary for intercession, asking for help in approaching God because of your unworthiness?
- Do you venerate the saints and hope for their intercession on your behalf, as in Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodox Christianity?
- Do you believe that the Pope is infallible, speaks for God, or that your local Roman Catholic priest has any say about your relationship with God?
- Do you believe that you should drink wine at mass on Sundays, blessed by an authorized priest, and that it literally turns into the blood of Jesus?
- How about putting credence in His Most Divine All-Holiness the Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome, and Ecumenical Patriarch? And his local representative in the Eastern Orthodox Church, a priest or bishop of your local parish or region?
- Do you believe in the interventions or miracles of Saint Nicholas, that occurred after his death in 343 AD?
- How about Sinterklaas, or Father Christmas, or Santa Claus? Or Santa’s nine tiny, flying reindeer?

OK, I GET THE IDEA

By now you if you are still reading this you may feel bored or irritated by all this pedantic, meticulous detail. You may be feeling uncomfortable about being defined by what you don't believe. It is a very long list and could be made ten times longer. So far, you don't seem very superstitious. According to dozens (if not hundreds) of definitions of the word "*unbeliever*," you are one! Congratulations.

Perhaps another point has been made with all of these questions: who really cares that you don't believe these things? "It feels so good not to be trammelled." Well, in some countries you could be put to death for the crime of *blasphemy* as an *unbeliever*, and even worse, millions of people think that this is good and right. So apparently people of faith feel the need to care what their neighbors or family members believe. (Not to mention the ungodly, bloody religious wars of history, including supposed Christians killing each other *en masse*.)

Also note how the person asking the questions has the power. Maybe that's a large part of why Ancient Athens put Socrates to death: his non-stop, smarty-pants question asking! He may have been one of the earliest recorded interrogators who asked too many of the wrong questions, and he is definitely not the last.

Appendix: Issue One of 1844 Nauvoo Expositor

NAUVOO EXPOSITOR.

—THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE
TRUTH.—

NAUVOO, ILLINOIS, FRIDAY, JUNE 7, 1844.

VOL. I.] [in part] [NO. 1.

We give place this week to the following Preamble, Resolutions and Affidavits, of the Seceders from the Church at Nauvoo.— The request is complied with on account of their deeming it very important that the public should know the true cause of their dissenting, as all manner of falsehood is spread abroad in relation to the schism in the Church. In our subsequent numbers several affidavits will be published, to substantiate the facts alleged. Hereafter, no further Church proceedings will appear in our columns, except in the form of brief communications. —ED.

PREAMBLE.

It is with the greatest solicitude for the salvation of the Human Family, and of our own souls that we have this day assembled. Feign would we have slumbered, and “like the Dove that covers and conceals the arrow that is preying upon its vitals,” for the sake of avoiding the furious and turbulent storm of persecution which will gather soon to burst upon our

heads, have covered and concealed that which, for a season, has kept brooding among the ruins of our peace; but we rely upon the arm of Jehovah, the Supreme Arbiter of the world, to whom we this day, and upon this occasion, appeal for the rectitude of our intentions.

If that God who gave bounds to the mighty deep, and bade the ocean cease—if that God who organized the physical world, and gave infinity to space, be our front guard and our rearward, it is futile and vain for man to raise his puny arm against us, God will inspire his ministers with courage and with understanding to consummate his purposes; and if it is necessary, he can snatch them from the fiery furnace, or the Lion's den; as he did anciently the three Hebrews from the former, and Daniel from the latter.

As for our acquaintance with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, we know, no man or set of men can be more thoroughly acquainted with its rise, its organization, and its history, than we have every reason to believe we are. We all verily believe, and many of us know of a surety, the religion of the Latter Day Saints, as originally taught by Joseph Smith which is contained in Old and New Testaments, Book of Covenants, and Book of Mormon, is verily true; and that the pure principles set forth in those books, are the immutable and eternal principles of Heaven, and speak a language which, when spoken in truth and virtue, sinks deep into the heart of every honest man.

Its precepts are invigorating, and in every sense of the word, tend to dignify and ennoble man's conceptions of God and his attributes. It speaks a language which is heard amidst the roar of Artillery, as well as in the silence of midnight; it speaks a language understood by the incarcerated spirit, as well as he who is unfettered and free; yet to those who will not see, it is dark, mysterious, and secrets the grave.

We believe that all men, professing to be the ministers of God, should keep steadily in view, the honor and glory of God, the salvation of souls, and the amelioration of man's condition; and among their cardinal virtues ought to be found those of faith, hope, virtue and charity; but with Joseph Smith, and many other official characters in the Church, they are words without any meanings attached—worn as ornaments; ex-

otics nurtured for display; virtues which, throwing aside the existence of a God, the peace, happiness, welfare, and good order of society, require that they should be preserved pure, immaculate and uncorroded.

We most solemnly and sincerely declare, God this day being witness of the truth and sincerity of our designs and statements, that happy will it be with those who examine and scan Joseph Smith's pretensions to righteousness; and take counsel of human affairs, and of the experience of time gone by. Do not yield up tranquility, a superiority to that man which the reasonableness of past events, and the laws of our country declare to be pernicious and diabolical. We hope many items of doctrine, as now taught, some of which, however, are taught secretly, and denied openly, (which we know positively is the case,) and others, publicly, considerate men will treat with contempt; for we declare them heretical and damnable in their influence, though they find many devotees. How shall he, who has drank of the poisonous draft, teach virtue? In the stead thereof, when the criminal longs to plead guilty to the court, the court is obliged to plead guilty to the criminal. We appeal to humanity and ask, what shall we do? Shall we lie supinely and suffer ourselves to be metamorphosed into beasts by the Syren tongue? We answer that our country and our God require that we should rectify the tree. We have called upon him to repent, and as soon as he shewed fruits meet for repentance, we stood ready to seize him by the hand of fellowship, and throw around him the mantle of protection; for it is the salvation of souls we desire, and not our own aggrandizement.

We are earnestly seeking to explode the vicious principles of Joseph Smith, and those who practice the same abominations and whoredoms; which we verily know are not accordant and consonant with the principles of Jesus Christ and the Apostles; and for that purpose, and with that end in view, with an eye single to the glory of God, we have dared to gird on the armor, and with God at our head, we most solemnly and sincerely declare that the sword of truth shall not depart from the thigh, nor the buckler from the arm, until we can enjoy those glorious privileges which nature's God and our country's laws have guarantied to us—freedom of speech, the liberty of the press, and the right to worship God

as seemeth us good.—We are aware, however, that we are hazarding every earthly blessing, particularly property, and probably life itself, in striking this blow at tyranny and oppression: yet notwithstanding, we most solemnly declare that no man, or set of men combined, shall, with impunity, violate obligations as sacred as many which have been violated, unless reason, justice and virtue have become ashamed and sought the haunts of the grave, though our lives be the forfeiture.

Many of us have sought a reformation in the church, without a public exposition of the enormities of crimes practiced by its leaders, thinking that if they would hearken to counsel, and shew fruit meet for repentance, it would be as acceptable with God, as though they were exposed, to public gaze,

“For the private path, the secret acts of men,
If noble, far the noblest of their lives”

but our petitions were treated with contempt; and in many cases the petitioner spurned from their presence, and particularly by Joseph who would state that if he had sinned, and was guilty of the charges we would charge him with, he would not make acknowledgment, but would rather be damned, for it would detract from his dignity, and would consequently ruin and prove the overthrow of the Church. We would ask him on the other hand, if the overthrow of the Church was not inevitable, to which he often replied, that we would all go to Hell together, and convert it into a heaven, by casting the Devil out; and says he, Hell is by no means the place this world of fools suppose it to be, but on the contrary, it is quite an agreeable place; to which we would now reply, he can enjoy it if he is determined not to desist from his evil ways; but as for us, and ours, we will serve the Lord our God!

It is absurd for men to assert that all is well, while wicked and corrupt men are seeking our destruction, by a perversion of sacred things; for all is not well, while whordoms and all manner of abominations are practiced under the cloak of religion. Lo! the wolf is in the fold, arrayed in sheep's clothing, and is spreading death and devastation among the saints and we say to the watchmen standing upon the walls, cry aloud

and spare not, for the day of the Lord is at hand—a day cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate.

It is a notorious fact, that many females in foreign climes, and in countries to us unknown, even in the most distant regions of the Eastern hemisphere, have been induced, by the sound of the gospel, to forsake friends, and embark upon a voyage across waters that lie stretched over the greater portion of the globe, as they supposed, to glorify God, that they might thereby stand acquitted in the great day of God, Almighty. But what is taught them on their arrival at this place?

They are visited by some of the Strikers, for we know not what else to call them, and are requested to hold on and be faithful, for there are great blessings awaiting the righteous; and that God has great mysteries in store for those who love the Lord, and cling to brother Joseph. They are also notified that brother Joseph will see them soon, and reveal the mysteries of Heaven to their full understanding, which seldom fails to inspire them with new confidence in the Prophet, as well as a great anxiety to know what God has laid up in store for them, in return for the great sacrifice of father and mother, of gold and silver, which they gladly left far behind, that they might be gathered into the fold, and numbered among the chosen of God.—They are visited again, and what is the result? They are requested to meet brother Joseph, or some of the Twelve, at some insulated point, or at some particularly described place on the bank of the Mississippi, or at some room which wears upon its front—Positively NO admittance. The harmless, inoffensive, and unsuspecting creatures, are so devoted to the Prophet, and the cause of Jesus Christ, that they do not dream of the deep-laid and fatal scheme which prostrates happiness, and renders death itself desirable; but they meet him, expecting to receive through him a blessing, and learn the will of the Lord concerning them, and what awaits the faithful follower of Joseph, the Apostle and Prophet of God; when in the stead thereof, they are told, after having been sworn in one of the most solemn manners, to never divulge what is revealed to them, with a penalty of death attached, that God Almighty has revealed it to him, that she should be his (Joseph's) Spiritual wife; for it was right anciently, and God will tolerate it again:

but we must keep those pleasures and blessings from the world, for until there is a change in the government, we will endanger ourselves by practicing it— but we can enjoy the blessings of Jacob, David, and others, as well as to be deprived them, if we do not expose ourselves to the law of the land. She is thunder-struck, faints, recovers, and refuses. The Prophet damns her if she rejects. She thinks of the great sacrifice, and of the many thousand miles she has traveled over sea and land, that she might save her soul from pending ruin, and replies, God's will be done, and not mine. The Prophet and his devotees in this way are gratified. The next step to avoid public exposition from the common course of things, they are sent away for a time, until all is well; after which they return, as from a long visit. Those whom no power or influence could seduce, except that which is wielded by some individual feigning to be a God, must realize the remarks of an able writer, when he says, "if woman's feelings are turned to ministers of sorrow, where shall she look for consolation?" Her lot is to be wooed and won; her heart is like some fortress that has been captured, sacked abandoned, and left desolate. With her, the desire of the heart has failed—the great charm of existence is at an end; she neglects all the cheerful exercises of life, which gladden the spirits, quicken the pulses, and send the tide of life in healthful currents through the veins. Her rest is broken. The sweet refreshment of sleep is poisoned by melancholy dreams; dry sorrow drinks her blood, until her enfeebled frame sinks under the slightest external injury. Look for her after a little while, and you find friendship weeping over her untimely grave; and wondering that one who but so recently glowed with all the radiance of health and beauty, should so speedily be brought down to darkness and despair, you will be told of some wintry chill, of some casual indisposition that laid her low! But no one knows of the mental malady that previously sapped her strength, and made her so easy a prey to the spoiler. She is like some tender tree, the pride and beauty of the grove—graceful in its form, bright in its foliage, but with the worm praying at its heart; we find it withered when it should be most luxuriant. We see it drooping its branches to the earth, and shedding leaf by leaf until wasted and perished away, it falls in the stillness of

the forest; and as we muse over the beautiful ruin, we strive in vain to recollect the blast of thunder-bolt that could have smitten it with decay. But no one knows the cause except the foul fiend who perpetrated the diabolical deed.

Our hearts have mourned and bled at the wretched and miserable condition of females in this place; many orphans have been the victims of misery and wretchedness, through the influence that has been exerted over them, under the cloak of religion and afterwards, in consequence of that jealous disposition which predominates over the minds of some, have been turned upon a wide world, fatherless and motherless, destitute of friends and fortune; and robbed it of which nothing but death can restore.

Men solace themselves by saying the facts slumber in the dark caverns of midnight. But Lo! it is sudden day, and the dark deeds of foul fiends shall be exposed from the house-tops. A departed spirit, once the resident of St Louis, shall yet cry aloud for vengeance.

It is difficult—perhaps impossible— to describe the wretchedness of females in this place, without wounding the feelings of the benevolent, or shocking the delicacy of the refined; but the truth shall come to the world. The remedy can never be applied, unless the disease is known. The sympathy, ever anxious to relieve, cannot be felt before the misery is seen.— The charity that kindles at the tale of woe, can never act with adequate efficiency, till it is made to see the pollution and guilt of men, now buried in the death-shades of heathenism.— Shall we then, however painful the sight, shrink from the contemplation of their real state? We answer, we will not, if permitted to live. As we have before stated, it is the vicious principles of men we are determined to explode. It is not that we have any private feelings to gratify, or any private pique to settle, that has induced us to be thus plain; for we can respect and love the criminal, if there is any hope of reformation; but there is a point beyond which forbearance ceases to be a virtue.

The next important item which presents itself for our consideration, is the attempt at Political power and influence, which we verily believe to be preposterous and absurd. We believe it is inconsistent, and

not in accordance with the Christian religion. We do not believe that God ever raised up a Prophet to christianize a world by political schemes and intrigue. It is not the way God captivates the heart of the unbeliever; but on the contrary, by preaching truth in its own, native simplicity, and in its own original purity, unadorned with anything except its own indigenous beauties. Joseph may plead he has been injured, abused, and his petitions treated with contempt by the general government, and that he only desires an influence of a political character that will warrant him redress of grievances; but we care not—the faithful followers of Jesus must bear in this age as well as Christ and the Apostles did anciently; although a frowning world may have crushed him to the dust; although un pitying friends may have passed him by; although hope, the great comforter in affliction, may have burst forth and fled from his troubled bosom; yet in Jesus there is a balsom for every wound, and a cordial to assuage an agonized mind.

Among the many items of false doctrine that are taught the Church, is the doctrine of many Gods, one of the most direful in its effects that has characterized the world, for many centuries. We know not what to call it other than blasphemy, for it is most unquestionably, speaking of God in an impious and irreverent manner.— It is contended that there are innumerable Gods as much above the God that presides over this universe, as he is above us; and if he varies from the law unto which he is subjected, he, with all his creatures, will be cast down as was Lucifer; thus holding forth a doctrine which is effectually calculated to sap the very foundation of our faith: and now O Lord! shall we set still and be silent, while thy name is thus blasphemed, and thine honor, power and glory, brought into disrepute? See Isaiah c 43, v 10; 44, 6-8; 45, 5, 6, 21, 23; and book of Covenants, page 26 and 39.

In the dark ages of Popery, when bigotry, superstition, and tyranny held universal sway over the empire of reason, there was some semblance of justice in the inquisitorial deliberations, which, however, might have been dictated by prudence, or the fear of consequences: but we are no longer forced to appeal to those states that are now situated under the influence of Popery for examples of injustice, cruelty and op-

pression—we can appeal to the acts of the inquisitorial department organized in Nauvoo, by Joseph and his accomplices, for specimens of injustice of the most pernicious and diabolical character that ever stained the pages of the historian.

It was in Rome, and about the twelfth century, when Pope Innocent III, ordered father Dominic to excite the Catholic princes and people to extirpate heretics. But it is in this enlightened and intelligent nineteenth-century, and in Nauvoo—a place professing to be the nucleus of the world, that Joseph Smith has established an inquisition, which, if it is suffered to exist, will prove more formidable and terrible to those who are found opposing the iniquities of Joseph and his associates, than even the Spanish inquisition did to heretics as they termed them.

On thursday evening, the 18th of April, there was a council called, unknown to the Church, which tried, condemned, and cut off brothers Wm. Law, Wilson Law, and sister Law, (Wm's. wife,) brother R. D. Foster, and one brother Smith, with whom we are unacquainted; which we contend is Contrary to the book of Doctrine and Covenants, for our law condemnest no man until he is heard. We abhor and protest against any council or tribunal in this Church, which will not suffer the accused to stand in its midst and plead their own cause. If an Agrippa would suffer a Paul, whose eloquence surpassed, as it were, the eloquence of men, to stand before him, and plead his own cause, why should Joseph, with others, refuse to hear individuals in their own defence?—

We answer, it is because the court fears the atrocity of its crimes will be exposed to public gaze. We wish the public to thoroughly understand the nature of this court, and judge of the legality of its acts as seemeth them good:

On Monday, the 15th of April, brother R. D. Foster had a notice served on him to appear before the High Council on Saturday following, the 20th, and answer to charges preferred against him by Joseph Smith. On Saturday, while Mr. Foster was preparing to take his witnesses, 41 in number, to the council-room, that he might make good his charges against Joseph, president Marks notified him that the trial had been on Thursday evening, before the 15th, and that he was cut off from the

Church; and that same council cut off the brother Laws' sister Law, and brother Smith, and all without their knowledge. They were not notified, neither did they dream of any such thing being done, for William Law had sent Joseph and some of the Twelve, special word that he desired an investigation before the Church In General Conference, on the 6th of April. The court, however, was a tribunal, possessing no power to try Wm. Law, who was called by special Revelation to stand as counsellor to the President of the Church, (Joseph,) which was twice ratified by General Conferences, assembled at Nauvoo, for Brigham Young, one of the Twelve, presided, whose duty it was not, but the President of the High Council.— See Book of Doctrine and Covenants, page 87.

RESOLUTIONS.

Resolved 1st, That we will not encourage the acts of any court in this Church, for the trial of any of its members, which will not suffer the accused to be present and plead their own cause; we therefore declare our decided disapprobation to the course pursued last Thursday evening, (the 18th inst,) in the case of William and Wilson. Law, and Mrs. William Law, and R. D. Foster, as being unjust and unauthorized by the laws of the Church; and consequently null and void; for our law judgeth no man unless he be heard; and to all those who approbate a course so unwarranted, unprecedented and so unjust, we would say beware lest the unjust measures you meet to your brethren, be again meted out to you.

Resolved 2nd, Inasmuch as we have for years borne with the individual follies and iniquities of Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and many other official characters in the Church of Jesus Christ, (conceiving it a duty incumbent upon us to bear) and having labored with them repeatedly with all Christian love, meekness and humility, yet to no effect, feel as if forbearance has ceased to be a virtue, and hope of reformation vain; and inasmuch as they have introduced false and damnable doctrines into the Church, such as a plurality of Gods above the God of this universe, and

his liability to fall with all his creations; the plurality of wives, for time and eternity: the doctrine of unconditional sealing up to eternal life, against all crimes except that of shedding innocent blood, by a perversion of their priestly authority, and thereby forfeiting the holy priesthood, according to the word of Jesus, "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch and is withered, and men gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned," St. John, xv. 6 . . . "Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath, not God, he that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, hath both the Father and the Son; if there come any unto you and bring not His doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed, for he that bideth him God speed is a partaker of his evil deeds;" we therefore are constrained to denounce them as apostates from the pure and holy doctrines of Jesus Christ.

Resolved 3rd, That we disapprove and discountenance every attempt to unite church and state; and that we further believe the effort now being made by Joseph Smith for political power and influence is not commendable in the sight of God.

Resolved 4th, That the hostile spirit and conduct manifested by Joseph Smith, and many of his associates towards Missouri, and others inimical to his purposes, are decidedly at variance with the true spirit of Christianity, and should not be encouraged by any people, much less by those professing to be the ministers of the gospel of peace.

Resolved 5th, That while we disapprove malicious persecutions and prosecutions, we hold that all church members are alike amenable to the laws of the land; and that we further discountenance any chicanery to screen them from the just demands of the same.

Resolved 6th, That we consider the religious influence exercised in financial concerns by Joseph Smith as unjust as it is unwarranted, for the Book of Doctrine and Covenants makes it the duty of the Bishop to take charge of the financial affairs of the Church, and of all temporal matters pertaining to the same.

Resolved 7th, That we discountenance and disapprove the attendance at houses of revelling and dancing; dram-shops and theatres; veri-

ly believing they have a tendency to lead from paths of virtue and holiness, to those of vice and debauchery.

Resolved 8th, That we look upon the pure and holy doctrines set forth in the Scriptures of Divine truth, as being the immutable doctrines of salvation; and he who abideth in them shall be saved, and he who abideth not in them can not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

Resolved 9th, That we consider the gathering in haste, and by sacrifice, to be contrary to the will of God; and that it has been taught by Joseph Smith and others for the purpose of enabling them to sell property at most exorbitant prices, not regarding the welfare of the Church, but through their covetousness reducing those who had the means to give employment to the poor, to the necessity of seeking labor for themselves; and thus the wealth which is brought into the place is swallowed up by the one great throat, from whence there is no return, which if it had been economically disbursed amongst, the whole would have rendered all comfortable.

Resolved 10th, That, notwithstanding our extensive acquaintance with the financial affairs of the Church, we do not know of any property which in reality belongs to the Church (except the Temple) and we therefore consider the injunction laid upon the saints compelling them to purchase property of the Trustee in trust for the Church, is a deception practiced upon them; and that we look upon the sending of special agents abroad to collect funds for the Temple and other purposes as a humbug practiced upon the Saints by Joseph and others, to aggrandize themselves, as we do not believe that the monies and property so collected, have been applied as the donors expected, but have been used for speculative purposes, by Joseph, to gull the saints the better on their arrival at Nauvoo, by buying the lands in the vicinity and selling again to them at tenfold advance; and further that we verily believe the appropriations said to have been subscribed by shares for the building of the Nauvoo House to have been used by J. Smith and Lyman Wight, for other purposes, as out of the mass of stock already taken, the building is far from being finished even to the base.

Resolved 11th, That we consider all secret societies, and combinations under penal oaths and obligations, (professing to be organized for religious purposes,) to be anti-Christian, hypocritical and corrupt.

Resolved 12th, That we will not acknowledge any man as king or law-giver to the church; for Christ is our only king and lawgiver.

Resolved 13th, That we call upon the honest in heart, in the Church, and throughout the world, to vindicate the pure doctrines of Jesus Christ, whether set forth in the Bible, Book of Mormon, or Book of Covenants; and we hereby withdraw the hand of fellowship, from all those who practice or teach doctrines contrary to the above, until they cease so to do, and show works meet for repentance.

Resolved 14th, That we hereby notify all those holding licences to preach the gospel, who know they are guilty of teaching the doctrine of other Gods above the God of this creation; the plurality of wives: the unconditional sealing up against all crime, save that of shedding innocent blood; the spoiling of the gentiles, and all other doctrines, (so called), which are contrary to the laws of God, or to the laws of our country to cease preaching and to come and make satisfaction and have their licences renewed

Resolved 15th, That in all out controversies in defence of truth, and righteousness, the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God, to the pulling down of the strongholds of Satan; that our strifes are not against flesh, blood, nor bones but against principalities and power; against spiritual wickedness in high places, and therefore we will not use carnal weapons save in our own defence.

AFFIDAVITS.

I hereby certify that Hyrum Smith did, (in his office,) read to me certain written document, which [now D&C 132] he said was a revelation from God, he said that he was with Joseph when it was received. He afterwards gave me the document to read, and I took it to my house, and read it, and showed it to my wife, and returned it next day. The revelation (so called) authorized certain men to have more wives than one at a time, in this world and in the world to come. It said this was the law, and commanded Joseph to enter into the law. And also that he should administer to others. Several other items were in the revelation, supporting the above doctrines.

WM. LAW.

State of Illinois,
Hancock County

I Robert D. Foster, certify that the above certificate was sworn to before me, as true in substance, this fourth day of May A. D. 1844.

ROBERT D. FOSTER. J. P.

I certify that I read the revelation referred to in the above affidavit of my husband, it sustained in strong terms the doctrine of more wives than one at a time, in this world, and in the next, it authorized some to have to the number of ten, and set forth that those women who would not allow their husbands to have more wives than one should be under condemnation before God.

JANE LAW.

Sworn and. subscribed before me this fourth day of May, A. D. 1844.

ROBERT D. FOSTER. J. P.

To all whom it may Concern:

Forasmuch as the public mind hath been much agitated by a course of procedure in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, by a number of persons declaring against certain doctrines and practices therein, (among whom I am one,) it is but meet that I should give my reasons, at least in part, as a cause that hath led me to declare myself. In the latter part of the summer, 1843, the Patriarch, Hyrum Smith, did in the High Council, of which I was a member, introduce what he said was a revelation given through the Prophet; that the said Hyrum Smith did essay to read the said revelation in the said Council, that according to his reading there was contained the following doctrines; 1st. the sealing up of persons to eternal life, against all sins, save that of shedding innocent blood or of consenting thereto; 2nd, the doctrine of a plurality of wives, or marrying virgins; that David and Solomon had many wives, yet in this they sinned not save in the matter of Uriah. This revelation with other evidence that the aforesaid heresies were taught and practiced in the Church; determined me to leave the office of first counsellor to the president of the Church at Nauvoo, inasmuch as I dared not teach or administer such laws. And further deponent saith not.

AUSTIN COWLES.

State of Illinois
Hancock County,

*To all whom it may concern*I hereby certify that the above certificate was sworn and subscribed before me, this fourth day of May, 1844

ROBERT D. FOSTER, J. P.

THE EXPOSITOR.

FRIDAY JUNE 7, 1844.

SYLVESTER EMMONS, Editor

Introductory.

In greeting our patrons with the first number of the Expositor, a remark is necessary for the expression of some views, and certain principles by which we intend to be governed in our editorial duties. Many questions and surmises are made by those who suppose we will come in conflict with some of their darling schemes of self-aggrandisement. Others, more honest, desire to know whether our object is to advocate any particular religious tenets, or any favorite measures of either of the political parties of the country. To all such questions we answer in the negative. Free toleration in religious sentiments, we deem compatible with the organization of our government, and should not be abridged. On the other hand, we believe religious despotism to be incompatible with our free institutions. What we conceive to be despotism, engendered by an assumption of power in the name of religion, we shall have occasion to show hereafter, in relation to whatever our own views may be upon the Federal measures that now, or may, hereafter agitate the country, the Expositor will not be the exponent thereof end—all strife and party zeal of the two great antagonistical parties for the success of their respective candidates for the Presidency, we shall remain neutral, and in an editorial capacity, inactive. Another party, however, has sprang up in our midst, the leader of which it would seem, expects, by a flourish of Quixotic chivalry, to take by storm the Presidential chair, and distribute among his faithful supporters, the office of governor in all the different States, for the purpose, we presume, of more effectually consolidating the government. This party we may be disposed to treat with a little levity, but nothing more. As it respects the local questions which may arise

in our own county, and the candidates for, the legislature from this county, we reserve the right to expatiate upon the respective claims—not on account of their politics—be they whig or democrat, but on account of a combination which we believe has for its object the utter destruction of the rights of the old citizens of the country, who have borne the heat and burden of the day; who have labored hard as pioneers of the county; who have settled and organized the county; who have rights that should be respected by every principle of honor and good faith, and whose wishes should be consulted in the choice of officers, and not have men imposed upon them, who are obnoxious, for good and sufficient reasons. In relation to such questions, we intend to express our mind freely, as our duty dictates, regardless of consequences. If a fair and honorably course be taken by the dominant party at Nauvoo, we will have nothing to battle against; but if they do not pursue that course, we shall be prepared for the warfare. We must confess, however, if we are to judge of the future by the past, we have little to expect from that quarter; but apart from local political considerations, we have a high and more noble duty to perform. We shall spread the banner to the breeze for a radical reform in the city of Nauvoo, as the departure from moral rectitude, and the abuse of power, have become intolerable. We shall speak out, and spare not, until certain grievances are redressed or corrected; until honor, virtue, and reputation shall take their accustomed habitations, and be respected; until we teach men that no exclusive privileges can be allowed to any individual under our form of government; that the laws of the land, based upon the revealed laws of heaven, are paramount to all other earthly considerations; and he who sets the laws at defiance, and evades their operation, either by direct or indirect means, pursues a course subversive of the best interests of the country, and dangerous to the well-being of the social compact. That there does exist an order of things with the systematic elements of organization in our midst—a system which, if exposed in its naked deformity, would make the virtuous mind revolt with horror; a system in the exercise of which lays prostrate all the dearest ties in our social relations—the glorious fabric upon which human happiness is based—ministers to the worst passions of

our nature, and throws us back into the benighted regions of the dark ages, we have the greatest reason to believe.

The question is asked, will you bring a mob upon us? In answer to that, we assure all concerned, that we will be among the first to put down anything like an Illegal force being used against any man or set of men. If any one has become amenable to the law, we wish to have him tried impartially by the laws of his country. We are among the number who believe that there is virtue and integrity enough in the administrators of the law, to bring every offender to justice, and to protect the innocent.

If it is necessary to make a show of force, to execute legal process, it will create no sympathy in that case to cry out, we are mobbed. There is such a thing as persons being deceived into a false sympathy once, who, the second time, will scrutinize very closely, to know who, or which party, are the persecutors. It is not always the first man who cries out, stop thief, that is robbed. It is the upright, honest, considerate and moral precepts of any class that will be respected in this or, any other enlightened age—precepts which have for their end the good of mankind, and the establishment of fundamental truths. On the other hand, paradoxical dogmas, new system of government, new codes of morals, a new administration of the laws by ignorant, unlettered, and corrupt men, must be frowned down by every lover of his country. The well-being of society demand it at our hands. Our country, by whose laws we are protected, asks us for a manifestation of that patriotism which should inspire every American citizen—the interests of the State of Illinois require it, and as a citizen of Illinois, we intend to respond to the voice of duty, and stand the hazard of the die.

We believe that the Press should not be the medium through which the private character of any individual should be assailed, delineated, or exposed to public gaze: still, whoever acts in an official character, who sets himself up as a public teacher, and reformer of morals and religion, and as an aspirant to the highest office in the gift of the people of this glorious republic, whose institutions he publicly condemns, we assert and maintain the right of canvassing all the public acts and animadvert-

ing, with terms of the severest reproach upon all the revolutionary measures that comes to our notice, from any source. We would not be worthy of the name of an American citizen did we stand by and see, not only, the laws of the State, but the laws of the United States set at defiance, the authorities insulted, fugitives from justice fleeing for refuge, asking and receiving protection from the authorities of Nauvoo, for high crimes committed against the government of the United States, the mayor of a petty incorporated town interposing his authority, and demanding the right of trial for the fugitive on the merits of the case, by virtue of a writ of Habeas Corpus, issued by the Municipal Court of Nauvoo. It is too gross a burlesque upon common sense—a subterfuge too low to indicate anything but a corrupt motive. Such acts, whether committed in a private or public capacity, will be held up to public scorn. An independent Press is bound by every sense of duty, to lay before the public every attack upon their rights; we, therefore in the exercise of our duty, expect the support and the aid of our fellow citizen in our enterprise.

An individual, bearing the cognomen of Jeremiah Smith, who has evaded the officers for some time, has taken refuge in the city of Nauvoo. It appears he is a fugitive from justice for the offence of procuring four thousand dollars from the United States Treasury at the city of Washington, under false pretences. A bill of indictment was found in the District of Columbia against him, and a warrant issued for his arrest. The Marshal of Iowa Territory got intelligence of his being in this place, and procuring the necessary papers for his arrest, proceeded to this place in search of him, about three weeks ago. After making inquiry, and becoming satisfied that he was secreted in Nauvoo, under the immediate protection of the Prophet, he said to him (the Prophet,) that he was authorised to arrest the said J. Smith, for an offence committed by him against the United States government and wished to know where he was to—which the Prophet replied, that he knew nothing about him. The Marshal said he knew he was secreted in the city, and was determined to have him; and, unless he was given up, he would have the aid of the Dragoons to find and arrest him. Joseph Smith then

replied, that was not necessary; but, if the Marshal would pledge his word and honor that he should have the benefit of a writ of Habeas Corpus, and be tried before him, he would produce the fugitive in half an hour. After some hesitancy, Marshal agreed to do so, when the prisoner was produced in the time specified. A writ of Habeas Corpus was issued, and the prisoner taken from the Marshal and brought before the Municipal court of Nauvoo for trial. The court adjourned until thursday, the 30th ult., when he was tried, and discharged, as a matter of course. In the interval, however, application had been made to Judge Pope, of the District court of the United States for the State of Illinois, who issued his warrant, directed to the United States Marshal, who sent his deputy to make a second arrest, in case the other officer did not succeed in taking him from the city. Smith was found by the Illinois Marshal, and arrested, when it became necessary for the high corporate powers of the city again to interpose their authority. The potent writ was again issued—the prisoner taken from the Marshal—a trial had, during which, the attorneys for Smith relieved themselves of an insupportable burthen of legal knowledge, which completely overwhelmed the learned court, and resulted in the triumphant acquittal of the prisoner, with a judgment for costs against the U. States.

Now we ask if the executive and judicial authorities of Illinois deem it politic to submit to such a state of filings in similar cases? Can, and will the constituted authorities of the federal government be quiescent under such circumstances, and allow the paramount laws of the Union to be set at defiance, and rendered nugatory by the action of a court, having no more than co-ordinate powers, with a common justice of the peace? If such an order of things is allowed to exist, there is every reason to believe that Nauvoo will become a sink of refuge for every offender who can carry in spoils enough to buy protection. The people of the State of Illinois will, consequently, see the necessity of repealing the charter of Nauvoo, when such abuses are practised under it and by virtue of said chartered authority, the right of the writ of Habeas Corpus in all cases arising under the city ordinance, to give full scope to the desired jurisdiction. The city council have passed ordinances, giving the

Municipal court authority to issue the writ of Habeas Corpus in all cases when the prisoner is held in custody in Nauvoo, no matter whether the offender is committed in State of Maine, or on the continent of Europe, the prisoner being in the city under arrest. It is gravely contended by the legal luminaries of Nauvoo, that the ordinances gives them jurisdiction, not only jurisdiction to try the validity of the writ, but to enquire into the merits of the case, and allow the prisoner to swear himself clear of the charges. If his own oath is not considered sufficient to satisfy the adverse party, plenty of witnesses are ready to swear that he is to be believed on oath, and that is to be considered sufficient by the court to put the quietus on all foreign testimony and the discharge of the prisoner follows, as a necessary consequence.