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ATHEIST PIETY: A RELIGION OF DOGMATIC DUBIETY

Louis C. Midgley

Abstract: The “Special Feature” of this mass-market secular humanist magazine consists of an introduction to “America’s Peculiar Piety” followed by a miscellany of brief, nonscholarly essays critical of The Church of Jesus Christ. The questions posed in the introduction to this flagship atheist magazine go unaddressed in the essays. Some of the essays are personal exit stories by former Latter-day Saints. One is an effort by Robert M. Price to explain away the Book of Mormon without confronting its contents. This is done by ignoring the details of Joseph Smith’s career in order to picture him as the equivalent of a bizarre, emotionally conflicted figure like Charles Manson or as the embodiment of one of a wide range of mythical trickster figures like Brer Rabbit, Felix the Cat, or Doctor Who. The assumed link between these mythical or legendary figures and Joseph Smith is said to be a Jungian archetype lodged in his presumably deranged psyche, leading him to fashion the Book of Mormon.

Another essay merely mentions the well-known criticisms of Joseph Smith by Abner Cole (a.k.a. Obadiah Dogberry), while others complain that the faith of the Saints tends to meet emotional needs or that their religious community has various ways of reinforcing their own moral demands. In no instance do these authors see their own deeply held ideology as serving similar personal and community-sustaining religious functions.

All of the essays reflect a fashionable, dogmatic, naive, and deeply religious enmity toward the faith of Latter-day Saints. The essays are also shown to be instances of a modern

militant atheism, which is contrasted with earlier and much less bold and aggressive doubts about divine things. The ideological links between those responsible for Free Inquiry and some critics on the fringes of the LDS community are also clearly identified.

Review of Tom Flynn et al. "America's Peculiar Piety: Why Did Mormonism Grow? Why Does It Endure?" *Free Inquiry*, October/November 2011, 21–41.

Louis C. Midgley

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles . . . were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God [*atheos*] in the world. (Ephesians 2:11–12 NRSV)

This "Special Feature" in *Free Inquiry* is not a typical Protestant *sectarian* criticism of the Church of Jesus Christ. Instead, the seven essays fit snugly into a currently fashionable strain of *secular* criticism of the faith of the Saints. They are also examples of objections to any faith in divine things. Since atheism is diverse and divided, each of the sometimes competing ideologies has a complex, interesting history. I will begin by locating the particular variety of atheism reflected in *Free Inquiry* on a larger historical and ideological map.

Modern Militant Activism

Though doubts about deities were present among ancient Greek philosophers, the adjective *atheist* (from *atheos*, meaning "without God")¹ surfaced only rather recently to describe

1. The word *atheos* is found in Ephesians 2:12, where it is virtually always translated as "without God." This verse reads: "Remember at that time you [gentiles] were without Christ, being alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and *without God* in the world" (NRSV, emphasis added).

unbelief. Specifically, it can be seen in the writings of Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), who published a series of books with titles such as *Christianity Unveiled* (1761) and *The Sacred Contagion* (1768), leading eventually to his book *The System of Nature, or, Laws of the Moral and Physical World* (1770), in which he argued that faith in God is a pernicious, dangerous force in human affairs.² A profoundly bold, public atheism can be found in the writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)—those Martin Marty once called the “God Killers.”³

It was Marx whose ideas generated a political mass movement with an explicitly atheist agenda. His target was “religion,” in which category he included not only faith in God but also the material and ideological grounds for the entire social structure. According to Marx,

The foundation of the criticism of religion is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion indeed is man's self-consciousness and self-estimation while he has not found his feet in the universe. But Man is no abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the world of men, the State, society. This State, this society, produces religion, which is an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritualistic Point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its general basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human being, inasmuch as the

2. For a recent collection of these items, see *Christianity Unveiled by Baron d'Holbach: A Controversy in Documents*, trans. David Holohan (Kingston upon Thames, England: Hodgson Press, 2008).

3. Martin Marty, *A Short History of Christianity* (New York: Meridian, 1959, 1967), 298–301.

human being possesses no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Religious misery is in one mouth the expression of real misery, and in another is a protestation against real misery. Religion is the moan of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion, as the illusory happiness of the people, is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to abandon the illusions about their condition is a demand to abandon a condition which requires illusions. The criticism of religion therefore contains potentially the criticism of the Vale of Tears whose aureole is religion.⁴

Those following in the footsteps of the Enlightenment tended to boast of their own emancipation or liberation from what they pictured as the silly myth and magic, as well as the soul-destroying dominance and control, that they routinely attributed to faith in God. However, beginning with Marx, public atheism moved from salons in Paris to the streets to become the foundation for a militant mass movement. As a result, modern atheists are not satisfied with being merely doubters, unchurched, or, again following Paul's language in Ephesians 2:12, *atheos*. Following Marx, atheists are no longer satisfied with merely understanding the world; they want to change it. Hence, behind the current rash of atheism is a passionate faith that science and/or philosophy, however conceived, must now liberate both individuals and society from emotionally grounded faith in God and other evils encountered in this world. The editors of *Free Inquiry* and many who opine in its pages boast

4. Karl Marx, "A Criticism of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Classic Books International, 2010), 4–5.

that they are not hemmed in by or dependent on wishful thinking, driven by mere feelings, or otherwise devoted to religious delusion. This “faith” is the ground for the religion promoted in *Free Inquiry*.

An Originally Shy and Retiring Skepticism

In the premodern world there were those who in various ways struggled with fear of divine retribution by angry gods. There were, of course, doubts about divine things in the ancient world. Those who entertained such doubts did not, however, self-identify as atheists. An early manifestation of what, without the use of the word, can be called an “atheism” seems to have been, if not exactly cowardly, at least cautious. By contrast, modern critics of faith in God tend to picture themselves as heroic Invictus-like masters of their own destiny⁵ who have no need for the consolation and hope offered by faith in God and often found among the so-called Peoples of the Book (or books).⁶ They are boastfully proud of being *atheos*. In addition, much like the Prometheus of Greek fable,⁷ they see themselves as heroic warriors engaged in a Titan-like battle to save humans from terrible dominance by delusions about a sublime-divine. They fight this battle in a valiant effort to liberate others, as well as themselves, from the oppression of false faith and to substitute a new, presumably true faith. In this they are unlike earlier doubters of deities, who were not at all Promethean

5. See William Ernest Henley’s (1849–1903) famous poem entitled “Invictus,” which is a Latin word meaning something like “unconquered” or “undefeated,” which Henley asserts he is, despite whatever fate brings his way.

6. I have in mind those whose faith is rooted in the Koran, the Book of Mormon, and the Bible, as well as in various authoritative interpretative confessions and creeds.

7. Prometheus, we are told by Hesiod (somewhere between about 750 and 650 BC) in his *Theogony* (lines 507–616), stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. For his audacious challenge to the gods, Zeus had him chained so that by day a bird ate his liver, which regenerated by night. He subsequently became a symbol of resistance to authority.

but were often Epicureans seeking, given the accident of their circumstances, to avoid as much pain as possible before being liberated from all pain by death.

In the premodern western world, the gods were routinely regarded as the ultimate source of the laws of regimes, and hence also as the guarantors of the moral and legal order. One good reason for caution in challenging or even questioning such deities was fear of persecution by outraged public authorities. To see the possible or likely consequence of public expressions of doubt about what the poets of a given regime proclaimed about the gods, and hence about a regime's "theology,"⁸ one only has to be reminded of the fate of Socrates.⁹ But, of course, fear of persecution did not silence rational endeavors and doubts about divine things. Instead, it led to cautious questions and speculation—sometimes set out in esoteric passages as philosophers sought to address both a narrow guild of discreet disciples and also a less-discerning general audience. Be that as it may, what seemed good for a questioning philosopher and perhaps his faithful acolytes was not necessarily thought to be good for the social order. Private intellectual virtues may at times compete with public virtue. Those with doubts about divine things sensed that a public fuss about such things might impair the moral fabric of their regimes, which was a good thing that even they badly needed. Put another way, doubters seem to have sensed that without the fear of divine retribution, the necessary, salutary, habitual obedience to moral and legal rules would evaporate, especially for those driven by avarice, ambition, and so forth. Children and childish adults thus were thought to need additional sanctions supporting moral and le-

8. The Greek word *theologia* first appears in Plato's *Republic* (see 378a) to describe what poets say about the gods that are of use in a well-ordered regime.

9. Plato, in his *Apology*, tells the story of Socrates being accused by Meletus of impiety for questioning the Athenian gods, as well as their laws. Found guilty, Socrates was sentenced to death for impiety as well as for corrupting the minds of Athenian youth.

gal restraints. Those who entertained their own deep doubts also recognized the social utility of belief in the gods; divine retribution was even pictured as a useful myth or “noble lie” that supported the legal and moral rules necessary for a civilized society.¹⁰ This tended to make the critiques of a regime’s gods a private matter.

But eventually there was what can be called a public atheism. For example, Epicureans sought to eliminate fear of active gods, which opened the door for a hedonist (or utilitarian-type pleasure-seeking/pain-avoiding) ethic. The core Epicurean argument was that, in a world properly bereft of active gods, minimizing as much pain as possible, and thereby maximizing pleasure, was the prudent way of life. They argued that if the gods are somehow indifferent to human behavior and its attendant miseries, or are mere illusions, then humans have no need to fear divine retribution. Such fear even spoils whatever pleasures are available. No longer, they insisted, must one wince as one pleasures oneself since the gods are passive and have no interest in human affairs. Epicureans taught a strictly mercenary way of life grounded on a theoretical explanation of how things really are. Their basic theoretical argument was that humans, like everything, are merely a temporary, fortuitous coming together of atoms. But the driving motive behind Epicurean criticism of divine things was essentially practical and not primarily theoretical. Epicurean morality celebrates pleasure seeking, which necessarily involves a prudent assessment of the likelihood of either pleasure or pain resulting from some course of action.

One obvious problem with the Epicurean brand of atheism is that pleasure seeking always involves an awareness and an

10. For a detailed treatment, as well as criticism, of the very old idea that the “truth” of faith in God is to be found in its role as the grounds for a civilized regime, see Louis Midgley, “The Utility of Faith Reconsidered,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 139–86.

assessment of the risk of pain. Momentary pleasures are likely to be followed by devastating and lasting pains. In addition, there simply is no impregnable fortress of scientific and philosophical argumentation that safeguards anyone from either experiencing a sudden end in death or eventually confronting the reality that pleasure, either pure or mixed with pain, gradually withers as one approaches death, when all pleasures presumably end.

However, the good news is that all pain is believed to end with death. There will be, they assured themselves, no divine retribution. Something like this is the message of a remarkable didactic poem by Lucretius (ca. 99–55BC).¹¹ Death, it is argued, is no evil since it ends all pain. This is certainly not a shout of joy. It is merely at best cautious advice to seek whatever pleasures one can find and avoid as much pain as possible, coupled to the hope that whatever mess one makes of the pleasure-pain calculus, it all ends sooner or later with death. The conclusion is that one need not fear death, for it is ultimate liberation from this miserable world. While struggling to avoid pain, one need not be set upon by false notions of divine beings who have even more pain planned for disobedient mortals after their miserable deaths.

The atheism that the Saints, and others who have faith in God, now confront is a practical or moral revolt against divine things.¹² This takes the form of a criticism not merely of confused, false, or mistaken understandings of God¹³ (of which I believe there are many) but of the very possibility of God. Modern militant atheists insist that the consolation for evil

11. See Titus Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura*, available in several translations under several English titles.

12. During the Reformation, various partisan zealots used the word *atheism* (“without God”) as a slur aimed at opposing, and presumably heretical, factions of Christians.

13. See Louis Midgley, “The First Steps,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): xxiv–xxvi.

provided by faith in God is no longer necessary; no one need live with an illusion of a future paradise. Instead, one must now strive to change the world for the better through education, ideological enlightenment, and resolute political action. The best (or worst) examples of regimes made to rest on an atheist ideology are those with an explicit atheist agenda. This has not, however, deterred atheist political activism.

Paul Kurtz, Prometheus Books, and *Free Inquiry*

The failure and eventual collapse of Communism came as both a shock and a disappointment to many atheists. Paul Kurtz (b. 1925) claims to have been shocked to discover at the end of World War II that prisoners of war from the Soviet Union were not eager to return home. But even with his illusions of a godless “worker’s paradise” shattered and his youthful hopes dashed, he did not abandon atheism. Instead, in addition to founding Prometheus Books in August 1969, Kurtz also launched the Center for Inquiry, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and the Council for Secular Humanism. In 1980, through his Council for Secular Humanism, he began *Free Inquiry*. He has managed thereby to bring a measure of ideological solidarity and institutional structure to atheism in America. Before Kurtz became a force, it was common for atheists to picture themselves as religious and also as forming a kind of surrogate church.¹⁴ He has sought to put a stop to this atheist self-understanding. The practical failures of Marxism have perhaps sobered but have not deterred atheists. The fact is that one no longer encounters the shy, cautious, and retiring “atheism” of antiquity, or even the remnants of Enlightenment skepticism about divine things, but rather an active, aggressive, rhetorically violent public atheism.

14. See Louis Midgley, “The Signature Books Saga,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 371–72.

The so-called New Atheists—Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins—have recently drawn wide public attention. Although Kurtz is not a household name, even among Latter-day Saint scholars, he has published more than fifty books and eight hundred essays and reviews.¹⁵ And he has, as I will demonstrate, also been responsible for an assortment of attacks on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. It is not clear that he had a hand in the most recent batch of essays in *Free Inquiry*, since on 18 May 2010 he resigned from all of his executive/editorial positions with the agencies he had founded since 1976.¹⁶ Tom Flynn, a close associate of Kurtz, is now the official editor of *Free Inquiry*, as well as executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism.

The October/November Seven

The October/November issue of *Free Inquiry* comprises a total of sixty-six pages, of which twenty-one constitute a miscellany of opinion on Mormon topics. None of these essays make a contribution to understanding the faith of the Saints or the crucial history of the restoration. Some of the authors assume the conclusions they reach. None of these essays give the appearance of having been written with much understanding of Latter-day Saint history or faith. Each of the seven essays is reviewed separately below.

15. See Wikipedia, s.v. “Paul Kurtz,” last modified 23 December 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Kurtz. Another version can be found at <http://kurtz.pragmatism.org>.

16. On 18 May 2010, in an “open letter” to his “friends and colleagues,” Paul Kurtz announced his “resignation from the boards of the Center for Inquiry, Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and the Council for Secular Humanism, all organizations that [he] founded beginning in 1976.” He also resigned “as editor-in-chief of *Free Inquiry* magazine.” He had, he indicated, “already been shorn of all effective authority in these organizations and magazines and ‘shoved on an ice flow’ [sic] so to speak.” It was, he wrote, “merely a formality to divest myself of any pretensions that I have anything any longer to say within the organizations or magazines that I founded.” See his “Apologia,” 18 May 2010, <http://paulkurtz.net/apologia.html>.

1. *Thomas (Tom) Flynn, introduction to the special feature entitled “America’s Peculiar Piety: Why Did Mormonism Grow? Why Does It Endure?” (p. 21).*¹⁷

Tom Flynn (b. 1955), in addition to being a journalist, novelist, entertainer, folklorist, and editor of *Free Inquiry*,¹⁸ has published two atheist handbooks.¹⁹ He considers himself knowledgeable about the faith of Latter-day Saints. However, he raises serious doubts about his qualifications by insisting that The Church of Jesus Christ is “headquartered at that spectacular temple in Salt Lake City.” He also assures his readers, “After years of avocational reading and research, I strongly suspect that Joseph Smith Jr. conceived his homespun faith as a conscious fraud but later, fatally, came to believe in his own messianic pretensions.” He grants that other secular humanists have different explanations for what he believes was “so transparently born of chicanery.” He promises that other essays in this issue of his magazine will sort such questions as “How can secular humanists and Mormons most constructively interact?” or “What is it like to leave Mormon beliefs and heritage behind?” However, in none of the essays is either question addressed.

2. *Brian Dalton, “My Journey into ‘Formonism’” (pp. 22–24).*²⁰

Dalton is known for having created a serial comic sketch in which he plays “Mr. Deity,” the lead role.²¹ “My Journey” is

17. Tom Flynn is a former Roman Catholic.

18. For details, see Tom Flynn, “The Real War on Christmas,” *Point of Inquiry*, published 22 December 2006, http://www.pointofinquiry.org/tom_flynn_the_real_war_on_christmas/.

19. See Flynn’s *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, foreword by Richard Dawkins (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007). His best-selling *The Trouble with Christmas* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993) has led to “hundreds of radio and TV appearances” in which he plays the “role of the curmudgeonly ‘anti-Claus.’” See his “Real War on Christmas” for details.

20. Brian Dalton was briefly a Latter-day Saint.

21. For details, see “Mr. Deity,” last modified 13 January 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr._Deity.

clearly an exit story. As is common in this genre, Dalton includes a fashionable complaint about the sense of betrayal and pain that he experienced when he went missing. A more naive, candid, and revealing version of Dalton's exit story has been made available in an interview by John Dehlin.²² It turns out that Dalton grew up with a guitar and not faith. Then there was a brief moment when he gave faith a whirl. He even accepted a missionary call but left the Missionary Training Center when he was offered a pop music gig. He joined the sybaritic/demonic world of drugs and casual sex. He now sees that bizarre world as profoundly evil. For a living, he has turned instead to graphic design. He admits that his loss of faith has occasionally troubled him because he has found nothing to counter the dreadful thought of his utter annihilation, and also the ultimate futility of all his endeavors, given the ideology he now entertains.²³ His way of dealing with such thoughts seems to be making fun of faith by playing the role of Mr. Deity in the spoof he created. An example of his wit is his use of the snappy label *Formon* to describe himself, hence the word *Formonism* in the title of his exit story.

Dalton, led by Dehlin, actually claims to have read much LDS apologetic literature prior to his aborted mission call. But nothing in his interview indicates that either Dalton or Dehlin has even an elementary grasp of contemporary LDS scholarship. Dehlin gently coaches Mr. Deity to claim that DNA stud-

22. See John Dehlin, "205–206: Mr. Deity's Brian Dalton," Mormon Stories Podcast, 20 October 2010, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1286>. Much of what follows concerning "Mr. Deity" will be drawn from this interview, though without specific citations.

23. However, the "Mr. Deity" described for Dehlin has acquired a passion for promises, agreements, or covenants in his sense of how husbands and wives ought to relate to each other. Dehlin did not pursue the question of how such moral restraints on personal freedom can possibly be grounded in an atheist world. Dalton has, it seems, somehow discovered that there really is a difference between virtue and vice, or between noble and base, and that these and other similar and related distinctions entail moral rules that restrain the temptations that lured him away from the MTC.

ies, along with hearing about seer stones, led him to reject the Book of Mormon. But did this realization come long after he had lapsed back into the pop music world, with its abundance of moral evil? Neither Dalton nor Dehlin sort any such questions.

Mr. Deity's exit story clearly does not address the questions "Why did Mormonism grow?" and "Why does it endure?" with which Tom Flynn introduced this "Special Feature." Is the "curmudgeonly 'anti-Claus'" that Flynn has a special affinity for a befuddled Mr. Deity?

3. Robert M. Price, "Joseph Smith: Liar, Lunatic, or Lord" (pp. 25–29).²⁴

Dr. Price (b. 1954), depending on his mood, either doubts or flatly denies that there ever was a Jesus of Nazareth. Even as fellow of the Westar Institute's rather bizarre Jesus Seminar, he goes much further than many or most of his skeptical associates by turning Jesus into a mere literary figure with no historical reality.²⁵ Be that as it may, he boasts that he has undergone a "faith journey." He tells of having once been a fundamentalist. He is now anxious to exorcize his initial pugnacious, passionate fundamentalist background.²⁶ He likes to explain that he began when he was in his teens by being "born again" in a fun-

24. Robert M. Price has two doctorates from Drew University. The first one (1981) was in theology, and the second (1993) was in New Testament criticism. Dr. Price is currently one of three "core faculty" at the Johnnie Colemon Theological Seminary, which without residence requirements provides ministerial credentials. See http://divinityschool.net/jcseminary/johnnie_colemon_theological_seminary.htm, and also <http://www.jctseminary.org/Courses.aspx> for details. In addition, Price is also currently a research fellow (or a "professor of biblical criticism") at the Council for Secular Humanism's Center for Inquiry, which is not a university. See his web page at <http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/bio.htm> for details.

25. See Robert M. Price, *Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable Is the Gospel Tradition?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), as well as his *Deconstructing Jesus* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000) and *Jesus is Dead* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2007).

26. See Price's autobiographical account of his "spiritual journey" entitled "From Fundamentalist to Humanist" (1997), at <http://www.infidels.org/library/>

damentalist Baptist church. He zealously engaged in witnessing to the unsaved. But he soon realized that “accepting Jesus” didn’t seem to change anything here and now. His new “enthusiasm” turned sour; it was, as is often the case, both poorly grounded and ephemeral.

So “he began to reassess his faith, deciding at length that traditional Christianity simply did not have either the historical credentials or the intellectual cogency its defenders claimed for it.” In 1977–78 he began “reading religious thinkers and theologians from other traditions, as well as the sociology, anthropology, and psychology of religion.” He soon “considered himself a theological liberal in the camp of Paul Tillich.”²⁷ He seems to have taught in the religious studies department of Mount Olive College in North Carolina for a while before he became the pastor of the very “liberal” First Baptist Church of Montclair, New Jersey (1989–1994). He did not prosper as a Protestant preacher. His liberal piety faded as he began to see himself as a Christian atheist.²⁸

In a recent interview with Clay Painter, Dr. Price provides additional information on his religious odyssey. He indicates how he came to write essays on the Book of Mormon.²⁹ Soon af-

modern/testimonials/price.html. What follows is taken from this and other biographical materials that Price has posted on the Internet.

27. See Price’s “Biography,” at <http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/bio.htm>. As far as I have been able to determine, Price has published three ephemeral essays on Tillich, beginning in 1979 and ending in 2004.

28. Price has published many hundreds of essays, reviews, translations, and books. See “Theological Publications by Robert M. Price,” updated 4 October 2009, <http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/theolist.htm> for his bibliography. He lists thirteen books, seven of which were published by Prometheus Books, one by Signature Books, and one by American Atheist Press. He has also published essays in such atheist magazines as *Religious Humanism*, *American Rationalist*, and *Skeptical Inquirer*, in addition to many essays in *Free Inquiry*. Price was the founding editor of the *Journal of Higher Criticism* in 1994. This journal ceased publication in 2003.

29. For this interview, see “Episode 183: Bible Geek Bob Price,” *Mormon Expression*, online at <http://mormonexpression.com/2012/01/19/episode-183-bible-geek-bob-price/>.

ter his Southern Baptist family moved from Mississippi to New Jersey when he was ten, he was socialized in a fundamentalist Baptist congregation. This indoctrination persisted until he started working on a master's degree, at which time his born-again faith melted away. He turned initially to an "extreme liberal theology," then to "religious humanism," but he eventually settled on atheism, or what he calls "secular humanism."³⁰ Price describes himself as "hot and cold" or "back and forth" on religious matters. Despite his ardent atheism, he indicates that he still enjoys religious liturgy and has had some unidentified "religious experiences."

In 1990 and 1993, Signature Books introduced Price to two collections of essays critical of the Book of Mormon. He indicates that he was enthralled by essays in those volumes written by Mark D. Thomas.³¹ Price invited Thomas to contribute an article on "critical research" on the Book of Mormon to the *Journal of Higher Criticism*, which Price once edited.³² (In

30. These are the labels used by Price to describe his shifting religious ideology.

31. See Mark D. Thomas, "Scholarship and the Book of Mormon," in *The Word of God: Essays in Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 63–79, which was reprinted, with editorial changes, from "Scholarship and the Future of the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 5/3 (May–June 1980): 24–29; and also Thomas, "A Rhetorical Approach to the Book of Mormon: Rediscovering Nephite Sacramental Language," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 58–80. I have exposed the flaws in the way Thomas reads the Book of Mormon in my essay "'To Remember and Keep': On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book," in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 124–32, 135–37.

32. Mark D. Thomas, "The Emergence of Critical Research on the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 3/1 (Spring 1996): 123–35. This essay is an *apologia* by Thomas for his own *critical* approach to the Book of Mormon. This "critical scholarship" (see pp. 126, 134) is, he claims, "academically sanctioned scholarship" and hence not the "apologetic scholarship" (p. 126) being fashioned by "apologetic Mormon scholars" (p. 130) associated with FARMS (see pp. 127, 131) who argue for "the antiquity of the text" (p. 128). The contest between these

2000, Signature Books published Thomas's argument that the Book of Mormon is Joseph Smith's effort to resolve theological puzzles.)³³ Then, during the summers of 2003–2006, Thomas held what he called a Book of Mormon Roundtable. Price was a prize participant at those meetings.³⁴

In the Painter interview, Price describes what he terms a “friendly confrontation” on the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon with one he called “Jack Sullivan” (John W. Welch?) and with “other people from FARMS.” This encoun-

two clashing and competing types of “scholarship” (and “scholars”) involves a radically differing assessment of “religious authority” (p. 128). The reason is that “if the book is ancient, then Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims are true” (p. 128). “Critical scholars who focus on historical criticism focus on demonstrating that the text is nineteenth century fiction” (p. 128). Where exactly does Thomas stand on this crucial issue? “I do interpret the Book of Mormon in a nineteenth-century context” (p. 133), a stance that places him among the “critical scholars” (pp. 124, 127, 128). Thomas explains that, unlike those who have been excommunicated for their “critical scholarship” (p. 126)—he has in mind Brent Lee Metcalfe and David P. Wright (see p. 126)—with his “rhetorical approach” he has “been able to sidestep the question of historicity” (p. 133). However, in this essay written for Dr. Price, he relaxes his fancy footwork and explains clearly that what he calls “critical scholarship” (pp. 124, 126, 134) is an attempt to prove that the Book of Mormon was fashioned by Joseph Smith and hence is merely nineteenth-century religious fiction and not a divine special revelation. He boasts that “critical scholarship distances the scholar from the text [of the Book of Mormon] so that a more objective reading is possible. However,” he also admits, “that distance often creates a hermeneutical difficulty—the text is less personal and less meaningful for the reader” (p. 134). Put another way, when the Book of Mormon is read as merely nineteenth-century fiction devised by Joseph Smith, it becomes a mere curiosity or annoyance rather than the ground for a genuine faith in God.

33. See *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming the Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000). Thomas indicated in his essay “Emergence of Critical Research” (p. 124 n. 3) that *Digging in Cumorah* would be published by Signature Books in 1996.

34. Price “published” his contributions to Thomas’s conferences under the title *Latter-day Scripture: Studies in the Book of Mormon* (available in both electronic and print-on-demand formats though ebookIt.com in 2011). Given Price’s close association with Signature Books, it is not clear why he opted to self-publish his work. See my review of this e-book on this website at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/review-latter-day-scripture-price/>.

ter, Price indicates, brought an end to the Book of Mormon Roundtable.³⁵

Price believes that it would be wise for Latter-day Saints to accept the way he has framed the debate on the Book of Mormon. In the Painter interview, he argues that while the Book of Mormon is in his estimation a fraud in much the same way that the Bible is fraudulent, it is also a work of a “literary genius” and “creative theologian.” Read this way, the Book of Mormon, like all scripture, is a “pious fraud,” which is how he understands prophets. By reading the Book of Mormon as a fraudulent history fashioned by Joseph Smith, one would, Price insists, enhance Joseph Smith’s stature as a prophet. And yet Price also boasts of finding the Book of Mormon “rather turgid” and unedifying. He thinks that *The Lord of the Rings* is “better scripture.” He is certain that the Book of Mormon is a hoax since, in his words, “the DNA thing shot the whole premise of the thing to hell.” Price opines without having given any attention to Latter-day Saint scholarship. Armed with a fundamentalist-style atheist certainty, he merely sneers at inconvenient arguments and evidence. This is understandable if not laudable: if one is a dogmatic atheist, why take seriously the scholarship of people who actually believe that there is something beyond the mundane world?

Price has made a minor career out of pestering Latter-day Saints in an effort to lure them into going down the same path he has taken.³⁶ His argument is that if there was no Jesus (as he

35. It is not clear who financed the Book of Mormon Roundtable.

36. See Robert Price, “Prophecy and Palimpsest,” *Dialogue* 35/3 (2002): 67–82. An enlarged version of this essay appeared under the title “Joseph Smith: Inspired Author of the Book of Mormon,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 321–66. William J. Hamblin responded to Price in a devastating essay impishly entitled “‘There Really Is a God, and He Dwells in the Temporal Parietal Lobe of Joseph Smith’s Brain,’” *Dialogue* 36/4 (2003): 79–87. See the revised version of Professor Hamblin’s response entitled “Priced to Sell,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 16/1 (2004): 37–47. Price was back at it

now insists), then there is no good reason for taking the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith's prophetic truth claims seriously. Given this premise, with much celerity Price celebrates a circular argument. He merely brushes aside the Book of Mormon. In doing this, as Professor William Hamblin has demonstrated, Price has ignored all the literature published by Latter-day Saints on the Book of Mormon.³⁷

Since the argument is circular, one can reverse it, which is what Tom Flynn has done: "If today's LDS church can be accounted for without once imagining that there really were golden plates, then how much more confidently can we suppose that Christianity can be understood without any need to presume that there really was a Jesus, much less that he rose from the dead?" (p. 21). The answer is, of course, not a bit more confidently. In addition, in both formulations the conclusion is packed into the premise. Flynn provides no evidence for his premise; it is merely asserted. And since Price has dogmatically removed Jesus entirely from history, there is no need for him to examine the Book of Mormon.

So it comes as no surprise that Price has "been convinced for some time that Joseph Smith's claims about the discovery of Golden Plates were a hoax" (p. 25). He thus dogmatically rules out even considering whether Joseph Smith was seer and prophet. He asks instead if Joseph Smith was a "Liar, Lunatic, or Lord" (p. 25). These are clearly not the only possibilities. Prior to caving in to a driving agenda, one ought to at least

again with an essay entitled "Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue* 36/4 (2003): 89–96. See also his self-published essays in *Latter-day Scripture*.

37. See Hamblin's complaints about this devastating lacuna in his "There Really Is a God," 79 n. 2 (see n. 36 above). In addition to the studies mentioned by Hamblin, the list could now be increased substantially. Price also ignored Terryl Givens's *By the Hand of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

sketch the alternative accounts and then weigh the appropriate evidences.³⁸

Price does not explain why the Saints, whose faith (he grants), “embodies stolid values and provides meaning and purpose for millions of devotees who would never think of committing fraud themselves” (p. 25), believe that Joseph was a genuine prophet and not a lunatic or a liar, and certainly not the Lord.

For Price, given his controlling atheist agenda, the explanation for Joseph Smith must be that he was a liar who also somehow came to believe he was Lord and hence was also a lunatic. In his essay, Price performs this magic by briefly mentioning such bizarre figures as Charles Manson (p. 26); Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa, “the great apostle of Tibetan Buddhism in North America” (p. 26); and Sabbatai Sevi, a notorious Jewish/Muslim false messiah (p. 27), who all seem to Price to embody what he describes as a bizarre trickster/deity syndrome (p. 29).

However, Price cannot distinguish between the “trickster” as found in fable and fiction, such as Bugs Bunny or Felix the Cat, and actual human beings. In his essay he muddles the two notions together, making it possible for him to neglect to demonstrate a historical influence or connection between, say, Charles Manson or Doctor Who and Joseph Smith. Instead, he turns the most exotic and bizarre into a “deep-seated archetype in the Jungian sense” (p. 29). Presumably, one whose psyche is somehow caught up in such an archetype may then experience “psychic inflation”—a kind of swelling in which one so possessed thinks he is beyond moral restraints because he is God.

Then, Price asserts, “the archetype begins to split at the seams of the merely human self, and one boasts prerogatives, immunities, privileges that befit an imagined god but

38. See Louis C. Midgley, “Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Critics and Their Theories,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 101–39.

soon corrupt the mere mortal” (p. 29). This claim grounds his conclusion: “*This is what I think happened to Joseph Smith. Somewhere along the line, he became inflated with the trickster archetype. The creation of the Book of Mormon was a trick in this sense*” (p. 29, emphasis in original). This language presumably explains Price’s absurd notion that Joseph, while a liar and a lunatic, also imagined he was Lord. Please note that Price does not deal with any unruly historical details. He merely argues by bad analogy and bald assertion. He does not confront the actual content of the Book of Mormon nor explain how it was written by one who, barely able to write a letter, was in the grips of such an inflated, split-apart “trickster archetype.” Nor does he defend his novel explanation against the many competing explanations.

4. Tom Flynn, “Obadiah Dogberry: Mormonism’s First Critic” (pp. 30–31).

This essay is the best example of Flynn’s failure to cover the issues he indicated would be addressed in the special-feature section of his magazine. He merely rehashes some of what has appeared elsewhere concerning Abner Cole. There is one other tiny problem: it seems that when Cole reached Palmyra and became editor of the *Palmyra Reflector*, his first “Obadiah Dogberry” foray against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon appeared on 2 September 1829. If this is true, and I believe it is, then Cole was not the first critic of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. With one exception (an item in the *Wayne Sentinel*, 26 June 1828), the first published critical remarks on Joseph Smith appeared in the magazine *Paul Pry’s Weekly Bulletin*. The first item in this “bulletin” on the Book of Mormon was published on 8 August 1829, nearly a month before Cole’s criticisms appeared.³⁹

39. Could Abner Cole have somehow authored those items on Joseph Smith that appeared in Rochester, New York, in the *Paul Pry Weekly Bulletin*? Not according to Dan Vogel. In his excellent *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake

5. Michael Nielsen and Ryan T. Cragun, “The Price of Free Inquiry in Mormonism” (pp. 32–35).⁴⁰

Michael Nielsen and Ryan Cragun point out the obvious—that faith serves deep needs by providing, among other things, a “sense of purpose and meaning” (p. 32). Faith also provides a “set of rules that guide behavior” as well as a way of finding “comfort and a way to deal with stress.” They recognize that the beliefs that do this the best are those that make the most demands. Nielsen and Cragun set out a kind of exterior social-psychological explanation for why the faith of the Saints has endured despite always facing hostile secular and sectarian worlds. They then identify behaviors among Latter-day Saints that maintain social solidarity in the face of opposition and doubts. All this, the authors opine, works rather well for “devout and orthodox believers” (p. 32). But there are, of course, some who are uncomfortable being faithful Latter-day Saints. These former or nominal Latter-day Saints—dissidents or cultural Mormons—surrender something when they choose to go missing; they must pay an emotional price for abandoning their faith.

Nielsen and Cragun also muse about the possibility of a kind of “liberal Mormon movement,” something warm and fuzzy like “cafeteria Catholics,” among Latter-day Saints (p. 33). At this point they seem to have forgotten that those faiths that

City: Signature Books, 1998), Vogel points out that “Cole names [Jeremiah O.] Block as the editor of the Rochester *Bulletin*.” Vogel sees evidence for this identification in the *Palmyra Freeman*, 17 November 1829: “the masons in Newark, as about establishing a paper, to be conducted by a certain Mr. Block of ‘Paul Pry’ memory” (Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:224 n. 2). Thus it seems likely that the *Paul Pry Weekly Bulletin* was actually the work of Jeremiah O. Block.

40. Dr. Nielsen is chair of the Psychology Department at Georgia Southern University, and Dr. Cragun is a research associate of the Center for Atheist Research who also teaches sociology at the University of Tampa. Cragun served an LDS mission (1996–1998), but soon after he finished his undergraduate degree in 2000, he left the church because he came to the conclusion that the Book of Mormon is fiction.

prosper are the ones that make the most demands, both moral and otherwise, while those anxiously seeking an accommodation with the dominant secular culture seem to go into decline. Presumably in an effort to make it less emotionally costly for those who do not choose to believe and behave, they want the church to modify the moral demands that faith necessarily involves. The conclusion that they reach, which is perfectly unexceptional, is that being or becoming a “free inquirer inside the religion is challenging” because it involves costs (p. 35).⁴¹ However, Nielsen and Cragun don’t seem to sense that this is also true within their own atheist community. One who begins to have doubts about atheism or who challenges the fashionable atheist dogmas and behaviors will also pay an emotional price—namely, feeling alienated from a community that no longer meets certain emotional or intellectual needs.

6. *James Alcock, “What Is So Strange about Believing as the Mormons Do?”* (pp. 36–39).⁴²

Alcock (b. 1942) is an amateur magician who, much like Nielsen and Cragun, is a severe critic of parapsychology. He argues—correctly, I believe—that “religion is attractive to many people because of the emotional needs that it serves” (p. 39). His own religion, from my perspective, must do for him something very much like what he attributes to the religion of others. It is true that religion “provides a structure for comprehending the world and giving meaning to our existence; it provides a sense of certainty and stability in times when uncertainty and ambiguity seem to reign; it provides a social network that furnishes friendship and a sense of belonging; it provides succor in times of grief;

41. It should be noted that “free inquirer” is Nielsen and Cragun’s code language for not being a believer.

42. Alcock does not appear to have been a Latter-day Saint. He is a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (more on this later) and teaches psychology at the Glendon Campus of York University in Toronto, Canada.

it provides relief from loneliness, for one's God is always there; and . . . it provides a powerful bulwark against anxiety" (p. 39).

From Alcock's apparently atheist perspective, the intellectual/emotional products of faith in God involve many odd things, including such things as "eating and drinking the flesh and blood of their Lord, either symbolically in Protestant denominations or supposedly literally in Roman Catholicism" (p. 36). These sorts of things appear "unusual or irrational" to those with a different faith or religion (p. 36). But he grants that "while it is easy for skeptical monotheists to smirk, we [atheists] should be careful when throwing stones, for we all live in glass houses where beliefs are concerned, and it is doubtful that any of us are free from significant pockets of irrationality within our own belief systems" (p. 36). He grants that what he labels "irrational" beliefs "seem no different from those that do correspond to reality" (p. 36).

Alcock then recommends what he calls "reality testing, logical analysis, and critical scrutiny of information" as necessary correctives for the "magical thinking" he attributes to those with faith in God (p. 37) rather than faith in various human endeavors and belief systems. He complains about those for whom "faith is allowed to trump reason" (p. 37), but without clearly identifying exactly what constitutes either "reason" or "faith."

Hence he opines that what he labels as a "transcendental" system, in which category he includes "beliefs of a supernatural, religious, or mystical nature,"⁴³ demands "deliberate suppression of logical analysis in favor of acceptance based on faith alone" (p. 37). He does not, of course, include his own atheist/humanist religious belief system in his negative stereotype. And he does not sense that his own "belief system" seems to function in the same way, the primary difference being the

43. Each of these labels identifies human propensities to worship merely vagaries or abstractions and hence at the wrong altar.

content of what is held on “faith alone.” He is correct in holding that emotions are necessarily involved in any religion (or belief system), but he does not think that the content of a religion makes any difference. He is wrong. Marxism as a secular religion has demonstrated that content is crucial.

7. C. L. Hanson, “*Building on a Religious Background*” (pp. 40–41).⁴⁴

Ms. Hanson proclaims that she is an atheist but “grew up Mormon” (p. 40). She can presumably “translate between [the] two communities” (p. 40). Why? Her once having been LDS makes her, she imagines, sort of “bilingual.” She is ready and willing, she claims, to correct “those who believe the usual stereotypes about atheists” because she knows that they are not really “amoral nihilists, or whatever.” She can, she claims, also correct mistakes that atheists make about the faith of Latter-day Saints. She does these things “sometimes on the *Bloggernacle* (network of faithful-Mormon blogs).”

She pictures herself as “a mild mannered mom” who posts up a storm on the Internet promoting what she calls “the middle ground where ‘nice,’ tactful atheism can occur” (p. 41). Her blogs—*Main Street Plaza* and *Letters from a Broad*—strike me as a bit raunchy and as lacking intellectual content.⁴⁵ Hanson needs a sense of solidarity with Latter-day Saints, even though her own nice “atheist community” (p. 41) should take care of her emotional needs by providing her with friends, a sense of

44. Hanson is an atheist housewife who blogs from Zurich, Switzerland (at *Letters from a Broad* and *Main Street Plaza*). She self-published in 2006 a novel entitled *Ex Mormon*. The issue of *Free Inquiry* under review has a half-page advertisement for her novel and one of her blogs (p. 24) in which she asks others to join her in what she calls the “Mormon Alumni Association: Gone for Good.”

45. For example, it really is ludicrous for Hanson to describe her teenage efforts to seduce boys or to describe what she claims to have managed in the library at BYU. See <http://lfab-uvm.blogspot.com/2006/07/my-deconversion-part-3-tipping-point.html>, including the comments for one of many similar examples of childish rubbish.

meaning, and an identity. She believes that “atheists who were raised in other religions can form the same sort of bridges with their own communities” (p. 41).

The fact is, however, that both substance and civility are in rather short supply on lists, boards, and blogs, where the most violent and uninformed are free to opine up a storm. And this goes, unfortunately, for both Latter-day Saints as well as their critics.

Some of Hanson’s remarks, however, actually almost seem to address Tom Flynn’s desires for an answer to the question of how atheists and Latter-day Saints can have something “to say to one another” (p. 21), presumably in addition to bashing each other on blogs. Unfortunately, she does not address the two questions—“Why did Mormonism grow?” and “Why does it endure?”—that constitute the subtitle of Tom Flynn’s introduction. This fact highlights a problem with the seven items in *Free Inquiry*.

A Strange Obsession with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon

It is not exactly clear, though that is not to say that it is entirely unclear, why Paul Kurtz and his associates have had a fascination with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon and have attempted to critique the faith of the Saints. No Protestant denomination has drawn the same attention from those in charge of this atheist movement. What is clear is that George D. Smith, the owner of Signature Books, has had a hand in this.

Beginning in 1984, through various conferences and publishing ventures, including *Free Inquiry*, Kurtz and Company, at times working with George D. Smith and Signature Books, have sponsored or published a series of attacks on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. The October/November 2011 issue of *Free Inquiry* now adds to this bit of sniping, which in the past has included the following items:

- Paul Kurtz, “The Mormon Church,” *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1983–84, 20, introduced Kurtz’s first two essays critical of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Then came George D. Smith’s “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon” (pp. 21–31), which was subsequently reprinted in *On the Barricades: Religion and Free Inquiry in Conflict*, ed. Robert Basil, Mary Beth Gehrman, and Tim Madigan (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 137–56.⁴⁶ These essays were followed by a version of “The History of Mormonism and Church Authorities: An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin” (pp. 32–34).
- George D. Smith, “Polygamy and the Mormon Church,” *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1986, 55–57.
- George D. Smith, “Mormon Plural Marriage,” *Free Inquiry*, Summer 1992, 32–37, 60.
- George D. Smith and Paul Kurtz jointly sponsored a three-day “Mormon/Humanist Dialogue” in Salt Lake City on 24–26 September 1993. This allowed cultural Mormons to scold Latter-day Saints for not allowing “freedom of conscience” and also for not embracing radical feminist ideologies. The participants included Brent Lee Metcalfe, Lavina F. Anderson, L. Jackson Newell, Cecilia Konchar Farr, Gary James Bergera, Allen Dale Roberts, Fred Buchanan, Martha S. Bradley, F. Ross Peterson, Paul Kurtz, George D. Smith, Bonnie and Vern Bullough, and Robert S. Alley. The Bulloughs and Alley were speakers provided by Kurtz. These talks were published under the title *Religion, Feminism, and Freedom of Conscience*, ed. and with an introduction by George D. Smith (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books and Signature

46. For a review of George D. Smith’s essays in *On the Barricades*, see Louis Midgley, “George Dempster Smith, Jr., on the Book of Mormon,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 5–12, with attention to the religious and ideological links between Kurtz and Smith (see pp. 6–7).

Books, 1994), vii–viii.⁴⁷ Tom Flynn then drew favorable attention to this volume in “The Humanist/Mormon Dialogue,” *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1994–95, 55–57.

- George D. Smith, “Strange Bedfellows: Mormon Polygamy and Baptist History,” *Free Inquiry*, Spring 1996, 41–45. This essay was eventually reprinted in *Freedom of Conscience: A Baptist/Humanist Dialogue*, ed. Paul D. Simmons (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 207–16. It appears that Baptists who have not capitulated to atheist importuning also abjure something called “freedom of conscience.” Why George D. Smith was involved in this conference is not clear, except that it seems to have given him an opportunity to opine about polygamy, which seems to be his favorite topic.
- George D. Smith, “The Freedom of Inquiry: Introduction,” *Free Inquiry*, Spring 1997, 14–16, in which Smith comments on the ideology advanced by Paul Kurtz.
- Mark D. Thomas, “Was Joseph Smith for Real? How He Lied, Perhaps Even to Himself,” *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1999–2000, 37–39.⁴⁸
- Paul Kurtz, “On Entering the Third Decade: Personal Reminiscences, a Humanist Journey,” *Free Inquiry*, Spring 2000, 29–38. In this retelling of past experiences as an advocate for atheist causes, Kurtz draws attention to George D. Smith’s contributions to *Free Inquiry*.⁴⁹
- On 6–8 July 2001 the editors of *Free Inquiry* sponsored a conference entitled “Mormon Origins in Ingersoll Land.” Tom Flynn, founder and director of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum, and now chief editor of *Free Inquiry*, gave an introductory address entitled

47. Excluded from this publication was Brent Metcalfe’s talk.

48. This essay is available online at http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=thomas_20_1.

49. See http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/kurtz_20_2.html.

“A New Religion under History’s Microscope.” This was followed by a talk by George D. Smith entitled “The Mormons: Pathology, Prognosis, and Why They are Going to Eat Our Lunch.” Clay Chandler then opined on the topic “Scrying for the Lord: Magic, Mysticism, and the Origins of the Book of Mormon,” followed by Robert M. Price’s “Nephites and Neophytes: The Book of Mormon as a ‘New’ New Testament.” Dr. Price’s address was subsequently published under the title “Prophecy and Palimpsest,” *Dialogue* 36/4 (2002): 67–82, and then in a revised version this essay was published by Signature Books under the title “Joseph Smith: Inspired Author of the Book of Mormon,” in Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*, 321–66.⁵⁰ Clay L. Chandler’s address was published in *Dialogue* 36/4 (2002): 43–78.

- George D. Smith, “Mormon Polygamy: We Call It Celestial Marriage,” *Free Inquiry*, April/May 2008, 44–46. This is a much less polished version of his introduction to his book *Nauvoo Polygamy: “. . . but we called it celestial marriage”* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008). For a thorough, devastating critique of

50. There seems to be something approaching a symbiotic relationship between Dr. Price and the editors at Signature Books. In addition to essays in anthologies critical of the Book of Mormon, Signature Books has published Price’s *The Pre-Nicene New Testament: Fifty-four Formative Texts* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006). For a review of this volume, see Thomas A. Wayment, “Maverick Scholarship and the Apocrypha,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 209–14. In 2012, Signature Books published Price’s *The Amazing Colossal Apostle: The Search for the Historical Paul*. Unlike his opinion on Jesus of Nazareth, Price grants there was a Paul, only that he was not the author of any of the letters in the New Testament. They were, he claims, all written by others attempting to use Paul’s name to advance various competing opinions. In the Painter interview, Price explained that his opinions concerning Paul, though not original since he borrowed them from some obscure nineteenth-century Dutch writers, are also, to say the least, highly controversial. From my perspective, Price’s opinions on Paul are much like his opinions on Jesus—on the extreme fringe of scholarly opinions even for those who share much of his secular religious ideology.

this book, see Gregory L. Smith, “George D. Smith’s *Nauvoo Polygamy*,” *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): 39–123; and for a whimsical and yet insightful review, see Robert B. White, “A Review of the Dust Jacket and the First Two Pages,” *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): 125–29. For my comments on the publication of *Nauvoo Polygamy*, see “Debating Evangelicals,” *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): xlvi–xlviii.

- Paul Kurtz, “Polygamy in the Name of God,” *Free Inquiry*, February/March 2009, 58–60, in which he comments on George D. Smith’s *Nauvoo Polygamy*.

Religion as a Bogeyman, or . . .

The essays in *Free Inquiry* seem to me to expose a flaw in atheist hostility to *religion*. What those committed to “free inquiry” call “religion” is what they see as the absurd, bizarre, “magical” beliefs and practices of those with whom they disagree. They fail to see that their own community-grounding, meaning-granting belief system, or ultimate concern, constitutes their struggle to meet their own emotional or intellectual needs. Put bluntly, militant atheism is a secular religion at war with both the moral discipline and consolation provided by faith in God. And this atheist self-help religious industry can and must be understood, from a Christian perspective, as an element in the desperate darkness of this world. There is precedent for this assessment. Until rather recently, except in America, this was the way the word *religion* was understood. As recently as the end of World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was calling for a religionless (but not, of course, an atheist) Christianity, and Karl Barth (1886–1968) was busy describing religion as the darkness of a fallen world.

From my perspective, what is promoted in *Free Inquiry* under the label “secular humanism” is a religion replete with its

own teachers and preachers, its own assortment of authoritative scriptures and creeds,⁵¹ and even, it turns out, an odd pilgrimage site. Tom Flynn created for the Council of Secular Humanists a so-called Freethought Trail in the Finger Lakes area of New York, as well as a museum, to venerate the memory of Robert Ingersoll, an exemplary atheist hero. The emotional needs of adherents attached to this version of a purely secular religion would seem to need some sustenance. Conferences are held to provide nourishment. However, for several reasons, Kurtz very passionately led secular humanists to strongly object to being seen as religious.

One reason for not wanting to be known as a religion is that, in the United States, if secular humanism is seen as a religion, then it could face big trouble in the courts because of the First Amendment. One can understand Kurtz's concern over this matter. But otherwise, efforts to shed the religion label seem to me to be a bit callow, given the fact that secular humanists have not abandoned the idea that there is an atheist community and in this sense even a kind of church or assemblage of peoples.

Modern Militant Public Atheism and the Faith of the Saints

Can a book with the title *On the Barricades: Religion and Free Inquiry in Conflict* be seen as mildly Epicurean? It seems it cannot. Instead, those engaged in "free inquiry," with their ideological swords in hand, are pictured as there on the barricades ready to fight and die for their religious ideal—liberation from the religion of false faith in God.

Leo Strauss once pointed out that "Epicureanism is so radically mercenary that it conceives of its theoretical doctrines

51. Kurtz is fond of manifestos. See, for example, his "Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call for a Planetary Humanism," *Free Inquiry*, Fall 1999, 4–20, eventually followed by "The Promise of Manifesto 2000," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1999/2000), 5. And for some additional details, see Midgley, "Signature Books Saga," 371–72.

as a means of liberating the mind from the terrors of religious fear, of the fear of death, and of natural necessity.”⁵² Again, according to Strauss,

The modern manifestation of unbelief is indeed no longer Epicurean. It is no longer cautious or retiring, not to say cowardly, but bold and active. Whereas Epicureanism fights the religious ‘delusion’ because it is a delusion; regardless of whether religion is terrible or comforting, qua delusion it makes men oblivious of the real goods, of the enjoyment of the real goods, and thus seduces them into being cheated of the real ‘this-worldly’ goods by their spiritual or temporal rulers who live from that delusion.⁵³

Strauss was not himself a believer, but he was also not a village atheist. He saw that no theoretical account of the whole of reality had rendered faith in God impossible, and he also had a high regard for the social utility of faith in God. His was not entirely unlike the stance taken by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*.⁵⁴ Tocqueville, roughly a contemporary of Karl Marx, seems in his youth to have lost his Roman Catholic faith. But this did not please him; he seems to have deeply regretted his inability to believe. Be that as it may, Tocqueville set out arguments for the utility of faith in God and in immortality as the necessary ground for the virtues necessary for a civilized society. Of course, from the perspective of those with genuine faith in God, the notion that its utility is its only truth is blasphemy. But the more sober, thoughtful doubters have sometimes made common cause with the faithful in

52. Leo Strauss, “Preface to the English Translation,” *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 29. This famous “Preface” has been published in collections of the essays of Strauss.

53. Strauss, “Preface,” 29.

54. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Debra Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

struggling to hold back the inevitable moral collapse that militant public atheism offers to “liberated” childish adults when they begin to realize that, given their new religion, it is either now or never with pleasure—or that, if there is no God, despite what Kurtz and Company claim, everything is permitted.

What militant atheists see as the religious delusion is ultimately rejected not because it is terrible but because it is comforting—that is, it actually has an emotional and social utility. This can be seen in several essays in this issue of *Free Inquiry*. All comforting delusions, it is implied, must be jettisoned. What is presumably now necessary, from this perspective, is the willingness to face the ultimate terrors of this world without any consolation other than a strong feeling that those others are deluded.

Secular criticisms of the faith of the Saints are not new. Even prior to the rash of sectarian complaints, Joseph Smith faced criticisms essentially resting on at least an Enlightenment fear of superstition, if not entirely or coherently on a dogmatic atheism. Paul Pry and Obediah Dogberry are thus the first in a long line of secular critics of the faith of the Saints.

To this point, none of these criticisms seem to have risen all that far from the launching pad. This is not, of course, to say that what Paul called *atheos*—being “without God in the world”—is not common when people see no necessity for God since they have the welfare state to support themselves, electronic toys to entertain themselves, or drugs to pleasure themselves. All of these, and many more similar things, are commonly worshipped. Idolatry has not disappeared, even among militant atheists. The reason is that there are many whose “hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore, their treasure is their god” (2 Nephi 9:30).

There is another wonderful passage in our scriptures that describes *atheos*. In the preface to the Doctrine and Covenants, we learn that there are those who “seek not the Lord to establish

his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol” (D&C 1:16).

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