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Abstract Although founded and directed by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, publishing company Signature Books has a reputation of having a liberal view of controversial LDS issues. Louis Midgley examines the history of Signature Books and compares it to that of Prometheus Books, a publisher of atheist literature.

THE SIGNATURE BOOKS SAGA

Louis Midgley

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

Shakespeare¹

At the end of his career, the late Sterling McMurrin, one of my esteemed former teachers, as well as a celebrated cultural Mormon polymath,² mentioned his friendship with George D. Smith, the wealthy president, publisher, and now full owner of Signature Books. McMurrin generously described his close friend as “a historian and writer of considerable capabilities, and a publisher of books.”³ Since 1981, Signature Books has issued over two hundred titles, with the target being one new title a month, “or about 4,000 pages annually.”⁴ In addition, Smith has published a number of often controversial essays on the Latter-day Saint past under his own name.

1. *Macbeth*, act 1, scene 3, lines 123–26.

2. For details, see L. Jackson Newell’s preface and introduction to *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), xiii–xxxii.

3. *Ibid.*, 361.

4. Quoted from “About Signature Books,” www.signaturebooks.com/about.htm (accessed 12 April 2004).

A Secular Ideology and Anti-Mormon Agenda

Both George Smith and Signature Books have acquired a rather solid, singular reputation. For example, from the Protestant evangelical camp, journalists Richard and Joan Ostling have noted that “George D. Smith’s Signature Books . . . continually publishes quality *liberal thinking* on controversial LDS topics.”⁵ And from the perspective of what might be called militant, fundamentalist, evangelizing, creedal atheism, Thomas W. Flynn has described Signature Books as “the leading *dissenting* imprint in the Mormon community.”⁶ Terryl Givens, from within the Latter-day Saint scholarly community, but far from the sometimes highly corrosive Utah intellectual environment, has observed that “Signature Books is the main vehicle for publications that *challenge the borders of Mormon orthodoxy*.”⁷ Speaking for the Mormon history establishment, and as part of their effort to characterize various venues that publish essays on topics related to the Latter-day Saint past, Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, and James B. Allen include the following in their commentary on their own massive bibliographic survey:⁸ “Another publisher was Signature Books, owned by George D. Smith, an LDS *liberal activist* who published material largely *in his ideological image*.”⁹ And, in an item

5. Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling in their *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 353, emphasis added. The Ostlings make much of this “liberal thinking” in their own conservative Protestant critique of the faith of the Saints.

6. Thomas W. Flynn, introduction to a conference that was held on 4–7 May 2000 in Los Angeles, California. Council for Secular Humanism Conference Tape #18 on “The Mormon Challenge” was available from *Free Inquiry* or the Council for Secular Humanism in May 2002. I quote from a partial transcript that I made of the tape recording of the proceedings of this conference.

7. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 296 n. 123, emphasis added.

8. See James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whittaker, *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997: An Indexed Bibliography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

9. Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, and James B. Allen, *Mormon History* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2001), 91, emphasis added.

featured on the Web site belonging to Signature Books, Bryan Waterman, whose work has been published by Signature Books and who is clearly sympathetic with its agenda,¹⁰ describes it as “a sometimes *renegade* Mormon publishing company.”¹¹

After noting that the Association for Mormon Letters had once “presented Signature Books with a Special Recognition award for providing a much-needed venue for more literary sorts of LDS publishing,” Gideon Burton and Neal Kramer indicate that

as an “alternative” press, Signature has dared to publish what the official and quasi-official presses could not. Its more liberal editorial policies have made possible publication of works of high literary quality, but such policies by no means guarantee literary quality, and can, in fact *prove very narrowly liberal*. . . . The publisher’s *liberal reputation has estranged not only mainstream LDS audiences but many authors and academics*. . . . Signature has thus both filled a gap and created another.¹²

This criticism annoyed Gary Bergera, then managing director of Signature. “I know,” he admits, “that some Signature titles *bring a critical eye to bear on certain aspects of LDS history and culture*.”¹³ But, he also insists, “such works comprise the very essence of freedom of choice and conscience.”¹⁴ He then indicates that, “in fact, Signature has probably had a relatively minor impact on mainstream LDS audiences” since it is a “small publisher.”¹⁵ Bergera, it should be noted, does not deny that Signature’s “liberal reputation has,” as its critics claim, “estranged

10. See, for example, Bryan Waterman, “Editor’s Introduction,” *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretative Essays on Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), vii–xiii.

11. Bryan Waterman, “Signature Books: A Little Something for Everyone,” *Student Review*, 16 February 1994, 4; also at www.signaturebooks.com/sigstories.htm#something (accessed 12 April 2004), emphasis added. (This is the first of fourteen similar news items posted on a Signature Books Web page to signal how those at Signature Books want to be seen by their clientele.)

12. Gideon Burton and Neal Kramer, “The State of Mormon Literature and Criticism,” *Dialogue* 32/3 (1999): 7, emphasis added.

13. Gary J. Bergera, “Feint Praise,” *Dialogue* 33/1 (2000): vi, emphasis added.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

not only mainstream LDS audiences but many authors and academics.” Instead, he describes Burton and Kramer as having chosen to “clothe a straw man” and characterizes their remarks as “unfortunate” because they neglected to provide what he considers “documentation.” Rather, he complains, they “allude to a seven-year-old disagreement with one or two book reviewers at FARMS over a review of one of Signature’s titles.”¹⁶ But has Signature Books indeed managed, as these critics claim, to estrange “many authors and academics”?

Orson Scott Card—described by Signature Books as a member of its original “impressive editorial board”¹⁷—has, like many others, become, if not deeply disillusioned, at least skeptical of the Signature agenda. He argues that “Signature is an *anti-Mormon publisher* that covers itself the way *Playboy* has traditionally covered its pornography, by publishing a few articles by serious writers in every issue.”¹⁸ He adds:

By publishing a few books that meet standards of respectable scholarship on LDS topics, Signature gives the false impression that they are a “balanced” publisher, when in fact their unrelenting *agenda* is to publish books designed to shake the foundations of the Mormon religion. Their prey is the budding Mormon intellectual who takes pride in being smart and educated but does not yet have the critical skills to recognize manipulation and deception when they are masked in the forms of scholarship.¹⁹

16. *Ibid.*, v. It was more than a mere disagreement by Signature with “one or two book reviewers at FARMS.” For details, see Daniel C. Peterson’s introduction, “Questions to Legal Answers,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): ix–xi.

17. Quoted from the Signature Books Web site at www.signaturebooks.com/about.htm (accessed 14 April 2004).

18. Orson Scott Card to Louis Midgley, 14 April 2004, emphasis added. A copy of this letter can be found in the Papers of Louis C. Midgley (MSS 2806), in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

19. *Ibid.*, emphasis added. Similar remarks were made by Orson Scott Card on 27 November 2001 as part of the Harold B. Library Author Lecture Series called “Stories Filled with Truth: How to Read Fiction, Scripture, and History,” www.lib.byu.edu/friends/lectures/card.html (12 April 2004). A portion of these remarks is quoted in an item found on the Sunstone Web site under the “message board” link at www.sunstoneonline.com/whatsnew/whatsnew-event.asp# (accessed 23 April 2004).

These observers have not felt the need to elaborate or to explain the meaning of the language they employed, perhaps because they all recognize that their readers will correctly understand what they seek to convey. It is likely that all these observers have correctly assumed that by describing Signature Books as “an anti-Mormon publisher” or a “renegade” publisher, or as being “liberal,” or as a “dissenting imprint,” or as “challeng[ing] . . . orthodoxy,” their meaning would be easily and correctly understood. In addition, these writers do not seem to have believed that, in the Latter-day Saint context, by using labels such as *liberal* to describe Signature Books or its owner’s ideology, they would imply some political rather than strictly religious orientation, or that the word *activist* would imply an engagement in partisan politics. It is also likely that these authors had in mind, among other things, something like the numerous books published by Signature Books that are either implicitly or explicitly critical of Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims, including those that attack the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon²⁰ or set out radically revisionist accounts of the crucial historical foundations of the faith of the Saints.²¹

In addition to Signature Books, George Smith also owns and disburses funds through the Smith Research Associates and the Smith-Pettit Foundation. The Smith-Pettit Foundation and Signature Books

20. See, for example, the following publications by Signature Books: Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (2004); Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (2002); Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (1999); Stan Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates: Thomas Stuart Ferguson’s Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon* (1996); Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (1993); and also most but not all of the essays in Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (1990). See also Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith’s Response to Skepticism* (1992), which is a revised edition of Hullinger’s *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1980); Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (1989); and Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (1988).

21. See, for example, the following publications by Signature Books: Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (2002); Mark D. Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (1999); and H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (1994).

are said to “share two common officers: our president and our acquisitions editor.”²² These two foundations “sometimes sponsor historical research, among other projects, and when they do, this sometimes materializes into a manuscript,” which Signature Books tends to publish.²³ George Smith thus advances his own ideology and exerts influence in ways other than by merely contributing financially to various institutions and causes or by being the president and publisher of Signature Books.²⁴

An example of what gets funded and then published with the Smith Research Associates imprimatur can be seen in an item entitled *New Mormon Studies CD-ROM*.²⁵ In a careful review of this useful searchable database, BYU historian Grant Underwood points out it “includes virtually the entire inventory of works published by Signature Books, as well an almost full run of the two independent journals focused on Mormonism—*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and *Sunstone*.”²⁶ It “is a valuable collection as far as it goes.”²⁷ However, it is not, as it is advertised, a “comprehensive resource library,” since it provides access to only “a fraction” of the relevant textual materials.²⁸ To get a sense of the ideology behind even this database, it should be noted that one consulting it will not find in it the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, *BYU Studies*, or the *FARMS Review*. Underwood correctly indicates that, “for the scholar who approaches the collection” of materials “with a bit of care and a *sense of the politics involved*, there

22. See www.signaturebooks.com/faq.htm (accessed 23 April 2004) for this language and also some of the other relevant details.

23. Ibid.

24. For details, see “About Signature Books,” www.signaturebooks.com/about.htm (accessed 12 April 2004).

25. See the searchable database put out by Smith Research Associates entitled *New Mormon Studies CD-ROM: A Comprehensive Resource Library* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

26. See Grant Underwood, review of *New Mormon Studies*, in *Church History* 68/3 (1999): 748. Underwood’s essay was published a second time in *Church History* 69/4 (2000): 928–30. I cite the 1999 version of Underwood’s review.

27. Ibid., 747.

28. Ibid.

is much that is useful and that is not available elsewhere in machine-readable form.”²⁹ He argues that those who consult this database

should also know that in response, and sometime[s] in over-reaction, to what Signature Books appears to consider the protective, even paranoid, posture of the LDS Church toward its history, the company [that is, Smith Research Associates and Signature Books] has tended to promote a “tell all, hold nothing sacred” *publishing agenda*. As a result, it has not always successfully separated the wheat from the chaff. Over the years a number of the included books *have been panned in scholarly reviews for being too ideologically driven and lacking in sound scholarly methodology*.³⁰

Underwood is correct, of course—one needs to approach all of what Signature Books publishes with “a sense of the politics involved”—that is, with an awareness that what Signature Books publishes is at times “too ideologically driven.”

While perhaps even relishing being seen as a renegade publishing house, which is the language posted on their own Web site, those at Signature Books also seem eager to avoid having attention drawn within the Latter-day Saint community to their owner as being “a LDS liberal activist” or to his press as publishing “material largely in his ideological image.”³¹ John Sillito, special collections archivist at Weber State University, thinks that Walker, Whittaker, and Allen “are wrong in their assessment not only of Smith personally and his role in the internal editorial process itself, but also of the nature of Signature Books’ list generally, or even only its historical titles.”³² He adds the following: “Of course, truth in disclosure would have me admit that I

29. *Ibid.*, 748, emphasis added. Those at Signature Books should not complain about having Underwood’s reflections thrown in their faces, since they have posted his remarks at www.signaturebooks.com/reviews/cd.htm (accessed 12 April 2004).

30. Underwood, review of *New Mormon Studies*, 748, emphasis added.

31. Walker, Whittaker, and Allen, *Mormon History*, 91.

32. John Sillito, “Navigating the Difficult Terrain of Mormon Experience,” *Dialogue* 36/3 (2003): 269.

am a member of Signature's editorial advisory committee."³³ However, even though Sillito wonders about the accuracy of the "characterization of Signature Books" by Walker, Whittaker, and Allen, he makes a good point when he observes that "every press has its mission and audience, every press has a broader list than one might imagine, and over-personalization is always problematic."³⁴ Sillito, of course, correctly notes that Signature Books issues a very wide variety of titles, most of which are not, from my or Orson Scott Card's perspective, explicitly anti-Mormon. Some of the titles issued by Signature Books seem to be at least harmless, while some are even quite useful. It is obviously not true that every title published under the Signature Books and Smith Research Associates imprints is overtly critical of the faith of the Saints and therefore in that sense anti-Mormon or otherwise critical of the Latter-day Saint faith. (And, of course, not all of the books published by Signature Books turn out to be either badly written or lack scholarly merit.³⁵ Some of the more autobiographical items published by Signature Books have, perhaps inadvertently, exposed what seems to be the soft underbelly of cultural Mormonism.)³⁶ However, this is easily explained, if one keeps in mind Card's apt comparison of the similarities in the publishing strategies of Signature Books and *Playboy* magazine. In his apologia, Sillito ignores the historical titles published by Signature Books that target Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 270. Those at Signature Books should keep this proviso in mind and cease the name-calling and personal attacks on authors who publish under the FARMS imprint. They should stop the parade of crude diversionary ad hominem attacks on essays published in this *Review* when we address issues raised in the books they publish. They attack the messenger and ignore the message.

35. However, from my perspective, some of what Signature Books publishes seems to be at least tasteless, if not obscene or absurd. Examples in this genre include Paul Toscano, *Music and the Broken Word: Songs for Alternate Voices* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991); Janice Allred, *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997); and Paul Swenson, *Iced at the Ward, Burned at the Stake: And Other Poems* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003).

36. Examples in this genre include McMurrin, *Matters of Conscience*; and Brigham D. Madsen, *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Western Historian* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

Some items published by Signature Books have been nicely edited,³⁷ and some have, of course, also been solid scholarly collections or studies. However, a word of caution is needed: at the end of the day the excellent materials published by Signature Books might be explained by a line from the Disney musical *Mary Poppins*: “Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.”³⁸ This *pharmakon* (medicine) turns out to be an opiate—a secular religion intended to charm the Saints away from a genuine faith in God.

Signature Books does not seem situated on Olympian heights above the struggles going on below; its owner and employees do not seem detached from the religious and ideological storms raging around them. They are, instead, in the thick of the fray. This publishing activity, as some might imagine or assume, has not been a series of random events. Books do not just happen—just as authors are motivated to write, publishers are motivated to publish.

With “A Common Humanist Perspective”

Those speaking for Signature Books, of course, deny that their publishing venture is driven by an ideology or that they have an agenda. They also insist that their wealthy employer and his press are not “activist.”³⁹ Apparently no one has pictured either George Smith

37. It must also be granted that some of the editing provided by Signature Books is inept. For example, botany is obviously the study of plants and not animals. Yet one amusing bit of garbling by editors at Signature Books made one author, probably without his knowledge or against his will, complain about “botanically unverifiable animals” in the Book of Mormon. Edward H. Ashment, “Historiography of the Canon,” in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 284.

38. Much earlier, the Roman poet Lucretius (ca. 99–55 BC), *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) 4.662–70, hinted at what might be behind his own poetic endeavors when he mentioned that a clever physician will place some honey on the rim of the cup so that it will be easier to get a reluctant patient to swallow hellebore. What might his nasty medicine have been? The gifted author of this powerful didactic poem set out in subtle ways the bleak message entailed in Epicurean atheism. This famous text by Lucretius is readily available in various translations and editions.

39. These remarks were made by Ron Priddis, formerly Signature Books marketing director and now managing director, when speaking on 17 March 2002 in the Gould

or his press as manifesting an “activist” political disposition. In at least this sense Signature Books apologists are correct. However, in rebutting such a charge, Signature Books apologists are clearly thrashing a straw man. They also claim that their publishing and marketing activities are merely intended to let some fresh air into what they depict as a stale Latter-day Saint environment.⁴⁰ They are not, they insist, concerned with the faith as such but only want the Saints to know more about their past, and so forth. Such disclaimers do not, however, explain all those books attacking Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, the unusual Signature Books marketing techniques, or the way in which they package some of their books.⁴¹

When engaged in public relations, Signature Books spokespersons neglect to mention their employer’s ideology or the thrust of his own publishing endeavors. Instead, they prefer to steer away from discussions of these matters. Occasionally, however, they call attention to their controlling ideology. For example, Ron Priddis, the managing director of Signature Books, has acknowledged what he called “*a common humanist perspective in all our books.*”⁴² Such assertions seem to

Auditorium of the Marriott Library at the University of Utah, at a meeting of the Friends of the Marriott Library, “Signature Books: Celebrating 20 Years of Publishing”; a copy of this can be found in the Papers of Louis C. Midgley.

40. George D. Smith, also speaking at “Signature Books: Celebrating 20 Years of Publishing.” Ron Priddis and Gary Bergera, managing director of Signature Books for sixteen years and currently the managing director of Smith-Pettit as well as Signature Books acquisitions editor, also addressed this celebration.

41. A recent example of deceptive marketing can be seen in the case of Palmer’s *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*—particularly in its title and in the publicity provided for it by Signature Books. For some of the details, see Davis Bitton, “The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn’t Tell Us),” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 257–71; and also Louis Midgley, “Prying into Palmer,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 365–410, which should be compared with the “Statement Regarding Grant Palmer’s Book *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*,” issued in January 2004 by the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 255.

42. Priddis, “Signature Books: Celebrating 20 Years of Publishing.” Signature Books spokespersons insist that they “never talk about ultimate explanations” because they deny that they believe that there is “one true explanation” of the faith of the Saints. *Ibid.* Those employed at Signature Books have not worked out for themselves a single, final secular explanation for Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Instead, they appear to brush aside and mock what they describe as the silly things they were taught in Sunday

concede both that there is a guiding “philosophy” behind Signature Books and also what its substance might be. There is, however, more to the story than merely this revealing label. It involves links between George Smith’s publishing career to the American atheist/humanist movement.

“The Prometheus Books of Utah”

In 1969 Paul Kurtz started a publishing house called Prometheus Books, which eventually became the leading English-language publisher of atheist literature. Something similar to the ideology currently advanced by Kurtz was initially canonized in 1933 in a well-known creedal statement entitled “A Humanist Manifesto.”⁴³ This manifesto was drafted by Roy Wood Sellars, a philosopher, and then worked over by others, including a number of Unitarian ministers,⁴⁴ among them Edwin H. Wilson.⁴⁵ Since Unitarians have an unusually deep hostility to creeds or formal affirmations of faith, they seem to have favored setting forth their beliefs in the form of manifestos. There is, it should be noted, a clear Marxist element in the original manifesto, which can be seen in both its atheist and socialist biases. Subsequent manifestos have tended to downplay the original socialist bias and also to move away from characterizing humanism as a religion. But the original supporters of humanism were not at all shy about describing themselves as religious. They thought of their humanist version of atheism as a “religion” and also as the ground for a “church” capable

School, and, they conveniently neglect to mention, the very teachings to which they once bore solemn witness as Latter-day Saint missionaries.

43. See “A Humanist Manifesto,” *New Humanist* 6/3 (May–June 1933): 1–5; and Paul Kurtz, ed., *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993).

44. See Edwin H. Wilson, *The Genesis of a Humanist Manifesto* (Amherst, NY: Humanist Press, 1995); and William F. Schulz, *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2002).

45. Edwin H. Wilson began his humanist career in 1929 as a regular contributor to *The New Humanist*, then a mimeographed newsletter; by 1930 it was published under his direction. This little magazine ceased publication in 1936 but was revived in 1941 under the title *The Humanist*, again edited by Wilson (from 1941 until 1956). See Teresa Maciocha, “Edwin H. Wilson: Unitarian Humanist Leader, 1899–1993,” at www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/unitarians/wilson.html (accessed 4 May 2004).

of competing with Christian denominations. When Wilson, for example, was once described as an atheist who had not “quit the habit of going to church,” he responded that churchgoing “was a good habit. It organizes one’s life. It’s where your friends are.”⁴⁶

But Kurtz and his close associates like to deny that their ideology is a religion, and they do not see themselves as “churched.” Be that as it may, Kurtz seems not to have been entirely satisfied with this original Humanist Manifesto, since in 1973 he and Wilson drafted a Humanist Manifesto II.⁴⁷ When Kurtz launched the atheist magazine *Free Inquiry* in 1980, his fondness for creedal atheism led him to include in the first issue of his magazine “A Secular Humanist Declaration.”⁴⁸ He and his associates have also established or supported a number of atheist front organizations closely linked to Prometheus Books and *Free Inquiry*.⁴⁹ The best known of these was called the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH) until the name was changed in 1996 to Council for Secular Humanism.

In 2003, the Humanist Manifesto III was published,⁵⁰ this time without the long list of specifics set out in 1973, in an effort to get an even more boldly stated atheism more fully in line with trendy new social concerns. Instead of specifics, it is larded with banal slogans and glittering generalities, as humanists welcome future challenges fully committed to freedom and responsibility. Earlier Kurtz and his close associates issued “Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Plan for Peace, Dignity, and Freedom in the Global Human Family,”⁵¹ in which Kurtz urged “that humans not look beyond themselves for salvation.” Echoing William Ernest Henley’s claim in his poem “Invictus” that he is

46. Maciocha, “Edwin H. Wilson.”

47. See Kurtz, *Humanist Manifestos I and II*.

48. See *Free Inquiry* 1/1 (1980–81): 3–7.

49. In addition to *Free Inquiry*, which is currently the flagship atheist periodical publication in the United States, Kurtz and company also publish or sponsor more than a dozen other newsletters, magazines, or other periodical publications, including various series of pamphlets. See www.centerforinquiry.net/publications.html for a listing of these items (accessed 24 April 2004).

50. See the *Humanist* 63 (May/June 2003): 10–14.

51. See “Humanist Manifesto 2000,” *Free Inquiry* 19/4 (1999): 4–20.

the master of his fate and captain of his soul, Kurtz insisted that “we alone are responsible for our own destiny.”⁵²

Twenty years ago, soon after having launched Signature Books in 1980, George Smith became a collaborator and associate of Kurtz. Much of the product of this partnership has not been especially visible within the Latter-day Saint intellectual community, but it is possible to identify some of the fruits of this friendship. For example, as recently as May 2000 Kurtz convened a gathering of atheists to deliberate on their concern about what they described as “The Mormon Challenge.”⁵³ In addition to George Smith, speakers included Todd Compton, a Latter-day Saint whom Smith seems to have brought on board to tell tales of the evils of plural marriage, especially of what he considers the suffering it allowed or encouraged men to inflict on hapless pioneer women,⁵⁴ and Vern Bullough, who was raised as a Latter-day Saint but has had nothing to do with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since his teens in the 1940s and whose understanding of Latter-day Saints and their faith seems to have been arrested at that point.

Thomas Flynn, who has recently replaced the aging Kurtz as the senior editor of *Free Inquiry*, introduced these speakers.⁵⁵ To those assembled to hear why the Church of Jesus Christ is a threat to secular

52. Ibid., 18. More and more specifics were included by Kurtz in his programmatic statement of how, since in his world there are no divine things, we can somehow live an enhanced life and thereby save ourselves, whatever that might mean. These include “a new planetary income tax, the regulation of global conglomerates, open access to the media, population stability, environmental protection, an effective security system, development of a system of World Law, and a new World Parliament. The *Manifesto* urges us to rise above parochial ethnic nationalism and divisive multiculturalism.” Paul Kurtz, “The Promise of Manifesto 2000,” *Free Inquiry* 20/1 (1999–2000): 5.

53. This conference, “The Mormon Challenge,” was held on 4–7 May 2000 in Los Angeles, California.

54. While pointing out that his understanding of Latter-day Saint history and faith differs somewhat from what is common among the Saints, Compton affirmed his own belief in God. He did not go into detail and seemed uncomfortable addressing an atheist audience. He may not have known exactly what he was getting into.

55. I would recommend having a transcript of this conference published since it would provide a good illustration of both the level of understanding and the controlling ideology of some eminent secular anti-Mormons.

humanism, Flynn claimed that George Smith “is a historian of Mormonism. He has been published several times in *Free Inquiry* and in various liberal Mormon publications.”⁵⁶ Flynn boasted of the ideological links between Paul Kurtz and George Smith and their publishing ventures. He explained that “George Smith is president of Signature Books,” which he then correctly described as “the leading dissenting imprint in the Mormon community. Sometimes,” he added, “*we call it the Prometheus Books of Utah.*”⁵⁷

“Faithful Disbelief”

George Smith’s first contribution to Mormon literature seems to have been a brief comment on Blacks and the priesthood,⁵⁸ which was soon followed by the publication of a paper he had read earlier at a Sunstone conference, in which he offered criticisms of the Book of Mormon.⁵⁹ Around the same time, he recorded and transcribed the funeral services for Fawn Brodie.⁶⁰ In a letter published in a student newspaper, George Smith claimed that “Dr. [Sterling] McMurrin’s *faithful disbelief* may offer hope to the ‘closet doubters’ who might agree [with McMurrin] that ‘you don’t get books from angels and translate them by miracles.’”⁶¹ “Faithful disbelief” seems to be an oblique way of describing a persistent lack of faith. Unfortunately, Smith made no direct effort to explain the meaning of this rather odd expression. By “faithful” he seems to have meant something like constant, determined, dogmatic, or persistent. Whatever he meant, Smith

56. Flynn, introduction to a conference entitled “The Mormon Challenge.”

57. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

58. See George D. Smith Jr., “The Negro Doctrine—An Afterview,” *Dialogue* 12/2 (1979): 64–67.

59. See George D. Smith, “Defending the Keystone: Book of Mormon Difficulties,” *Sunstone*, May–June 1981, 45–50.

60. See “Memorial Services for Dr. [sic] Fawn M. Brodie, January 17, 1981,” recorded and transcribed by George D. Smith Jr., available in the Brodie Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. This was accompanied by a five-page typed item apparently written by George D. Smith entitled “Dr. [sic] Fawn McKay Brodie—A Personal View.” See also George D. Smith, “Memories of Brodie,” *Dialogue* 14/4 (1981): 7–8.

61. George D. Smith, letter to the editor, *7th East Press*, 8 February 1983, 11, emphasis added.

was pleased that this student newspaper had published an interview in which McMurrin set forth his now famous dogmatism. Smith soon published his own attack on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon in *Free Inquiry*,⁶² along with a slightly modified version of the interview given by McMurrin, which contains that now rather notorious remark about the Book of Mormon.⁶³

On Shaking the Tree of Life

On 22 July 1991, George Smith explained and defended his publishing ventures.⁶⁴ The *Salt Lake Tribune* article in which his explanation and defense appeared described him as a “shy man,” “a shadowy figure of considerable wealth bent on reshaping Mormonism by digging through its past,” and a “Stanford-educated son of a cigar-smoking United Parcel Service executive.” The *Tribune* depicted Smith, whom it identified as “Signature’s president and longtime benefactor,” as someone “committed to unfettered historical inquiry,” who was therefore “the darling of like-minded scholars, but the scourge of Mormon traditionalists whose mandate is to write ‘faithful history’—defined

62. See George D. Smith, “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon,” *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (1983–84): 21–31; eventually reprinted without illustrations 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.

63. See George D. Smith, “The History of Mormonism and Church Authorities: An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin,” *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (1983–84): 32–34, which is a shortened version of “An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin by Blake Ostler,” *Dialogue* 17/1 (1984): 18–43, which originally appeared in the *7th East Press* on 11 January 1983. McMurrin, it should be noted, liked to report that he had “never read the entire Book of Mormon.” McMurrin, *Matters of Conscience*, 114. He was not the least bit uncomfortable in boasting about this lacuna in his literary endeavors, despite Thomas F. O’Dea’s pungent observation back in 1957 that “the Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it.” Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

64. See Vern Anderson, “Revisionist or Truth Seeker? Publisher Defends Research of LDS Church’s Past,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 22 July 1991, D1. The version of this article posted on the Signature Books Web site at www.signaturebooks.com/sigstories.htm#/controversy (accessed 10 June 2004) as “Publisher Adds Controversy to the Pages of Mormon History” has been condensed.

by Apostle Boyd K. Packer . . . as history that bolsters belief and avoids awkward or embarrassing detail.” In this context, the word *benefactor* suggests patron or financial backer. Allen Roberts, then a member of the Signature board of directors, is quoted as saying that “there’s an impression out there that he’s running a one-man show.” Roberts explained that this is partly true—“it is on the financial side, but on the editorial side it’s not.”⁶⁵

Anderson quoted Smith as saying that he is “willing to shake the tree, and perhaps others don’t like to shake the tree because it is sacred.”⁶⁶ What “tree”? In a Latter-day Saint context, this remark would seem to make sense if one had in mind Alma’s comparison of the word of God to a seed, which if properly nourished will grow into a tree of life from which eventually a most precious fruit—the fruit of the tree of life, or eternal life—can be harvested (Alma 32:28–43). Understood in this way, the tree is, of course, sacred to the faithful, just as Smith said, but not to those who mock from the sidelines—in George Smith’s words, those eager to “shake the tree.”⁶⁷

Mocking Marriage; Leveraging Laxity

In essays he has published in *Free Inquiry*, George Smith has dis-coursed about humanist slogans,⁶⁸ although he has focused most of his attention on polygamy, a topic with which he seems somewhat obsessed.⁶⁹ He tends to focus on what he clearly believes were the dis-

65. All quotations in this paragraph are from Anderson, “Revisionist or Truth Seeker?”

66. Ibid.

67. Smith indicated that he was “not trying to hide anything.” He is also quoted as having said, “I have no hidden agendas. I stand for historical integrity and free inquiry on all subjects, religious and otherwise.” Anderson, “Revisionist or Truth Seeker?” If this is genuinely the case, then he and his employees at Signature Books should welcome an unfettered, let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may, warts-and-all look at George Smith’s publications for indications of both his motivations and ideology.

68. See, for example, George D. Smith, “The Freedom of Inquiry: Introduction,” *Free Inquiry* 17/2 (1997): 14–16.

69. George D. Smith, “Polygamy and the Mormon Church,” *Free Inquiry* 7/1 (1986–87): 55–57; Smith, “Mormon Plural Marriage,” *Free Inquiry* 12/3 (1992): 32–37, 60; Smith, “Strange Bedfellows: Mormon Polygamy and Baptist History,” *Free Inquiry* 16/2 (1996):

gusting motives and evil consequences of that practice in the early church. But there is a paradox in this.

In what comes close to being an official Signature Books account of a rather instructive incident that took place early in 1990, Bergera reports that “since 1989” Elbert Peck “had been running an occasional column [in *Sunstone*], entitled ‘A Changed Man,’ by former Sunstone staffer Orson Scott Card.”⁷⁰ Peck is said to have

felt that Card, a nationally award-winning science fiction writer, brought a thought-provoking conservative voice to the magazine. Card’s fourth column, which appeared in the February 1990 issue, was called “The Hypocrites of Homosexuality.” In it, Card declared that “the Church has no room for those who, instead of repenting of homosexuality, wish it to become an acceptable behavior in the society of the Saints. They are wolves in sheep’s clothing, preaching meekness while attempting to devour the flock.” He continued, “If we accept the argument of the hypocrites of homosexuality that their sin is not a sin, we have destroyed ourselves.”⁷¹

Bergera indicates that “Signature Books, which distributes the magazine to bookstores and other retailers, informed Sunstone that if it continued to publish, in Signature’s view, such irresponsible opinions, it might need to find another distributor.”⁷² This might be seen as an instance of a threat to use economic power to leverage others into following what

41–45; reprinted in *Freedom of Conscience: A Baptist/Humanist Dialogue*, ed. Paul D. Simmons (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 207–16. In this essay he suggests that Joseph Smith might have gotten the idea for polygamy from John Milton, who wanted to remarry when his wife deserted him, or that he might have heard about Anne Boleyn and King Henry, or he might have heard something about Anabaptist marriage practices. At the Mormon History Association meetings in Tucson, Arizona, on 17 May 2002, he presented a paper entitled “Counting Joseph Smith’s Wives.” Then Bergera responded with support for his employer with “A Review of George Smith’s Identification of the Earliest Mormon Polygamists.”

70. Gary J. Bergera, “‘Only Our Hearts Know’—Part I: Sunstone during the Daniel Rec- tor, Elbert Peck, and Linda Jean Stephenson Years, 1986–92,” *Sunstone*, March 2003, 46.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

appears to be the Signature party line on homosexuality. While Signature seems obsessed by what they see as the evils of the plural marriage once practiced by the Saints, they condemn as “irresponsible opinions” objections to homosexual behavior.

Appearing Balanced; Privileging Revisionist History

Card points out that Signature publishes some solid essays for the same reasons that Peck seems to have published a column by Card—that is, as part of an effort to market its product to the faithful. This has resulted in some anomalies. At approximately the same time that Signature had its attorney protest about what he termed libel in three essays critical of books issued by Signature, George Smith had Bergera put together an anthology assessing various ways of writing about Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the Mormon past generally. The end result was a book consisting of sixteen rather diverse essays.⁷³

Bergera assembled some previously published essays setting out opinions more or less supporting the Signature ideology,⁷⁴ as well as essays by Martin E. Marty and Edwin S. Gaustad, both prominent American church historians. Bergera had difficulty getting Richard L. Bushman—whose essay entitled “Faithful History” (first published in 1969) provided the title for the anthology—as well as Neal Kramer, David Bohn, and me to agree to participate in the undertaking. I insisted that we must know in advance the parameters of the project and that page proofs be provided prior to publication. No changes were made in Bushman’s essay, but other authors were hassled by Signature editors seeking to manipulate the published form of their essays. Since the essays by Marty and Gaustad also did not support the Signature agenda, two revisionist essays not in the original table of contents were added to the anthology.⁷⁵

73. See George D. Smith, ed., *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

74. Among others, these included D. Michael Quinn, Melvin T. Smith, Lawrence Foster, Paul M. Edwards, and C. Robert Mesle.

75. See the essays by Malcolm R. Thorp, “Some Reflections on New Mormon History and the Possibilities of a ‘New’ Traditional History,” 263–80, and Edward H. Ashment, “Historiography of the Canon,” 281–302.

The end result, despite the editorial mischief, was a reasonably good collection of essays dealing with important issues. But one would not know this from Smith's introduction.⁷⁶ Unlike his previous claim that, among other weaknesses, the traditional history written by faithful Saints "avoids awkward or embarrassing detail," George Smith distinguished two meanings that can be attached to the expression "faithful history": the "history written to express and support religious faith," which he mocks, "and history that attempts to be faithful to the past."⁷⁷ He neglected to mention that neither Bushman, who gave us the expression "faithful history," nor any of the others whom Smith describes as "traditional Mormon historians," believes that one of these is possible in the absence of the other.⁷⁸ Instead, Smith denigrates what Bushman calls "faithful history" by linking it with "traditional narratives of the supernatural [that] have usually been taught as factual events"⁷⁹ and by insisting that the brand of history he favors strives to see "Mormonism as part of American religious experience"⁸⁰—that is, as a mere manifestation of some larger flux of secular forces and consequently not what the faithful have always believed it to be. For Smith, the work of those he labels "professional Mormon historians" has produced what he describes as a "New Mormon History,"⁸¹ which clearly includes *for him* efforts to argue that the Book of Mormon is frontier fiction and not an authentic ancient text, with all that implies for the faith of the Saints.

George Smith asserts that "traditional Mormon historians" "typically reject compromises, such as the view that a mythical Book of Mormon can evince religious authenticity as 'inspired redaction.'"⁸² Thus he seems willing to allow the possibility that Joseph Smith might

76. George Smith, "Editor's Introduction," *Faithful History*, vii–x.

77. *Ibid.*, vii.

78. *Ibid.*, ix.

79. *Ibid.*, viii.

80. *Ibid.*, ix.

81. *Ibid.*, viii.

82. *Ibid.*, ix. Signature has on its Web page at www.signaturebooks.com/reviews/faithful.htm (accessed 18 May 2004) what purports to be a review of *Faithful History* by Bryan Waterman that first appeared under the title "In Search of Faithful History," *Student Review*, 30 September 1992, 5. Waterman was then an undergraduate student in English at Brigham Young University. On 6 November 1992, I phoned Waterman, and

have produced frontier fiction that could simultaneously contain some inspiring passages. Unfortunately, from his perspective, the Saints have wrongly believed that this book is an authentic ancient history and also a divine special revelation. Joseph Smith simply could not possibly have made available to us a genuine ancient history.

When the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* appeared in 1992, Sterling McMurrin objected that “the authenticity of the Book of Mormon is taken for granted.”⁸³ In addition, “The *Encyclopedia* is saturated with references to the Book of Mormon, reflecting” what McMurrin took as “the recent church movement to give that work greater attention.”⁸⁴ McMurrin then added the following:

In his excellent Sunstone lecture, “The Book of Mormon as Seen in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*,” which should be read by anyone interested in the nature of the *Encyclopedia*, George D. Smith has indicated that the *Encyclopedia* contains about 200 articles dealing with the Book of Mormon. In his treatment of this subject, Smith writes that “editorial selectivity favoring orthodoxy prevails throughout the encyclopedia.”⁸⁵

The essay to which McMurrin referred was soon published in *Sunstone*.⁸⁶ Because the *Encyclopedia* does not offer revisionist explanations of the Book of Mormon, Smith claims that it “is not the

he indicated that he had lifted most of the review directly from a press release written by Ron Priddis, then publicist for Signature, and issued as “Mormons Clash over History,” *Signature Books News*, 4 September 1992. He sent me a photocopy of this item with the following notation: “Brother Midgley—The editorial marks are mine. You’ll see that the version in SR [*Student Review*] is close to this. I had a few personal [paragraphs] that were omitted for space reasons.” Priddis then posted what had originated as his own press release on the Signature Web page, but under Waterman’s name. Needless to say, the assessment of *Faithful History* by publicist-Priddis/reviewer-Waterman is tendentious, as well as garbled.

83. Sterling M. McMurrin, “Toward Intellectual Anarchy,” review of *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, *Dialogue* 26/2 (1993): 212.

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*

86. See George D. Smith, “Orthodoxy and Encyclopedia: The Book of Mormon in the Encyclopedia,” *Sunstone*, November 1993, 48–53.

promised comprehensive treatment of Book of Mormon scholarship; it is a statement of LDS orthodoxy.”⁸⁷ Instead, according to Smith, “it consciously omits important scholarship, but does comprehensively present orthodox views of the Book of Mormon.”⁸⁸ What follows in Smith’s essay is a kind of litany of secular anti-Mormon objections to the Book of Mormon, many of which repeat the objections Smith had previously published in *Free Inquiry* and elsewhere.⁸⁹ He seems to have wanted the *Encyclopedia* to detail and extol objections to the Book of Mormon.

Some “Strange Bedfellows”

In addition to his writings in *Free Inquiry*, there are several other indications of personal and ideological links between Paul Kurtz and George Smith. For example, Kurtz celebrated the twentieth anniversary of *Free Inquiry* by describing some of the great moments in his

87. Ibid., 48.

88. Ibid., 49.

89. George Smith has contributed essays to *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, and the *Journal of Mormon History*. See George D. Smith, “William Clayton: Joseph Smith’s ‘Private Clerk’ and Eyewitness to Mormon Polygamy in Nauvoo,” *Sunstone*, December 1991, 32–35; Smith, “Is There Any Way to Escape These Difficulties? The Book of Mormon Studies of B. H. Roberts,” *Dialogue* 17/2 (1984): 94–111; Smith, “Indians Not Lamanites,” *Dialogue* 18/2 (1985): 5–6; and Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841–46: A Preliminary Demographic Report,” *Dialogue* 27/1 (1994): 1–72; reprinted in *Dialogue* 34/1&2 (2001): 123–58. In addition, he edited and published *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books/Smith Research Associates, 1991 & 1995). When James B. Allen reviewed *An Intimate Chronicle* in *BYU Studies* 35/2 (1995): 165–75, a tussle ensued in the pages of *Dialogue* 30/2 (1997). See James B. Allen, “Editing William Clayton,” 129–38; George D. Smith, “A Response: The Politics of Mormon History,” 138–48; and then Allen’s “A Reply,” 148–55; and Smith’s “A Rejoinder,” 155–56. Early in Smith’s publishing career he got into a quarrel with William Hamblin over how to read Isaiah. See George D. Smith, “Isaiah Updated,” *Dialogue* 16/2 (1983): 37–51, reprinted in *The Word of God*, 113–30; William Hamblin, “‘Isaiah Update’ Challenged,” *Dialogue* 17/1 (1984): 4–7; and “Smith Responds,” *Dialogue* 17/1 (1984): 7. See also George D. Smith, “Concepts of Deity; A Brief Overview from Yahwist Writings to the Mormon Jehovah-Is-Jesus Doctrine,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 7 (1987): 28–34; and Smith, “William Clayton: In the Shadow of Power,” *Journal of Mormon History* 19/2 (1993): 126–40.

career as an atheist activist,⁹⁰ several of which even involved George Smith and Signature Books. On that occasion, Kurtz reported that “George D. Smith wrote a series of important articles on the Mormon Church” for *Free Inquiry*.⁹¹ As already indicated, he had published a special feature in *Free Inquiry* in 1984. This consisted of his brief introduction, followed by his own essay and then one by Sterling McMurrin, both of which were highly negative about the Church of Jesus Christ and were especially disparaging toward Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

Kurtz described George Smith as “a lifelong member of the church” but more accurately as one who “provides a detailed critical examination of Joseph Smith and his claim that the Book of Mormon was divinely inspired.”⁹² He described McMurrin “as one of the leading Mormons in America”⁹³ and as “a Mormon since birth, who questions the treatment of the history of the church by Mormon authorities.”⁹⁴

On 6–8 July 2001 the editors of *Free Inquiry* sponsored another conference on Mormonism entitled “Mormon Origins in Ingersoll Land.”⁹⁵ They combined a celebration at the Robert Ingersoll Birthplace Museum, which is located at “the birthplace of freethought firebrand Robert Green Ingersoll,” with the musings of “an expert panel” on “the founding of the Mormon religion and the publication of the

90. See Paul Kurtz, “On Entering the Third Decade: Personal Reminiscences: A Humanistic Journey,” *Free Inquiry* 20/2 (2000): 29–38.

91. *Ibid.*, 32. These have previously been identified.

92. Paul Kurtz, “The Mormon Church,” *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (1983–84): 20. George Smith was married in a Latter-day Saint temple in July 1970, with all that this implies. However, it seems rather unlikely, if not entirely impossible (given his public stance on the church and its historical foundations), that he wishes to be known as a Latter-day Saint or that his name is still on the membership records.

93. Editorial note introducing McMurrin’s essay, *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (1983–84): 32.

94. Kurtz, “Mormon Church,” 20. McMurrin was also married in a Latter-day Saint temple in June 1938. He was never excommunicated nor did he have his name removed from the church records, though he loved to boast of being a heretic and for much of his adult life he chose not to be part of the community of Saints. He was, instead, an observer of the faithful from the margins of the Latter-day Saint academic community.

95. This and other references to this conference have been taken from materials posted on the *Free Inquiry* Web site at www.secularhumanism.org/ingersoll/mormon.htm (accessed 12 April 2004). I quote from a printed copy of these materials.

Book of Mormon, which took place in nearby Palmyra, New York, in 1830.” They also attended the Hill Cumorah Pageant. “No freethought event,” they reported, “has offered so immediate an experience of Mormonism in action.” In the language one expects to find in the hype of a travel brochure, the atheists who attended this event were encouraged to “rub shoulders with Mormons from all across America” and to be “affable when you turn . . . down” efforts at conversion. They were also instructed to “marvel at Christian missionaries who throng pageant gates struggling to ‘deconvert’ passing Mormons.”

Those who reflected on Mormon origins at this “once-in-a-lifetime experience” included Flynn, who, in addition to being the senior editor of *Free Inquiry*, is also the director of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum. Flynn’s remarks were entitled “A New Religion under History’s Microscope,” and he was immediately followed by George Smith, who lectured on “The Mormons: Pathology, Prognosis, and Why They Are Going to Eat Our Lunch.” Smith’s remarks were followed by a lecture entitled “Scrying for the Lord: Magic, Mysticism, and the Origins of the Book of Mormon,” by Clay Chandler,⁹⁶ who was at that time managing the Web site for *Dialogue*. His brother Neal Chandler—then coeditor (along with his wife) of *Dialogue*—followed with his own comments on “Recent Scholarship on Mormon Origins.”

The final talk at this conference on “Mormon Origins” was given by Robert M. Price, who read a paper entitled “Nephites and Neophytes: The Book of Mormon as a ‘New’ New Testament.” It should come as no surprise that those at Signature Books recruited Price from among the stable of secular humanist speakers assembled by Kurtz to assist them in their most recent attack on the Book of Mormon.⁹⁷

96. An essay by Clay Chandler, “Scrying for the Lord: Magic, Mysticism, and the Origins of the Book of Mormon,” can be found in *Dialogue* 36/4 (2003): 43–78. (There is no indication in *Dialogue* that a version of this essay was read to a gathering of atheists assembled by George Smith and Paul Kurtz.)

97. See Robert M. Price, “Joseph Smith: Inspired Author of the Book of Mormon,” in *American Apocrypha*, 321–66. Compare this essay with Price, “Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon,” *Dialogue* 36/4 (2003): 89–96. See William J. Hamblin’s “There Really Is a God, and He Dwells in the Temporal Parietal Lobe of Joseph Smith’s Brain,” *Dialogue* 36/4 (2003): 79–87; also found in a slightly revised version as “Priced to Sell” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 37–47.

Price began his career as a born-again fundamentalist, but then he did a radical flip-flop⁹⁸ and is now a fellow of the Weststar Institute, which sponsors, among other things, the controversial Jesus Seminar mode of explanation of Christian origins. He edits the *Journal of Higher Criticism* and is a fellow at the Center for Inquiry, which is a Council for Secular Humanism front organization operating in the New Jersey/New York City area. He was also once the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Montclair, New Jersey, which must be a rather “liberal” congregation, given his essentially atheist ideology.

Some Strange “Dialogues”

According to Paul Kurtz, the Council for Secular Humanism has “convened two important dialogues—between Mormons and humanists in Salt Lake City, and Baptists and humanists in Richmond, Virginia. They were the first such dialogues ever held.”⁹⁹ Both of these events have included George Smith speaking *for the humanists*. If one were to grant that both Baptists and secular humanists have their own faith and were also inclined to employ a trendy new terminology, then these events might be seen as *interfaith dialogues*. However, the dialogue between atheists and Baptists was clearly not between feisty, evangelizing, “born-again” Baptists and competent naturalistic humanists. Instead, it involved a few “humanists” assembled by Kurtz to console some dissident Baptists who had come to deplore the direction their

98. See Robert M. Price, “From Fundamentalist to Humanist” (1997) found at www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert_price/humanist.html (accessed 24 April 2004). He describes his odyssey from what he flippantly brushes aside as a crude fundamentalist ideology to his current atheist stance. Price is a favorite of Internet Infidels; they have five of his essays listed on one of their Web pages. See www.infidels.org/secular_web/new/1997/june.shtml (accessed 24 April 2004). Price, who was said in 2002 to be the “author of six books, three awaiting release, and hundreds of articles, is a fellow of the Jesus Seminar and Professor of Biblical Criticism at the Center for Inquiry.” He is also on the editorial staff of *Secular Nation* magazine, which is a publication of the Atheist Alliance International, www.atheistalliance.org/library/news_082602.html (accessed 24 April 2004). Price seems recently to have come to believe that there was no historical Jesus of Nazareth—Jesus is simply, for him, a myth invented by others.

99. Kurtz, “Personal Reminiscences,” 36.

Baptist denomination had recently taken and who were willing to accept the assistance of atheists in voicing their resentments.¹⁰⁰

It is, however, unlikely that a few disheartened seminarians, even with the help of some humanists, will be able to challenge the aggressive fundamentalist faction that gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1985 “through virtual civil war”¹⁰¹ against somewhat more moderate fellow Baptists. The diaphanous Harold Bloom, in his typically interesting, oracular, and assertive way, has commiserated over what he thinks is a dismal decline in traditional Baptist religiosity, as those caught up in what he denigrates as a new “Know-Nothing” brand of fundamentalism have captured control of the SBC from an older, somewhat more moderate and less unreasonable faction. Bloom claims that what has taken place is an “analogue of a hostile takeover in the corporate world.”¹⁰²

Could Kurtz, his associates, and a few disaffected seminarians possibly imagine that this “dialogue” could change the direction being taken by the SBC? Such does not seem likely. At best, some disgruntled Baptists vented their spleen and sought some sympathy for their plight. It appears that some eccentrics among those marginalized by the takeover of the SBC by a fundamentalist faction sought at least some consolation from Kurtz and company, if not a full alliance. With the aid of Joe E. Barnhart and Robert S. Alley, two of his close associates, Kurtz drafted a statement entitled “In Defense of Freedom of Conscience: A

100. This “dialogue,” heavily augmented by a miscellany of sermons and previously published essays, was issued in 2000 as *Freedom of Conscience: A Baptist/Humanist Dialogue* by Prometheus Books. Robert Price contributed a sermon entitled “Bootleg Baptists?” (pp. 80–84) and a previously published essay entitled “Inerrancy: The New Catholicism? Biblical Authority vs. Creedal Authority” (pp. 175–81), which helped to flesh out what originally took place.

101. See the Ostlings in *Mormon America*, 384. A fundamentalist faction within the Southern Baptist Convention won a decisive victory in what has been described as the “Baptist Battles.” For details, see Nancy Ammerman’s *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

102. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 231. He may have borrowed the expression from Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 14.

Cooperative Baptist/Secular Humanist Declaration.”¹⁰³ Kurtz predictably supported the complaints of these former Baptists by appealing to some trendy slogans. Kurtz, Barnhart, Alley, and nineteen others, including *George Smith*, endorsed this pronouncement.¹⁰⁴

The dialogue between humanists and “Mormons” actually involved some marginal or former Latter-day Saints or cultural Mormons including Lavina F. Anderson, Brent Lee Metcalfe, L. Jackson Newell, Cecilia Konchar Farr, Gary James Bergera, Alan Dale Roberts, Fred Buchanan, Martha S. Bradley, F. Ross Peterson, and, of course, George Smith. Kurtz, Bonnie Bullough, Gerald A. Larue, Robert S. Alley, and Vern Bullough set out a version of atheist/humanist ideology, while supporting the grievances of the dissidents. This dialogue was *jointly published* by Prometheus Books and Signature Books, with George Smith serving as editor.¹⁰⁵ Since I have elsewhere dealt at length with this dialogue, I will not comment further, other than to point out again that George Smith was behind that venture, and that McMurrin, the leading Mormon humanist, unlike Newell, did not speak at the conference.¹⁰⁶

Discontented Baptist seminarians or disaffected Latter-day Saints are, of course, perfectly free to break away from the Southern Baptist Convention or the Church of Jesus Christ; they are free, if they so desire—that is, if their conscience so dictates—either to move to some more congenial secular “religious community” or to cease being Christians at all. Hence, without wishing to defend the bloodletting that took place nearly twenty years ago in the Southern Baptist Con-

103. Joe E. Barnhart, Robert S. Alley, and Paul Kurtz, “In Defense of Freedom of Conscience: A Cooperative Baptist/Secular Humanist Declaration,” *Free Inquiry* 16/1 (1995–96): 4–7.

104. *Ibid.* For the full text of “In Defense of Freedom of Conscience: A Cooperative Baptist/Secular Humanist Declaration; Joint Statement,” see *Freedom of Conscience*, 263–70.

105. See George Smith, *Religion, Feminism, and Freedom of Conscience* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus and Signature Books, 1994). Metcalfe’s talk was not included in this book.

106. For a commentary on *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*, see Louis Midgley, “Atheists and Cultural Mormons Promote a Naturalistic Humanism,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 229–97. For a glowing review of this volume, see Thomas W. Flynn, “The Humanist/Mormon Dialogue,” *Free Inquiry* 15/1 (1994–95): 55–57. See “Atheists and Cultural Mormons,” 257–67, where I dealt extensively with Newell’s ideology.

vention, it is difficult to determine who or what is supposed to have challenged or violated the freedom of conscience of the now displaced or marginalized Baptists. Disgruntled Baptist preachers, as well as former Latter-day Saints or cultural Mormons who have for whatever reasons never really believed or have ceased to believe and who may have even adopted an atheist ideology, have full freedom of conscience. No one has taken or can take away their moral agency.

But slogans about a presumably unfettered search for truth, about freedom of conscience and “free agency,” are used by dissidents to insist that they be allowed to teach or be given power to control the destiny of religious communities. It is even argued that the “liberty” the framers of the American Constitution sought to guarantee to American citizens and that was incorporated into the First Amendment somehow ought to be grounds for such a right.¹⁰⁷ But this is just silly slogan thinking; nothing more can be said about it. No one has or can prevent cultural Mormons or humanist Baptists from being responsible moral agents. All, unless intellectually defective, are responsible moral agents faced with the consequences of their choices. Recognition of this fact does not thereby require that others with whom they chose to disagree must celebrate, encourage, or finance their heresies and apostasy. The harsh realities of recent denominational politics such as found in the Southern Baptist Convention do not conflict with freedom of conscience but are actually a sign of its vigorous exercise.

No one is or can be forced to engage in practices they abhor, at least in lands where regimes prevail that do not strive to force ideological conformity. Even in the most repressive regimes, no one can be forced to believe things they simply do not believe. That we are moral agents does not somehow mean that others must acquiesce to our demands. This is at least part of what is meant by moral agency. However, in matters of conscience there is simply no requirement that the views of those who believe something fundamentally at odds with a community in which they find themselves must be tolerated or encouraged.

107. See George D. Smith’s “Editor’s Introduction” to *A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*, vii–viii.

And this is well understood. Do atheist propaganda fronts open their publishing venues to vigorous critical assessment of their own secular creeds? Should they? Should they be demonized if they choose not to do so? Do atheists put in charge of their institutions those who abhor atheism? By not doing so, have they violated anyone's freedom of conscience? Is there an indication that those in control of the Council for Secular Humanism are willing to authorize the use of their resources and publishing venues by those who believe in God and who are prepared to defend their beliefs? Or who are prepared to sponsor and finance and celebrate vigorous critiques of atheism? Are they somehow morally defective for not doing so?

If something labeled "freedom of conscience" or the search for truth through what is labeled "free inquiry" demands that everyone, whatever they may or may not believe, must finance or give equal time to unbelievers or others with radically different beliefs, or provide a protest pulpit for dissidents and unbelievers or others with competing or radically different beliefs, then Kurtz and company betray such freedom, as do secular and sectarian anti-Mormons generally. But atheists have not to this point made a plausible case for such a moral requirement, though they work hard to convince others that their ideology ought to officially dominate or otherwise be controlling.

And the Rest of the Story

One might grant that George Smith seems to have personal and ideological ties to Paul Kurtz and his brand of secular humanism and yet not see this as necessarily controlling or coloring the operation of Signature Books and his Smith Research Associates. But this would be a mistake, as well as naïve, since a significant number of the books issued by Signature Books are anti-Mormon in the sense that they overtly attack Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. It is that literature that reflects his ideology and agenda. There clearly is an ideology determining what is being published. Signature Books follows closely what seems to be the line advanced by its wealthy owner.

George Smith recently set up Smith-Pettit Foundation. The purpose of this private foundation appears to be a way of both owning

and financing Signature Books, perhaps to provide a source of income to help regularize the support for that publishing venture. The Smith-Pettit tax return shows that it had \$8,767,866 in total assets at the beginning of 2002 and \$9,291,019 at the end of the year.¹⁰⁸ The management of this foundation has been turned over to Bergera, who also continues to function as acquisitions editor for Signature Books. The day-to-day operations at Signature Books do not appear to be directed by George Smith; he does not seem involved in the routine operations of the press or the foundations he owns. And it is possible, perhaps even likely, that his employees occasionally do things that annoy him. But there are, in addition to personal (if not financial) links, also ideological connections between George Smith (and Signature Books) and militant, evangelizing atheist propaganda agencies, including Prometheus Books. This seems significant and should be known in the Latter-day Saint community and also by evangelical critics of the Church of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁹ And these ideological links help to explain the books attacking Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon that flow from Signature Books.

Signature Books employees have neglected to mention to their Latter-day Saint clientele the links their employer has to Prometheus Books, or to what is currently known as the Council for Secular Humanism, and

108. The Smith-Pettit Foundation (which does not function as a tax-exempt entity) owns 67 percent of Signature Books, which seems to have had a book value of \$768,150 in 2002; other investments of the foundation that year included mutual funds with a book value of \$2,536,569. One can get some idea of the size of this investment by examining the Smith-Pettit Foundation tax returns, which are available for 2002 at tfc990.fdncenter.org/black_pdfs/870641442/200212.pdf and for 2001 at tfc990.fdncenter.org/black_pdfs/870641442/200112.pdf (both accessed 24 April 2004). The other third of Signature Books seems to be owned by George Smith through a holding company that also owns and renovates properties in Salt Lake City.

109. “Dr.” John Weldon, a countercult anti-Mormon, believes that “Signature Books offers a wide variety of books documenting problems in Mormonism that refute FARMS claims. What FARMS will not do, because it cannot, is to fairly evaluate these Mormon writings because they disprove their claims re: Mormonism.” This assertion, which shows how countercult critics of the Church of Jesus Christ understand the literature published by Signature Books, is quoted from the encyclopedic collection of over 8,500 pages of material in what is called “Apologetic Index,” assembled by Anton Hein, a pugnacious Dutch countercultist, at www.apologeticsindex.org/cpoint10-9.html (accessed 24 April 2004).

to other related atheist front organizations servicing the wider community of militant, evangelizing atheists. It is also noteworthy that those at Signature Books have been neither forthcoming about their somewhat reclusive, very wealthy owner, nor about his and their motivations and ideology. By giving close attention to the ideological nexus between Signature Books and Prometheus Books, it is possible to understand what constitutes the “common humanist perspective” found in the titles issued by Signature Books and also what is meant when prominent Latter-day Saint historians—each known for their moderation—indicate that Signature Books publishes material largely in George Smith’s “*ideological image*.”

Those at Signature Books seem to want to be known as a “dissenting imprint” and a “renegade publisher.” This proclivity can clearly be seen in the “News Stories about Signature Books and Its Authors” posted on a Web page it maintains.¹¹⁰ This collection of news items, ranging back well over a decade, provides a good indication of what constitutes “the common humanist perspective” in the books published by Signature Books and also how those at Signature Books both understand and promote their publishing endeavors among those on the margins of the Latter-day Saint intellectual community. In those items there is much reveling in reports of conflict with the Brethren and with faithful Latter-day Saints generally, especially with those who publish under the FARMS imprint.

Skirmishes on the “Wasatch Front”

Why the passion on the part of Signature Books to demonize FARMS? Or why do Signature Books spokespersons lionize authors who have public squabbles with the church? The answer to these and related questions requires a little historical background. Prior to 1989 (though there has been a constant parade of anti-Mormon books and

110. At www.signaturebooks.com/sigstories.htm#something (accessed 24 April 2004), see “News Stories about Signature Books and Its Authors.” This can also be accessed from the Signature Books home page through the “News and Events” link, and then through “News Stories about Signature Books” link.

pamphlets), other than Hugh Nibley's early apologetic essays and a few other items, there were few, if any, genuinely scholarly or even nonscholarly responses to either sectarian or secular critics. Instead, there was, as there continues to be now, both a large and often lackluster devotional literature and also a thriving and sometimes impressive Latter-day Saint historiography, the quality of which seems to be improving. However, if we can believe one report, little of what has been written since 1950 by Latter-day Saint historians has been focused on defending the faith and the Saints.¹¹¹ There are several reasons for this lacuna in recent LDS historiography.

First, LDS historians have rightly tended to view the sectarian brand of anti-Mormonism as thoroughly contemptible. They have also tended to see this literature and the movement behind it as entirely unworthy of any of their critical attention despite whatever damage it might be doing to the faith of the Saints and despite or because of the quirky personalities involved. However, historians thrive on little known or archival materials, and there is a wealth of such sectarian anti-Mormon literature. And yet, despite the abundance of textual materials upon which to draw in telling its story, virtually no attention has been given to this literature and consequently to the individuals and agencies that produce and market such material. It would, on this assessment, be a step backward to give attention to sectarian anti-Mormons or the literature they generate. In addition, until 1989 there was no venue in which scholars, even when so disposed, could publish responses to either sectarian or secular anti-Mormonism.

Second, it seems that an entire generation of Latter-day Saint historians has been taught to eschew controversy, and accordingly they tend to avoid polemics even in defense of the faith. Walker, Whittaker, and Allen have argued that "instead of defending or attacking LDS faith claims—one of the major characteristics of nineteenth-century Mormon historiography—the new historians [that is, those who began to publish after 1950] were more interested in examining the Mormon past in the hope of understanding it—and understanding

111. Walker, Whittaker, and Allen, *Mormon History*, 61.

themselves.”¹¹² This opinion may be extreme, but something like it seems to still be at work among historians.

Third, since Latter-day Saint historians belong to a kind of club that includes those outside or on the fringes of the circle of faith, responding to the secular variety of anti-Mormonism seems to have posed a special problem for them, since to do so would likely have led to criticism of colleagues or associates with whom they desire to maintain friendships. In addition, to do so would have involved unwanted, uncomfortable confrontations with those who entertain revisionist ideology and who often have been in control or heavily involved in publishing venues such as *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, and Signature Books.¹¹³

But events beyond the control of Latter-day Saint historians made their situation somewhat awkward. Mark Hofmann’s sensational “discoveries” in the 1980s, which eventually turned out to be forgeries, spawned a literature highly critical of Joseph Smith and the crucial founding theophanies, as well as of the Book of Mormon. When Hofmann was eventually exposed as a forger who was covertly pursuing a secular anti-Mormon agenda, critics on the margins of the Mormon intellectual community merely made some adjustments and continued their attacks as if nothing much had happened. Some venues, of course, were keen to publish such literature. Signature Books was and continues to be preeminent among these publishing houses.¹¹⁴

Shortly after the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* was launched in 1989, Daniel C. Peterson expressed his willingness to facilitate the publication of a literature that would be “at once genuinely scholarly and authentically Latter-day Saint.”¹¹⁵ In addition, he also

112. Ibid.

113. Critics of the church seem to recognize and exploit for their own purposes the overall ideological orientation of these publishing venues. See, for example, the remarks about *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* by the Ostlings in their *Mormon America*, especially 352–63.

114. An instructive example is the recent publication by Signature Books of Palmer’s tendentious *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*. For twenty years, Palmer, while employed by CES, had been covertly working on the manuscript for a book that was initially spawned by the confusion generated by Mark Hofmann’s forgeries and his phony tales of a secret history hidden in the vault of the First Presidency. For the details, see Midgley, “Prying into Palmer,” 368–76, 378–79.

115. Peterson, “Questions to Legal Answers,” vii.

opened the pages of this *Review* to competent responses to both sectarian and secular anti-Mormon literature. Thus the primary difference between the 1980s and now is that for fifteen years there has been a venue willing to publish competent, scholarly responses to attacks on the Church of Jesus Christ. In both word and deed Peterson indicated that scholars interested in providing genuinely competent responses to the full range of anti-Mormon literature would henceforth have a venue in which to publish. This development has not pleased dissidents or cultural Mormons and former Saints—and least of all those at Signature Books; nor has it thrilled those few sectarian critics of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon who have bothered to acquaint themselves with recent scholarly LDS literature. To this point, anti-Mormons have responded to this unanticipated development primarily by ignoring the relevant literature.

Prior to the advent of the *Review*, critics may have anticipated pounding away with impunity at the foundations of the faith of the Saints. This may have been true of Signature Books, which got started nearly a decade earlier than this periodical. The publication of the *Review* changed all of that. By 1991, those at Signature Books could see that the books they published would receive much unwanted attention in its pages. In an effort to thwart the open and honest discussion of books containing, among other things, attacks on the Book of Mormon, George Smith had his attorney threaten FARMS¹¹⁶ over review essays that had appeared that were critical of a collection of essays edited by Dan Vogel.¹¹⁷ Waterman, an apologist for Signature Books, then claimed that “Signature was accused of being . . . ‘Korihor Press,’ a label originally applied to the publishing firm by a BYU religion professor in a book review.”¹¹⁸ What Stephen Robinson actually wrote is that “Korihor’s back, and this time he’s got a printing

116. See *ibid.*, ix–xi, for the relevant details.

117. See Stephen E. Robinson, review of *The Word of God*, ed. Dan Vogel, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 312–18; and perhaps also Louis Midgley, “More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 261–311.

118. Waterman, “A Little Something for Everyone,” 4.

press.”¹¹⁹ According to Waterman, this “incident sparked rumors of a lawsuit; according to Signature staff their attorney merely asked for an apology.”¹²⁰

Apparently a bit embarrassed by their effort at legal intimidation, the Signature Books staff downplay the ploy. Why was an apology necessary, since what Robinson said, in his pithy way, was simply true? An apology for what? Robinson demonstrated parallels between the assumptions at work in many of the essays included in Vogel’s collection and the program advanced anciently by Korihor. Are we now to be forbidden from employing the powerful symbols found in the Book of Mormon (for example, Korihor, the other anti-Christ, or even that expression itself) when we confront the world in which we currently live? This episode ended in a slight clarification of the language used in advertising the issue of the *Review* in which Robinson’s essay appeared, but no apology for what Robinson or other reviewers had written.

In one of his more memorable introductions to this *Review*, Peterson described this effort to silence criticism of attacks being published by Signature Books on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.¹²¹ Subsequently, there have been a number of similar and related skirmishes between secular critics of the Church of Jesus Christ and those who publish under the FARMS imprint.

One instructive instance of what amounts to censorship involved Orson Scott Card, who previously published with Signature Books and had, in better times, even served on its editorial board. He had published an essay in *Sunstone* in which he defended “the prophet’s sole authority to determine whether homosexuality is or is not a sin in the eyes of the Church. Signature’s reaction was to threaten to withdraw from distributing *Sunstone* unless they stopped publishing me.”¹²² “Their agenda was clear. You can attack the church under Signature’s aegis, but heaven help you if you dare to defend the Church.”¹²³

119. Robinson, review of *The Word of God*, 312.

120. Waterman, “A Little Something for Everyone,” 4.

121. Peterson, “Questions to Legal Answers,” viii–lxxvi.

122. Card to Midgley, 14 April 2004, 2.

123. *Ibid.* Though many at Signature Books seem appalled by plural marriage, they seem especially sensitive to criticisms of homosexuality.

It is, of course, unnecessary to review all the details of these earlier untoward efforts at intimidation and censorship other than to indicate that there has been an ongoing campaign by the Signature Books staff to marginalize or otherwise discredit those who publish with FARMS.¹²⁴ And the fact is that we are once again faced with a spate of essays and books, many of which are written by those who were once Latter-day Saints but who have come to reject and attack Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. These books are often published by or linked in some way to Signature Books.¹²⁵

Signature Books is hostile in several ways to those who are at all critical of the things they publish. This can be seen not only in some of the books they publish,¹²⁶ but also in the unseemly attack posted on the Signature Books Web site entitled “Why I No Longer Trust the *FARMS Review of Books*.”¹²⁷ This essay was originally read at a Sunstone conference in Salt Lake City. John Hatch, its author, was part-way through undergraduate work in history at the University of Utah when he launched his attack on FARMS.¹²⁸ He was soon rewarded (1) by having his essay posted on the Signature Books Web site and (2) by then being employed by Signature Books to put together an anthology of essays on the Book of Mormon. But when that project failed, he was shifted to editing the diaries of Anthon H. Lund,¹²⁹ and

124. Let me repeat again, so that I will not be misunderstood: no one that I am aware of has claimed or implied that everything published by Signature Books lacks merit or that all the titles they publish are overtly critical of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, or paint the Church of Jesus Christ, either blatantly or covertly, in dark colors.

125. Smith Research Associates is one of George Smith’s foundations through which he funds anti-Mormon research. Occasionally a book is released collaboratively by both Smith Research Associates and Signature Books. Works published by Smith Research Associates are marketed though Signature Books. For details, see www.signaturebooks.com/faq.htm (accessed 24 April 2004).

126. See especially D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), passim.

127. See John Hatch, “Why I No Longer Trust the *FARMS Review of Books*,” posted at www.signaturebooks.com/sigstories2.htm#Farms (accessed 24 April 2004).

128. Every item in Hatch’s criticism was answered by Daniel Peterson in “QnA,” the editor’s introduction to the *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): xi–xxi.

129. John P. Hatch, ed., *Danish Apostle: The Diaries of Anthon H. Lund*, forthcoming in October 2004 from Signature Books. See www.signaturebooks.com/danish.htm (accessed 24 April 2004).

(3) he was hired as managing editor of *Sunstone* and also assigned to coordinate their symposia.¹³⁰

A “Great Debt”?

Elsewhere I have argued that at least some criticisms of the Church of Jesus Christ seem providential, if one is of a pious disposition.¹³¹ Critics may even do the Saints a service.

For example, Fawn Brodie’s criticisms of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon sent a generation of historians back to the sources and also stimulated a massive and continuing rediscovery of the Book of Mormon by the Saints. This sort of thing is the desirable, though unintended, consequence of various efforts to pull the Church of Jesus Christ from its crucial historical foundations. By attacking the faith, critics may actually help direct our attention back to those foundations and away from the charming fads and fashions floating around in the dominant culture. Also, despite the tragic losses caused by such assaults—and they are real losses—some anti-Mormon literature ends up focusing and strengthening the faith of the Saints and thereby inadvertently assists in building the kingdom.

Our critics may thus help remind the Saints that the genuine work of the Holy Spirit takes us into a world pulsing with divine power—one in which the heavens are not closed, one in which signs and wonders are still present, and one not unlike that found in our scriptures and also in the founding events upon which our faith ultimately rests. Critics thus help force the Saints to take seriously the crucial founding events and texts, which unfortunately we otherwise may trivialize or neglect. Our critics oblige us to face matters that, given our highly secularized world, we tend to downplay, ignore, or turn into conventional sentimentalities.

130. He is reported to be continuing his education in history at the University of Utah and “at the moment researching the life of LDS president George Albert Smith.” See www.signaturebooks.com/danish.htm#Hatch (accessed 24 April 2004).

131. See, for example, Louis Midgley, “The Legend and Legacy of Fawn Brodie,” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/1 (2001): 69–70.

Sterling McMurrin liked what he saw being published by his friend, George D. Smith. He thought that “through his company, Signature Books, he and others have made great contributions to the understanding of Mormon history and sociology. The Mormon church really owes them a great debt of gratitude for what they have done and are doing, but it’s a debt,” he guessed, “that will probably never be acknowledged.”¹³² Should we be indebted to George Smith and Signature Books for the publication of attacks on the crucial historical foundations of the faith of the Saints? I cannot, of course, speak for the church or its leaders, but it seems appropriate to acknowledge what McMurrin called a “great debt.” Some of the literature published by Signature Books may have some unintended desirable consequences. McMurrin was probably right about George Smith and Signature Books, but in a way that he probably did not have in mind. We can thank at least some of our critics, both sectarian and secular, for helping to maintain the faith.

In addition, we also thereby have an explanation for the shape and contour of the battles that have been raging for at least the last few decades along the Wasatch Front. This expression is, of course, a common designation for the area in Utah on the west flank of the Wasatch Mountains along which there is now virtually a solid array of subdivisions and shopping malls stretching from Brigham City on the north to Santaquin on the south, with Salt Lake City at its center. The term also appears to signal something more ominous—a kind of war zone in which the faith and practice of Latter-day Saints is contested by both secular and sectarian anti-Mormons. Recently, from the sectarian side, the focus has been on Main Street Plaza in Salt Lake City, where so-called street preachers, as well as those representing the Utah Gospel Ministries and Alpha and Omega Ministries, have carried on leafleting and protesting, in sometimes rowdy and obscene ways, sometimes on church property and even directly in front of the Salt Lake Temple. The protests have not been limited to preachers but have included one book publisher.

132. McMurrin, *Matters of Conscience*, 361.

Servicing a Client

One can get an idea of the extent and dimensions of the secular side of this battle going on along the Wasatch Front by consulting the public relations materials posted by Signature Books on its own Web site.¹³³ The news items recorded there give an indication of the motivations and agenda of those at Signature Books. They are also part of a war waged against the faith of the Saints. Those materials seem calculated to signal what potential buyers can expect to find in at least some of those books. Signature Books likes to celebrate the fact that a number of the authors they publish are dissidents, have been in battles with the Brethren, and have been excommunicated or had their memberships canceled. In addition, in an effort to sell the books they publish, Signature Books not only takes advantage of controversy surrounding the authors they publish, but also at times takes steps to generate such scandals. The recent marketing of *American Apocrypha*, an anthology of essays highly critical of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, illustrates this tactic. This sales campaign involved Priddis and Tom Murphy, one of the authors recently published by Signature Books.

Murphy has explained what led to widespread publicity over possible church discipline for his attack on the Book of Mormon that appears in *American Apocrypha*. Instead of treating his encounter with his stake president as confidential, he consciously made a decision to “go public” and thereby generate as much adverse publicity for the church as he possibly could. His intention was to use widespread adverse publicity to force his stake president to back down. This is his version of these events:

After I had expressed my intention to *go public*, Ron Priddis of Signature Books forwarded my letter to Richard Ostling of the Associated Press who forwarded it to Patty Henetz [a reporter eager for a juicy story]. Ultimately, I must take full

133. At www.signaturebooks.com/sigstories.htm#something (accessed 24 April 2004), see “News Stories about Signature Books and Its Authors.”

responsibility for my desire to go *public* and for agreeing to the interview [with Henetz]. I did so because I believe that the best way to deal with *ecclesiastical abuse* is to expose it.¹³⁴

The expression *ecclesiastical abuse* was apparently coined by Lavina Anderson, herself a former Latter-day Saint, to describe efforts by church leaders at any level to counsel, admonish, correct, or discipline dissidents or apostates of whatever variety. Her complaints about the Brethren and about various instances of church disciplinary actions eventually led in 1993 to considerable publicity over the so-called September Six. Five of the six, some of whom were marginal at best in the Latter-day Saint intellectual community, were supported by well-organized public protests staged at stake centers or at Latter-day Saint temples. At least a few of these protests involved “candlelight vigils.” The whole point of such antics was to draw the local TV stations and the press, who would be given carefully prepared press releases so that they could easily file their stories.

Steven Clark, a well-known former Latter-day Saint as well as anti-Mormon agitator, was not, as had been rumored, the one who launched the protests supporting Tom Murphy. It was Murphy himself, through his publisher, who “leaked” his story to the press. His actions generated widespread publicity about his problem with his stake president. It is true that, in his own words, he

spoke with Steven Clark and many other people before my interview with my stake president. Steven Clark played a role in organizing the candlelight vigils in Salt Lake City and elsewhere but Kathy Worthington, who[m] I’ve never met, played an even larger role. My students at Edmonds Community College, though, were the first to suggest a candlelight vigil. When Steven Clark suggested the idea to me later I put him in contact with my students.¹³⁵

134. Thomas W. Murphy, open letter dated 9 January 2003, emphasis added. This letter can be found at www.tungate.com/murphy.htm (accessed 24 April 2004). The letter is item #23 in the collections of materials assembled in support of Murphy by Mel Tungate.

135. Ibid.

Priddis and his associates at Signature Books, it seems, actually launched their Murphy publicity through a number of press releases intended to help sell their recently released book critical of the Book of Mormon¹³⁶ by generating or capitalizing on controversy about one of the book's essayists, Murphy. With the help of those at Signature Books, Murphy provided the stuffing for sensational and often distorted news items appearing in the popular press around the world. Priddis and his fellow employees assisted in organizing protests against the Church of Jesus Christ, one of which actually took place in front of the Salt Lake Temple on Main Street Plaza.

Much of the publicity given to what should have been an entirely confidential matter was generated by Signature Books to sell a book critical of the church. But there is more—Priddis paraded on Main Street Plaza in front of the Salt Lake Temple. He was there to protest an essentially confidential matter of church discipline; he was photographed carrying two signs at this protest: one read, “Thomas Murphy Burned at the Stake Center,” and the other, “And it came to pass that no Lamanite DNA was found throughout all the Land.”¹³⁷

The use by Signature Books of widespread publicity about what should be confidential matters, and the staged candlelight vigils, began a decade earlier with well-orchestrated and publicized protests over church discipline of the so-called September Six. This is the mythology being paraded by dissidents who hope that they can force the church to cave in by protests and other adverse publicity. In addition, Murphy's students may have spontaneously invented the idea of candlelight protests at Latter-day Saint temples by those hostile to the church. They

136. See Vogel and Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha*.

137. See twelve photos in “Murphy Supporters Rally on Main Street in Downtown Salt Lake City, December 8, 2002,” part of a larger item entitled “Thomas Murphy—Lamanite DNA News,” www.salamandersociety.org/news/ (accessed 27 December 2003; apparently this Web page is no longer available). Ron Priddis was featured in several of the photos. The caption on one photo indicates that Priddis “rallies on his clients [*sic*] behalf.” Priddis is described as the “Signature Books publisher of Thomas Murphy’s ‘Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,’” which is found in *American Apocrypha*, 47–77. One of these photos was also published in “Murphy Supporters Protest on Main Street Plaza,” *Sunstone*, December 2002, 73.

also may have been coached by Murphy about the September Six and the associated protests, as well as about the alleged “ecclesiastical abuse” by church leaders presumably intended to frustrate free inquiry in the untrammelled search for truth and so forth.

It would be nice to view things from the point of view of Murphy’s stake president, Mathew Latimer. In an unusual move—which I applaud for various reasons, one of which is that it clears me of the lie being circulated by Murphy’s supporters that I “turned him in”—Latimer has written to Murphy to explain exactly what his concern was in his case:

As you know, your papers are publicly available, and you have openly discussed these matters in several venues. While it may be intriguing to think that a member of the so-called “intellectual community” turned you in, I can assure you my involvement in this matter arose out of much more mundane circumstances. In the end, our discussions were *never about suppressing academic freedom or honest inquiry*—despite what you and your supporters may believe. It was about encouraging repentance, correcting error, and, hopefully, rekindling faith in Christ. For me, it remains so.¹³⁸

Anti-Mormonism

In English, following a pattern initially set down in Greek, the commonly accepted way of indicating that one is against or in opposition to something, or that one is speaking or writing against something, hence contradicting, disputing, rivaling, and so forth, is by adding the prefix *anti-* to a word. To see just how common this linguistic habit is in English and how ordinary and useful the words are that are formed in this way, one should consult the *Oxford English Dictionary*. There one finds listed and explained an enormous number of English words apparently

138. Mathew Latimer to Thomas Murphy, “Re: Dispelling Rumors,” e-mail, 21 March 2004. Murphy has reproduced this letter in his “Inventing Galileo,” *Sunstone*, March 2004, 60 n. 4. Murphy still seems to believe that someone must have turned him in. Those caught up in the mythology of September Six must find some evil agent out there whose goal is to get “intellectuals” and put an end to free inquiry.

formed after about 1600 by adding the prefix *anti-* to various words to express opposition or rivalry, to identify a process of the opposite or contrary kind, to recognize a party or an individual as being against or opposed to something, or to point out a product or agent that strives to inhibit, limit, or counteract something.¹³⁹

While the designations *Mormon*, *Mormonites*, and *Mormonism* were widespread in the early 1830s, the expression *anti-Mormon* was initially used as a part of the self-identification of those opposed to the faith of the Saints. The first published instance in which the prefix *anti-* was attached to the word *Mormon* seems to be the *Anti-Mormon Almanac, for 1842*, an obscure twenty-two-page pamphlet published in 1841.¹⁴⁰ What is a bit surprising is how long it took for those opposed to the faith of the Saints to use the expression *anti-Mormon* to identify their opposition to the faith of the Saints.

It should be noted that there is nothing unusual about the labels *anti-Mormon* or *anti-Mormonism*. Nothing in the prefix *anti-* implies that those individuals or agencies linked to this compound word advocate or participate in violence or are mean-spirited, unsophisticated, evil, irrational, and so forth. When an individual or agency either self-identifies or is identified by the Saints as *anti-Mormon*, what is meant is merely that they oppose, dispute, or are against the well-established beliefs of the Saints. Hence it is amusing to see people scrambling to avoid the label, especially when they publish essays and books in which they clearly oppose the crucial core beliefs of the Saints. There is nothing in the prefix *anti-* that would justify limiting the use of the labels *anti-Mormon* or *anti-Mormonism* to the antics of street preachers, while exempting those peacefully leafleting or otherwise protesting the faith of the Saints or those who operate sectarian outreaches or ministries in opposition to the faith of the Saints. And, likewise, nothing in the prefix would exempt secular opposition to the faith of the Saints, such as is occasionally published by Signature Books, from inclusion under those labels.

139. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2004 [1989]), s.v. prefix *anti-*.

140. *Anti-Mormon Almanac, for 1842* (New York: Health Book Store, [1841]).

No matter how mild or blatant their attacks on the Church of Jesus Christ, some critics are inclined to express surprise and alarm, even to be deeply offended, when they and their essays are identified as anti-Mormon. For example, in the paperback edition of his *One Nation under Gods*, Richard Abanes, even with his sense of decency and decorum and despite his obvious indifferent preparation for expressing a genuinely informed opinion on the Mormon past, continues to insist that “the history of Mormonism is rife with nefarious deeds, corruption, vice, and intolerance. So far the fruits of Mormonism have included lust, greed, theft, fraud, violence, murder, religious fanaticism, bribery, and racism.”¹⁴¹ Are these anti-Mormon sentiments? When we recall that the prefix *anti-* simply means “against” or “opposite” in opinion, practice, or sentiment, then the label *anti-Mormon* seems appropriate. The conclusions reached and sentiments expressed by both Abanes and the author of the *Anti-Mormon Almanac* are clearly in opposition to the faith of the Saints. One need not intend physical violence against the Saints or their property to be staunchly anti-Mormon.

It should not be difficult for secular, as well as evangelical, critics of Latter-day Saints and their faith to figure out why the Saints consider their writings—and in some instances their tapes, videos, and other public and private activities (including costly nuisance litigation)—stridently anti-Mormon.¹⁴² On the facing page of the post-script added to the paperback edition of his book, with his ebullience

141. See Richard Abanes, *One Nation under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 436. It is noteworthy that the subtitle to the *Anti-Mormon Almanac, for 1842*, reads as follows: *Containing, besides the usual astronomical calculations a variety of interesting and important facts, showing the treasonable tendency, and the wicked imposture of that great delusion, advocated by a sect, lately risen up in the United States, calling themselves Mormons, or Latter Day Saints; with quotations from their writings and from public document no. 189, published by order of Congress, February 15, 1841, showing that Mormonism authorizes the crimes of theft, robbery, high treason, and murder; together with the number of the sect, their views, character of their leaders, &c., &c.* It seems that the conclusions set out by Abanes in 2003 are not all that different from those set out in 1841, when the label *anti-Mormon* seems to have been coined.

142. Abanes has been the target of such legal threats over plagiarism by a fellow anti-Mormon agitator. See cultlink.com/ar/abanes-frost.htm, cultlink.com/sentinel/Vangorden.htm, and cultlink.com/news/apr_2003_sentinel_eupdate.htm, for some of the details (accessed 27 April 2004).

showing, Abanes expressed amazement that some “faithful members of the LDS church” have characterized him as “an ‘anti-Mormon.’”¹⁴³ However, if his book is not anti-Mormon, then the label simply has no meaning whatsoever—there are not now and never have been anti-Mormons or anti-Mormonism, notwithstanding all the books and essays opposed to the faith of the Saints, and also the more flagrant persecution, protests, picketing, publishing of religious pornography, leafleting, legal action, mobs, and expulsions.

Evangelical critics who publish essays and books attacking the foundations of the faith of the Saints sometimes also pass out leaflets or protest when Latter-day Saint temples are dedicated. Recently, as previously noted, Main Street Plaza in Salt Lake City has been the focus for some of these protests—even on church property and directly in front of the Salt Lake Temple—by preachers who, among other things, sometimes file lawsuits against the Saints and the church. These people also regularly insist that they are not anti-Mormon.¹⁴⁴

Secular anti-Mormons are far more subtle than the sectarian variety. George Smith and his associates and employees may resent having their activities and some of the titles they publish viewed by the faithful as anti-Mormon. For personal, if not merely business purposes, they may not appreciate being themselves so labeled. But here is an irony. Priddis demonstrated on Main Street Plaza, presumably to sell one of the books just published by the press for which he works.

Is it then any wonder that Jan Shipps observes, “because Signature Books includes on its list *many works* that call parts of the canonized version of the LDS story into question, *some Latter-day Saints regard it as an anti-Mormon press*”?¹⁴⁵ It is, of course, also true that she thinks

143. Abanes, *One Nation under Gods*, 437.

144. See, for example, Kurt Van Gorden, “Missionaries Not ‘Anti-Mormon,’” *Christianity Today* 41/1 (1997): 15; and Alan W. Gomes, foreword to *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity*, by James R. White (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1997), 12. Gomes claims that “contrary to what some anti-evangelical Mormon critics may charge, Prof. White is no ‘anti-Mormon,’” adding that “if White truly were ‘anti-Mormon’ he would let them perish in their error.”

145. Jan Shipps, “Surveying the Mormon Image Since 1960,” in *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 119–20 n. 30, emphasis added.

that “this is a mistake,” since Signature Books, in her words, manifests a “willingness to publish alternative interpretations of the Mormon experience” that she thinks have “provided a richer picture of the LDS past than would otherwise be available.”¹⁴⁶

But the mistake seems to be hers. She is right about the disposition of those at Signature Books, but wrong in the conclusion she draws. One can, along with others in the Latter-day Saint scholarly community, desire better written, more accurate, more imaginative, more richly detailed accounts of the Latter-day Saint past. And one can applaud the significant steps that have been taken in this direction. And, of course, Signature Books, whatever its ideology, has played a modest but not crucial role in this. It is not every item on its list but the constant pounding away at the crucial founding events—that is, the attacks on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon—that has led to its being described as a dissenting, renegade press and being made a pariah. For the ideology it espouses, it has justifiably garnered the label *anti-Mormon*.

A Necessary Personal Disclaimer

By identifying the personal and ideological links between Signature Books and Prometheus Books—that is, between George Smith and Paul Kurtz and his humanist operations—the “common humanist perspective” found in many of the books published by Signature Books has been identified. This, of course, has not constituted a refutation of the ideology of the owner of Signature Book or the contents of the books published by the press he owns. My intent has not been to offer a refutation. Instead, I have told a story. My historical account is, as any sound history ought to be, grounded in textual evidences. These evidences are easily available but unfortunately little known. My account differs from both fiction and gossip by being supported by textual sources, which thereby constitute the evidence for its veracity. And what I have written is not an evasion of some intellectual issue; it

146. Ibid.

is not ad hominem since the motivations behind deeds, ideological or otherwise, are at the heart of intellectual history.