



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

---

Volume 17 | Number 1

Article 13

---

1-1-2005

### Assessing the Countercult

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

David M. Whitchurch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Holzapfel, Richard Neitzel and Whitchurch, David M. (2005) "Assessing the Countercult," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 17 : No. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol17/iss1/13>

This Miscellaneous is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** Assessing the Countercult

**Author(s)** Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and David M. Whitchurch

**Reference** *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 311-35.

**ISSN** 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

**Abstract** Review of *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult* (2003), by Douglas E. Cowan.

## ASSESSING THE COUNTERCULT

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and David M. Whitchurch

*Richard Neitzel Holzapfel has a PhD in history from the University of California, Irvine. He is a professor of church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.*

*He has published "Book of Mormon, Opposition to," in Book of Mormon Reference Companion, gen. ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 129–32.*

*David M. Whitchurch received his PhD in educational psychology from Brigham Young University and is an associate professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.*

In the foreword to *Bearing False Witness?* Jeffrey Hadden indicates that Douglas Cowan's interest in sectarian anti-Mormonism, and also in the Christian countercult movement in which it is now embedded, came as a result of his own life experience. Following his training at St. Andrew's Theological College, Cowan was ordained and sent to his first assignment for the United Church of Canada. His assignment was in Alberta, Canada. Having been raised on Vancouver Island, Cowan was unfamiliar with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In an effort to be prepared for an interfaith dialogue with the Latter-day Saints in Cardston and Magrath, he went to a Christian bookstore looking for some literature on Mormonism. He walked out of the store that day with one of the most popular anti-Mormon books of the period, Ed Decker and Dave Hunt's *The God Makers*.<sup>1</sup>

Armed with this book, Cowan eventually made his way to southern Alberta. Of course, what he had read about the Latter-day Saints and what he actually experienced living among them in the southwest

---

1. Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, *The God Makers* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1984). This is the original book version of a scurrilous, anti-Mormon video shown widely in conservative Protestant churches.

Review of Douglas E. Cowan. *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. xiii + 255 pp., with references and index. \$72.95.

corner of Alberta proved impossible to reconcile. His curiosity aroused, he began to collect other countercult materials in an effort to see if similar false or misleading historical information, categories, analogies, and interpretations were being employed to describe other targets of the countercult. He was hooked on the countercult. At the University of Calgary, he completed a doctoral dissertation on the subject which he has now turned into a book.<sup>2</sup>

Cowan has consulted much of the vast literature produced by the increasingly large and diverse countercult movement. He has provided cogent categories with which to compare and contrast the literature generated by various individuals and groups engaged in countercult activity. He also provides several important conclusions about the countercult in general and anti-Mormonism in particular. His is the first general introduction to the Christian countercult. He clearly identifies the ideology and dynamics of the movement.

Countercultists, Cowan demonstrates, claim they are busy *warning* the Protestant faithful away from the false claims of dangerous “new religious movements,” and also *rescuing* those who have been drawn into these groups. These countercult individuals and agencies also claim that they are attempting to *convert* lifelong members of these groups to “historic Christianity.” Cowan argues that, whatever their vast differences, all countercult individuals and agencies are engaged in what he describes as boundary maintenance. He demonstrates that the Christian countercult seeks to reinforce and defend its own conservative Protestant worldview in the face of what it pictures as various threats posed by an ever increasingly pluralistic religious landscape in America.

Cowan’s early experience among the Cardston Latter-day Saints eventually led him to examine “hundreds of books, pamphlets, newsletters, journals, audio- and videocassettes, and Web sites” (p. 13). In addition, he obtained personal information from and about individuals

---

2. *Bearing False Witness?* is clearly the result of much simplifying, winnowing, and refinement of Cowan’s dissertation. It may, however, still be difficult for those not already familiar with some of the jargon of sociology. For this and other reasons, Cowan’s book may be especially bewildering for countercultists. See an earlier review by Louis Midgley, “Cowan on the Countercult,” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 395–403.

and organizations that are at the forefront of the countercult movement. As Cowan synthesized this information, he sought to discover the mind-set and practices of those involved in the countercult movement, to account for the development of countercultists, as well as their interaction with each other and their operational tactics. He wished to figure out exactly how the countercult views other religions. He asks “what is the countercult’s core identity? . . . And, how does it constitute the adversarial Other in the face of whom that identity finds meaning?” (p. 13).

Cowan makes a clear distinction between a diverse and widely studied secular anticult movement and what is essentially a recent conservative Christian activity now widely known as the countercult (p. 15). Unlike the somewhat better-known secular anticult movement, this fundamentalist/evangelical effort at internal boundary maintenance seems to be based on the belief, according to Jeffrey Hadden, that the world is full of “false gods, demons, [and] evil spirits” (p. xi). As a result, the battle the countercultists are engaged in is often seen by them as spiritual warfare against unseen powers and forces (see pp. 22, 38–39, and elsewhere). And when cast in this light, the targeted human agents are then easily and routinely mocked, ridiculed, and, in some cases, demonized. Bearing false witness against one’s enemies is often excused in the heat of battle. All of this follows a very old and unfortunate pattern among Christians.

As with earlier unfortunate instances of overly zealous efforts to stamp out what was understood as heresy within Christianity—one thinks of the various inquisitions, or of the urge to fight the enemy without (for instance, Jews living in Christian Europe or Muslims living in the Holy Land)—some of these current endeavors engender, whether consciously intended or not, hatred, arrogance, avarice, ill-will, persecution, and other obviously non-Christian attitudes and practices.<sup>3</sup>

---

3. For a detailed discussion among sociologists of the relevant terminology, see *Bearing False Witness?* 24–28.

## Perspectives on the Christian Countercult

Cowan's well-researched assessment of the countercult is divided into three main sections: (1) "Perspectives on the Christian Countercult" (pp. 1–60); (2) "Typologizing the Countercult" (pp. 63–130); and (3) "Countercult Apologetics" (pp. 133–211). A major portion of his book sets out what he considers the crucial underlying theoretical background of the countercult movement. His sociological interpretations provide for the Latter-day Saint a powerful new way of understanding the behavior of contemporary fundamentalist/evangelical anti-Mormon individuals and agencies, as well as reasons why such organizations continue to proliferate and seemingly prosper. In addition, his analyses should be of interest to serious students of social behavior. However, the terminology and theoretical detail may overwhelm some readers. For some, reading Cowan's book might be compared to a novice reading Shakespeare.<sup>4</sup> Understanding and appreciating his treatment of the countercult will, in all likelihood, demand a serious effort from the reader. Those who pay the price to master the terminology and understand Cowan's explanations will reap large dividends. They will be fitted with better ways of comprehending the countercult movement in general and the motives and ideology of that slice of the countercult dedicated to undermining the faith of Latter-day Saints.

Although Cowan often refers to the Church of Jesus Christ, he also examines a wide range of countercult attacks on alternative faiths or "new religions" or "cults." (The movement has adopted for itself the name *countercult* despite some misgivings about the use of the label *cult*.) In addition, Cowan discusses how the same countercult

---

4. An example of Cowan's "thick" language can be seen in the following remark: "When a social structure evolves in which relatively open choice is available with respect to the particular construction of reality residents may inhabit without significant social sanction, specific conceptual mechanisms are required to maintain a reasoned inhabitation in one reality over another" (p. 6). Fortunately, Cowan often includes clear explanations of such scholarly jargon. To the just stated postulate he adds: "Put differently, there needs to be ongoing reinforcement that the choice to live as a Christian, for example, is superior to all other possible choices. However, the option for one's own subjective reality also locates the individual *outside* of other subjective realities. Clarifying which universe one *does* inhabit also declares which universe (or universes) one *does not* and, by implication, *ought not* inhabit" (pp. 6–7).

groups that criticize the Saints and the Jehovah's Witnesses often also assail Roman Catholicism and Islam. The countercult manifests far more concern for such manifestations of faith than for deviations within Protestant ranks such as Protestant liberalism or the excesses of an ever-growing and proliferating Pentecostal movement. Cowan provides numerous insights into why, on the margins of conservative Protestantism, there are those who work hard to establish and maintain their own identity and credibility by bearing false witness against others.

In addition, participation in countercult behavior achieves a two-fold purpose—what Cowan, borrowing from sociological literature, calls therapy and nihilation (p. 48). He indicates that these “do not function as opposites, but rather as dependent aspects of a larger cognitive process and praxis. Therapy is one component in the process of reality-maintenance; nihilation is one means by which a therapeutic model of reality-maintenance realizes its objective” (p. 48). By challenging someone's worldview, “the *pathologic* and *diagnostic* functions of the conceptual machineries of universe-maintenance begin to operate” (p. 51). In other words, reading and teaching countercult doctrine not only serves as an attempt to disrupt and marginalize those with divergent religious views, but it also seeks to strengthen, fortify, and deepen the beliefs of countercult participants in the legitimacy and reality of their own worldview. Nihilation works as a simple, yet often unrecognized, boundary maintenance technique within countercult cosmology that helps to perpetuate antisect polemics.

The concept of boundary maintenance especially makes sense in light of the fact that the majority of countercult books, pamphlets, brochures, and media material are marketed to Protestants—they are not aimed at the enemy but are sold for self-consumption (p. 11). The anti-Mormon literature that lines the shelves of Christian bookstores does not typically end up in the homes of Latter-day Saints; rather, fundamentalist/evangelical Protestants purchase the material and consume it in an effort to allay concerns about what they are told is a dire threat posed by the Saints. This literature is not purchased to better understand their Latter-day Saint acquaintances or to “save”

those who have had the “unfortunate” experience of coming into contact with the Church of Jesus Christ.

The evidence for the effectiveness of boundary maintenance as a socializing agent can be seen in numerous everyday occurrences. Consider, for example, how boundary maintenance expresses itself outside of religion. Competing schools frequently involve themselves in boundary maintenance when students revert to name-calling or finger-pointing during competitive activities. Those caught up in such caustic rhetoric often develop a heightened sense of school pride, personal belonging, and institutional allegiance. Interestingly, this type of boundary maintenance even occurs when the verbal abuse is unintentional and kept to a minimum. In another, more complicated, scenario, think back to the recent events between the United States of America, France, and Germany just prior to the war in Iraq. Individual political bias and personal frustrations toward those blinded to *our* interpretation of the unfolding events—regardless of what those beliefs might be—only served to intensify and, in all likelihood, strengthen and justify our own political views. This same socializing dynamic takes place within the religious realm. Active (or latent, passive) aggression against those with differing religious viewpoints tends to reinforce the worldview of both the attacked and the attacker. An obvious benefit, then, of involving people in countercult apologetics is membership retention. An added bonus is the socializing of new participants, as they become ardent “defenders of the faith.” Outward hostility also serves to deepen the religious views of those under siege—especially those with stronger beliefs. In light of such understanding, those with moderate or fragile opinions are the most vulnerable to countercult efforts.

Not surprisingly, countercultists require little or no real provocation to assail those with different views. Cowan argues that

the mere thought that there are religious realities that people inhabit quite happily, and in which they do not accept the legitimacy of the exclusive religious claims on which the very existence of evangelical/fundamentalist reality is predicated, is enough to provoke the countercult response. This disso-



nance becomes even more pronounced when they inhabit a counterdefinition that is perceived to be in diametric opposition to that of the countercult. (p. 47)

Nonetheless, some sort of rationale to drive the movement into expending so much time and energy to stop what countercultists see as heretical sprawl is required.

Cowan provides several useful explanations of how countercult cosmology justifies such an active stance against those with competing religious views. We will examine only one of these. He argues that,

As a religious economy opens, and the need for maintenance and reinforcement of particular religious meaning structures increases, to the extent possible religious actors will seek to locate the validity of those structures within an external (i.e., objective) authority. This proposition anchors the most common attribute of Christian countercult apologetics: that the Bible is the unique and external authority by which all other religious traditions, beliefs, and behavior must be measured and ultimately judged, an authority that is inerrant, infallible, and insuperable. (pp. 30–31)

Therefore, Cowan shows, by accepting the inerrancy of the Bible, all other views outside of this belief must be wrong and even demonic. Thus the Bible not only authorizes the onslaught against religious expansionism, it also supplies internal resolve on the part of participants to aggressively censure anyone with different beliefs.

Inflexibility and rigidity are a direct consequence of this foundational stance. Cowan demonstrates that “the Christian countercult often generates a world arranged with little regard for complexity or nuance, a world reduced to the uncomplicated comparison of carefully selected texts, the ‘simplicity of essences’ is itself essential to its organizing cosmology” (p. 34). Such a protective stance allows for a seemingly powerful defense of their own worldview. If someone finds fault with such interpretations, then “that person [or group] either (1) is an active participant in the conspiracy or (2) has been deceived by those who are

active participants” (p. 40). Those who refuse to embrace the ideology of the countercultist, which is presumably set forth in the scriptures, simply fail to understand the authoritative nature of the word of God and have been deceived by Satan, the “father of lies”—the “great deceiver.”

Countercultists fortify their position by rejecting anyone who fails to interpret scripture as they do. Religious groups that vary from the approved religious orthodoxy are seen as enemies of the truth. “That there may be competing interpretations of contested passages,” Cowan notes, “rarely enters into the discussion” (p. 58). Such beliefs thrive in countercult apologetics. It should be noted that no countercult argument even remotely suggests divine special revelation as a means for establishing the correct interpretation of the scriptures. How could it, given a closed canon!

Any appeal to extra-biblical revelation, for example—whether *The Book of Mormon*, or a new version of the Bible such as the *New World Translation* (Jehovah’s Witnesses)—presents a significant problem for countercult apologists. Likewise, doctrinal and ritual differences—from the place of the Temple in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the denial of the Trinity by Jehovah’s Witnesses—are enough to render a group permanently suspect in the eyes of the countercult. While opinions vary on *how* to confront groups such as the Latter-day Saints or Jehovah’s Witnesses, the evangelical countercult is all but united in its condemnation of them as heretical. (pp. 51–52)

Justification for such a position relies on “tradition.” Of course, Cowan points out that longevity of belief does not necessarily make it true. If such were the case, then many religions could vie for religious supremacy, including Zoroastrianism, paganism, Stoicism, Judaism, Islam, or even varieties of atheism. Nonetheless, this argument is pervasive among those involved in countercult apologetics. No wonder

Joseph Smith spoke about the damning influences of religious tradition.<sup>5</sup> Is it any wonder that he thought that

their has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation it has been like splitting hemlock knots with a Corn dodger [hard-baked corn bread] for a wedge & a pumpkin for a beetle [hammer]. Even the Saints are slow to understand I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God, but we frequently see some of them after suffering all they have for the work of God will fly to peaces like glass as soon as anything Comes that is Contrary to their traditions, they Cannot stand the fire at all.<sup>6</sup>

### Typologizing the Countercult

In the second section of his book, Cowan briefly traces the historical background of the current countercult movement. He shows that as the nineteenth century drew to a close, it became evident to some conservative Protestants that the growth of the Church of Jesus Christ in the free market of religion provided in the United States made a host of alternative beliefs available to consumers. The realization of this competition soon threatened the security of Protestant evangelicals (pp. 63–64). In response to such growth, two wealthy oil barons at the beginning of the twentieth century funded the publication and free distribution of a tract that targeted Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and Roman Catholics (pp. 64–65).

---

5. Harold O. J. Brown, who is quoted extensively by Cowan, points out that believers hold that what they consider orthodoxy must be correct since it has been around for so long, even though Brown admits that "heresy often appears more prominently" in the first two Christian centuries (p. 56). See Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 5.

6. Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 319 (spelling as in original). A slightly edited version is also available in Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 331.

Other organized efforts soon followed. One of the most influential of these was begun by Walter Martin (1928–89). With the first publication in 1965 and eventual wide acceptance of his *Kingdom of the Cults*,<sup>7</sup> the countercult as we know it was born.<sup>8</sup> Cowan makes much of Martin’s shady background and credentials and indifferent understanding of those he attacked (see pp. 71–77). This discussion should be of special interest to Latter-day Saints. Well over a decade after his death, Martin remains somewhat of an enigma as he continues to be recognized as the father of countercult apologetics—even though his credentials have been successfully challenged and his statements regarding his being of direct descent from Brigham Young unequivocally proven false (pp. 71–76).

For Martin, anything that differed from his interpretation of Scripture was, ipso facto, suspect—at the very least heterodox and at most heretical. . . . Even though his ordination in the General Association of Regular Baptists was revoked in 1953, and his claims to ordination in both the American Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention are, at the very least, suspect,<sup>9</sup> he continues to declare . . . that “I am a Baptist minister.” (pp. 74–75)

Cowan provides useful background information on others involved in the countercult movement, including those on the most extreme end of the spectrum. He points to those who followed in Martin’s footsteps—including Bill Schnoebelen (pp. 79–80), Lori Boespflug, Bob Larson (pp. 80–86), Texe and Wanda Marrs (pp. 87–92), Constance Cumbey,

---

7. Walter Martin’s *Kingdom of the Cults* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1965) was republished in revised, corrected editions in 1977, 1985, and 1997. After a terrible internecine fight between Hank Hanegraaff, who took control of the lucrative Christian Research Institute upon Walter Martin’s death in 1989, and the Martin family, still another edition was published by Bethany House in 2003 with Ravi Zacharias serving as general editor rather than Hank Hanegraaff, who held that title in the 1997 edition.

8. It is reported in the 1997 edition of *Kingdom of the Cults* that Walter Martin “was fondly and respectfully known as known as ‘the father of Christian cult apologetics’” (p. 7).

9. Cowan quotes from Robert L. Brown and Rosemary Brown, “*They Lie in Wait to Deceive*”: A Study of Anti-Mormon Deception (Mesa, AZ: Brownsworth, 1986), 3:1–27.

and Dave Hunt—major exhibits of the more irrational and least academic end of the countercult spectrum. At this point in his argument, Cowan offers a useful typology of various strands of countercult activities (pp. 96–110). In addition, more than anyone else who has published on this topic, Cowan has the most complete and accurate understanding of how the countercult has moved into and made use of the Internet (see pp. 115–30).

Referring to Bob Larson and Ed Decker, Cowan argues that, “in an effort to accord their ministries more importance than might otherwise be the case, many countercult apologists regularly exaggerate both anecdotal atrocities and anecdotal miracles associated with their efforts” (p. 83). Many of the somewhat less than rational countercultists tend to interpret the scriptures in ways that allow them to warn people about the impending doom of nonbelievers. “Prophetic determinism,” according to Cowan,

plays two important roles in the countercult movement’s cognitive praxis: (1) it offers a reflexive framework by which the countercult apologist or reader can identify current events within the context of an inerrant Scripture, and at the same time reinforce belief in that same inerrancy; and (2) it furnishes explanations for those events that are rendered plausible only in the context of that framework. (p. 93)

Furthermore, Cowan examines the organizational structure of the countercult. There are individuals and agencies that range from large, wealthy “professional” organizations such as the Christian Research Institute and the Watchman Fellowship to “mom-and-pop, street-level ministries” (p. 97). Knowing the background, goals, and organizational structure of countercult groups serves as a helpful guide. This is especially the case for Latter-day Saints, who confront such groups. Cowan devotes an entire section to the “professional” countercult groups “in light of their stated organizational imperatives, especially as those imperatives impact U.S. constitutional guarantees of religious freedom” (p. 99; see 99–114). For example, speaking of the

Watchman Fellowship, a large countercult agency, Cowan argues that, from Jason Barker's perspective,<sup>10</sup>

dialogue is little more than a Trojan horse for mission. The purpose is to learn about target groups in order to make one's witnessing more effective—hardly the agenda [Leonard] Swidler had in mind. . . . As a whole, Barker's approach to interreligious dialogue seems less an honest attempt to engage those who believe differently than a somewhat artificial effort to put a positive spin on countercult apologetics through an appeal to the rhetoric of dialogue. (p. 109)<sup>11</sup>

With regard to modern technology, the Internet has exploded with Web pages devoted to anti-Mormon/antisept apologetics. Although many of these sites utilize the Internet as a way to dispense information about the faith of Latter-day Saints, others "function as cyberstorefronts, offering minimal online material but advertising the ministry's commercial print, video, and audio products. They participate in an information supermall, rather than an information superhighway" (p. 116). However, those that provide free access to information via the Internet purposely design Web pages so that search engines automatically queue up their sites. Anyone investigating almost any aspect of the Church of Jesus Christ is quickly flooded with anti-Mormon propaganda. Unfortunately, many of these agencies, especially of the mom-and-pop variety, have Web sites with minimal concern for the accuracy of their information. With so much misinformation and overt religious bias available, those actively engaged in sharing the message of the restoration must teach not only what they believe but also what they do not believe.

---

10. Jason Barker has had much to say about what he calls "interreligious dialogue." See Cowan for citations to his various essays in the *Watchman Expositor*, the Watchman Fellowship's newsletter (p. 224).

11. See Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20/1 (1983): 1-4.

### Cowan's Theory

One would expect, considering the focus of the book, to encounter the powerful word *cult*. The countercult is mentioned without an exact definition (see pp. ix–x). However, Cowan usually uses the term with a negative connotation. The notion of “countercult” suggests that there is a true “cult” perspective. In his foreword, Hadden argues that the dimension of “cult conflict, however, has largely been neglected by scholars over the past quarter-century. Here, the central focus is conflict regarding *correct beliefs* or doctrine” (p. x). “Christian countercult operates in two separate but related domains: apologetics and missiology” (p. 6). (Apologetics means attacking the faith of others, and missiology means witnessing to others of a different or no faith.) Cowan assumes that,

when a social structure evolves in which relatively open choice is available with respect to the particular construction of reality residents may inhabit without significant social sanction, specific conceptual mechanisms are required to maintain a reasoned inhabitation in one reality over another. Put differently, there needs to be ongoing reinforcement that the choice to live as a Christian, for example, is superior to all other possible choices. However, the option for one's own subjective reality also locates the individual *outside* of other subjective realities. Clarifying which universe one *does* inhabit also declares which universe (or universes) one *does not* and, by implication, *ought not* inhabit. (pp. 6–7)

Cognitive dissonance sets in with the realization that the way we *believe* things to be may not be the way they *actually* are. (p. 7)

In the context of an open religious economy, several different voices compete for authoritative positions in the discourse on cults, sects, and new religious movements, and each brings to that discourse a distinct interpretation of events. First are the

new religious movements themselves. Whether they are new because of religious novelty or innovation . . . , because they have reinterpreted dominant religious traditions to supposedly uncover heretofore hidden meanings (e.g., Latter-day Saints . . . ), or because they have only recently emerged in a particular religious economy . . . , each has its own emic perspective, its own self-understanding of religious history, beliefs, and practice. (pp. 8–9)

And each of these understandings, along with others, competes with every other. “In this discourse, Christian countercult writers and speakers identify themselves most often as apologists” (p. 9), and in the past fifty years the countercult has sought to demonstrate the superiority of its understanding of Christianity in the face of competing voices.

Cowan’s approach to studying or investigating the countercult movement is “to combine elements from . . . a sociology of knowledge, particularly as it has been mediated through the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and the cognitive approach to social movements articulated by Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison” (p. 10). The particular materials that interest Cowan are what he calls “the public face of the Christian countercult, the *social* construction of countercult apologetics, which means, by and large, that which is readily available on the shelves of the Christian bookstores” (p. 11).

Through a close analysis of hundreds of books, pamphlets, newsletters, journals, audio- and videocassettes, and Web sites, I have tried to accomplish three major tasks. In part I, I outline the cognitive praxis by which the countercult as a social movement is defined. Part II describes some of the major trends in countercult development and the various organizational continua along which different countercult groups and apologists operate. Finally, part III surveys the manner in which the members of the Christian countercult depict various religious groups in our society. That is, what is the countercult’s core identity? How is it organized to manifest that identity?



And, how does it constitute the adversarial Other in the face of whom that identity finds meaning? (p. 13)<sup>12</sup>

Since Cowan believes that “religious pluralism has thrown Christianity into crisis,” he then identifies what he thinks constitutes the essential foundations of countercult cosmology and the way in which that cosmology is maintained (pp. 29–30). The fourth of these propositions is as follows:

As a religious economy opens, and the need for maintenance and reinforcement of particular religious meaning structures increases, to the extent possible religious actors will seek to locate the validity of those structures within an external (i.e., objective) authority. This proposition anchors the most common attribute of Christian countercult apologetics: that the Bible is the unique and external authority by which all other religious traditions, beliefs, and behavior must be measured and ultimately judged, an authority that is inerrant, infallible, and insuperable. (pp. 30–31)

The countercultists are thus desperate to demonstrate that any competing faith is merely a “subjective construction of reality” and hence wrong (see p. 33 for an application of this standard). However, showing that some construction of reality is wrong does not thereby provide “a demonstration that the countercult construction is correct” (p. 33). Cowan claims that this mistaken “understanding, however, informs one of the most common countercult deployments of scriptural inerrancy: its use as an all-sufficient witnessing tool” (p. 33). It also explains the passion for confrontational witnessing and the commonplace attack mode which characterizes the countercult, even in its somewhat more rational and academic modes (see pp. 205–11). In addition, as previously mentioned, “the Christian countercult often generates a world arranged with little regard for complexity or

---

12. Cowan might have helped make his book more accessible to someone outside of sociology by defining earlier the terms he employs in his book. Terms such as *cult*, *countercult*, *anticult*, *social praxis*, *cognitive praxis*, etc. are defined by Cowan but not until the reader reaches pages 18–28.

nuance, a world reduced to the uncomplicated comparison of carefully selected texts, the ‘simplicity of essences’ is itself essential to its organizing cosmology” (p. 34).

If someone faults the exegesis, logic, interpretation, or conclusions of these apologists, then that person either (1) is an active participant in the conspiracy or (2) has been deceived by those who are active participants. While the countercult encompasses different modes of antipathetic discourse, this rhetoric of conspiratorial deception is common, both supported by and supplementing the principle understanding of Satan as the “father of lies” and the “great deceiver.” (p. 40)

Thus from Cowan’s perspective, when someone challenges “the hygienics of a particular world-view, the *pathologic* and *diagnostic* functions of the conceptual machineries of universe-maintenance begin to operate” (p. 51). Cowan traces these in considerable amusing and instructive detail.

Cowan concludes that,

In the countercult construction of reality, if either the Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses are right—that is, if their cosmology, their conception of salvation history, and their interpretation of humankind’s place within those have some measure of validity—then the religious meaning structure adhered to by the countercult must be incorrect to that extent. It is of paramount importance, therefore, to nihilate the worldviews adhered to by these so-called cults of Christianity. (p. 134)

Does the endeavor to nihilate—destroy—a competing religious worldview include bearing false witness? This seems to be a fundamental question underlying Cowan’s book. In his discussion of Dave Hunt, Cowan includes the following remark:

“Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor,” reads the ninth of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:16, Dt. 5:20, KJV). Ex. 23:1 expands the pentateuchal statute, further enjoining the adherent: “Thou shalt not raise a false report:

put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.” While Hunt might argue that this applies only to witnesses in a civil suit, the plain sense of the test is clear: bearing false witness—whether lying outright about someone or something, or selectively omitting part of the case in order to promote or protect one’s own interests—is condemned by God. That this ought to be of more concern to countercult apologists than it often appears is evident from the use Hunt hopes readers will make of his work. “We are not simply a source of ‘information,’” he writes in a 1992 newsletter. “We earnestly desire to join together tens of thousands of concerned believers who will not only be informed but who will *act* upon the information we provide.” Recalling Decker and Hunt’s declaration that in their consideration of the Mormon Church, they would make their case “avoiding bare assertions and ridicule,” the nature of the ‘information’ countercult apologists provide becomes of considerable interest. (p. 166)

### **A Lesson for the Faithful**

Latter-day Saints may be surprised to discover that segments of the countercult attack Roman Catholics with considerable passion (see pp. 171–89). For example, writing about Jack Chick and his anti-Catholic stance, Cowan notes that

a number of freedoms collide in the context of the Christian countercult. Within the larger evangelistic imperative of Christ’s Great Commission, many countercult apologists interpret the freedom of religion to include permission to point out where any worldview different from theirs is flawed, and its adherents morally and spiritually deficient. While hardly limited to Christianity, this dynamic obtains in any conflict between competing exclusive religious claims. Chick, on the other hand, exemplifies the freedom to express one’s beliefs (in this case, that the Jesuits are Satan’s willing pawns in a deadly game of

world domination) in conflict with protection from ridicule, condemnation, and outright slander. (pp. 177–78)

If we recognize bigotry and ignorance and malevolence in anti-Mormonism, we should avoid ever yielding to the temptation to believe what is said by the countercult about Roman Catholics, Muslims, Jews, or any other faith community. Honesty and love are what is always proper.

One of the features of Protestantism is the lack of quality control. No one can insist that countercult nonsense cease. If it is denounced, the one doing this will become the next target. Cowan provides a catalogue of reasons. Among these one can include the following:

Avocational apologists . . . may not consider it important in any official capacity, but authority and credentialing do matter in the world of social discourse. . . . Put simply, though, if one has the authority to speak on a particular subject, if one is credentialed in a particular area, it is not unreasonable to expect that one's comments in that area will be taken more seriously than those of a person with no discernible experience or education, or, in the context of new religious movements, whose only qualification appears to be his or her status as an ex-member. On the other hand, if credibility were unimportant, the collection of laudatory comments on bookflaps, back covers, and publisher's promotional material would not be so prominent in the countercult marketing process. Such, however, is not the case. (p. 199)

What all of this adds up to is that, "given that it is a decentralized, increasingly democratized social phenomenon with no established magisterium or institutional structure, authority and credentialing in the Christian countercult is a murky business at best. In fact, this circumstance presents another discriminate continuum according to which the countercult can be typologized" (p. 200).

Cowan also offers a explanation for why "the less sophisticated material . . . is the most popular, and why the entirely unregulated

flow of information through the Internet is daily increasing in popularity” (p. 207). These include the following:

First, whether oriented toward mission or boundary-maintenance, this material is written with what might be called a first-order practicality in mind. In the vast majority of cases, complexity, nuance, and variation between or within competitor religions, as well as attention to the controversial development of Christian doctrine and belief, are subsumed to the overriding principle of countercult apologetics and evangelism. . . .

Second, since both the target consumer of countercult material and the producer share this same subjective construction of reality, a first-order practicality requires less intellectual and ethical rigor of both. . . . Countercult authors begin from the assumption that religious group or teaching “X” is heretical, and then simply mine such resources as are available—whether primary, secondary, or tertiary—to prove that conclusion. Since the turn of the twentieth century, for example, no one in either the nascent or the more intentional countercult has begun a book on the Latter-day Saints or Jehovah’s Witnesses with the honest question, “Is what this group teaches *really* wrong?” Rather, *that* they are wrong is understood a priori; what remains is simply that fact’s satisfactory demonstration. As a result, the ordinary rigors of scholarship—for example, sound argument, triangulated references, credible sources—are simply not required. Indeed, an argument could be made that if they were employed, these rigors would seriously impede the process of popular countercult apologetics as it is currently constituted. . . .

. . . [Third,] the vast majority of countercult material is produced for—and, in not a few cases, by—people who have little or no academic, theological training. They are quite simply not

interested in a product that does not serve the needs of first-order apologetic or evangelistic practicality. (p. 207)<sup>13</sup>

### Concluding Postscript

There are voices who claim that challenges to the popular movie, television, and music industry are unfair because Hollywood is not a monolithic institution—there are individuals and studios producing material a cut above what some in Hollywood produce. Likewise, some have argued that Cowan's book is irrelevant because the people he highlights in his study—like Walter Martin, Dave Hunt, and Ed Decker—do not now represent the countercult movement or its activities, methods, motives, and purposes. They may even argue that “outsiders” should not be involved in policing or even criticizing the Christian countercult since they themselves are doing an adequate job. They may even disown individuals who engage in blatantly deceitful practices.

Such a rebuttal, however, remains hollow and disingenuous as long as videos, books, and tapes, like those produced by Hunt and Decker, are relied upon routinely by the rank and file within the fundamentalist/evangelical movement when they attempt to confront Latter-day Saints and their message. In a climate of international extremism which has produced suicide bombers, we certainly cannot blame only those few individuals who engage in such practices, but we must question and examine a larger *culture of death* that encourages and even facilitates individuals to engage in such actions. The thought precedes the deed. Cowan's book will remain germane as long as the fundamentalist/evangelical community allows or encourages individuals to “bear false witness” against others who do not fall within their narrow interpretation of what constitutes authentic Christianity. As long as Latter-day Saints are demonized and falsely accused by fundamentalists, the Christian countercult movement, which feeds individuals and

---

13. In his concluding remarks, Cowan provides a summary of the various challenges facing countercult apologetics (pp. 208–11).

churches information about Mormonism, is responsible for some of the hatred, anger, and prejudice that exists in fundamentalist circles.

For those who are falsely accused by such individuals and groups, *Bearing False Witness?* challenges them to examine their own lives to ensure that they do not “bear false witness” against the very groups who attack them or any individual or group who represents an alternative to their own worldview. Such a position does not require individuals to accept all points of view or even to disengage from important conversations with those whose views present an alternative to their own message—it is, nevertheless, a challenge to all concerned to be as honest as humanly possible in the way we frame other individuals’ or groups’ beliefs and practices. In the end, when we talk about the beliefs and practices of another group, we should do so in such a way that, if someone from that group were present, he or she would agree that we had correctly articulated his or her beliefs and practices in both tone and content. Cowan has called all to raise the bar of honesty, integrity, and truthfulness.

### **A Personal Addendum—Richard Neitzel Holzapfel**

In 1828 Martin Harris lost the one hundred and sixteen pages of the Book of Mormon translation he helped complete with Joseph Smith. This part of the manuscript was taken from his home in Palmyra by an individual who had conspired with a group opposed to Joseph Smith’s religious mission. Apparently, the group planned to release an altered manuscript once Joseph Smith reproduced the text, hoping to demonstrate that Joseph Smith could not translate the same story twice and therefore prove that he was in fact a fraud.

That ends justify any means was certainly not a new idea in 1828. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), the father of modern political theory, published his famous book *The Prince* in 1532,<sup>14</sup> in which he argued that all means may be employed for the preservation of

---

14. Machiavelli, *Il principe* (Florence: Bernardo di Giunta, 1532).

princely authority—the end justifies every possible means—and every deed of a ruler is justified.<sup>15</sup>

The Lord told Joseph Smith that “Satan stirreth them up, that he may lead their souls to destruction. . . . Yea, he saith unto them: Deceive and lie in wait to catch, that ye may destroy; behold, this is no harm. And thus he flattereth them, and telleth them that it is no sin to lie that they may catch a man in a lie, that they may destroy him. And thus he flattereth them, and leadeth them along until he draggeth their souls down to hell; and thus he causeth them to catch themselves in their own snare” (D&C 10:22, 25–26). My own exposure to the Christian countercult movement in Orange County, California, for more than a decade, convinced me that in far too many cases not much had changed since 1828.

Several individuals and organized groups active at this time in southern California were still willing to pass along false and unsubstantiated reports about Latter-day Saints (such as claiming above-average rates of depression, suicide, teenage pregnancy, and divorce among the Latter-day Saint community or that the demon Moroni lived in the Salt Lake Temple in a special throne room where the president of the church received his marching orders each morning). Some who knew better were unwilling to correct false statements and half-truths made by leading anti-Mormons about the Church of Jesus Christ.

In some cases Protestants were urged to break the laws of the land (such as trespass on private property to put anti-Mormon tracts in hymnals in Latter-day Saint chapels early Sunday mornings before worship services began). And in certain instances they were willing to misrepresent LDS practices and beliefs (for instance, by claiming to reveal the real meaning of CTR, “crucify the righteous,” or the ultimate purpose of LDS church steeples, to impale Jesus when he returns).

Some created false dichotomies (for example by claiming that Mormon men are uptight, sexually repressed individuals prone to depression and suicide or are deviant sexual perverts waiting to engage in numerous sexual liaisons with countless young women in the world to come). And it was not unknown to have Protestants blatantly involved

---

15. Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Boston: Bedford, 2005).



in subterfuge, such as calling local church leaders—I was stake mission president at the time—claiming to be investigators with a few questions and in the end to reveal that they were working for a countercult organization whose purpose was to harass and raise doubts about the faith.

Ironically, many of these individuals were unwilling to examine their own religious tradition's historical past or their own sacred texts with the same criteria that they demanded of the Saints. Finally, they sometimes resorted to mocking and belittling Latter-day Saint practices, beliefs, and institutions—getting a laugh from the crowd at their lectures at the expense of some of God's children.

Often the results of these individual and group efforts were played out among young children at the local school campuses and the neighborhood parks and swimming pools. A special class or church meeting on the church at one of the evangelical local churches on Sunday evening was sometimes followed by harassing and intimidation Monday morning—bullying and mocking.

One classic and repeated tactic employed by evangelical school kids was to get their LDS classmates to read an anti-Mormon book or attend an anti-Mormon lecture by making a deal with them. "If I read from the Book of Mormon," they would ask, "Will you read one of my church books?" Or, "if I attend one of your worship meetings, will you attend a meeting at my church?" What they got was not a book about their schoolmate's church or the invitation to a worship service at the local evangelical church, but an anti-Mormon book or an invitation to attend an anti-Mormon lecture. In both cases it was a ploy that good-natured and genuinely honest LDS kids fell into who thought that honesty demanded, once their friend had read something in the Book of Mormon or attended a YM/YW activity, that they had to read the anti-Mormon book or attend an anti-Mormon lecture offered after their classmate completed his or her part of the deal.

In the end, very few Christian fundamentalists I came in contact with in Southern California during more than a decade, who had been exposed to the Christian countercult movement, were not infected by similar falsehoods, lies, and half-truths about the Church

of Jesus Christ. Of course, many Americans in the larger culture seem ready to accept sensational reports, conspiracy theories, and tantalizing stories about others they perceive as threats to their worldview. The Internet has only accentuated this problem in American culture by spreading fallacious rumors and using scare tactics that find fertile ground among a gullible public.

The willingness to lie and engage in such deceitful practices may rightly be identified as the most pervasive and persistent heresy of the Christian countercult movement theology and practice. This heresy has been documented, explored, and studied by Cowan. He has done the Saints a favor.

While some will claim that Cowan's work underestimates the diversity of the Christian countercult, the book explores the contours of this dynamic and bifurcated movement. It provides, I believe, a good starting point for further study and refinement of details of this movement. Cowan's book will allow others interested in the subject to move beyond some of the important insights and observations as they examine specific individuals and groups for specific periods of time from a larger context. Certainly, like most organizations and individuals, the purposes, motives, and activities of the individuals and groups mentioned by Cowan have metamorphosed and will continue to do so.

Just as studying a specific pericope in the New Testament in isolation, without examining the larger context, impairs an individual's ability to correctly and adequately understand a specific passage, a study of an individual or group involved in the Christian countercult movement without being informed by the examination of the larger context provided by Cowan will not be as thoughtful and useful as it could have been. Corrections and clarifications about specific groups and individuals will certainly be made to Cowan's work, but the larger framework he provides will continue to be useful to those interested in the subject. For providing this framework, Cowan is to be congratulated.

Cowan raises important questions for all those involved with or confronted by the Christian countercult. For those involved in this movement, his effort should help them identify issues that are specifically germane to their own tactics and methods. These general observations can convict, condemn, and convert them from current practices and methods that he calls into question. While certainly not to be compared to holy scripture—like that of Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s 8 June 1978 Harvard commencement address,<sup>16</sup> which remains one of the best critiques of Western culture and society (Solzhenitsyn himself was condemned and an outsider)—Cowan’s message may act as “a voice, crying in the wilderness” for us to repent of past activities and tactics as we deal with other people whose faith traditions are different from our own (see p. 115). Whether one is a member of the Christian countercult movement, a supporter, one who consumes their product, or, in fact, a member of a group attacked by their efforts, Cowan challenges each to be fair and truthful in their claims about others’ beliefs, practices, and activities.

Understandably, individuals and groups will focus on those areas and specific points where they believe Cowan misunderstood them—their purpose, motives, and activities. Doing so, however, shields them from looking deep into their own hearts to ask the hard questions about personal motives and tactics. It will be more helpful, however, if individuals and agencies looked for those facts and general critiques within Cowan’s book which may outline activities that should be rejected. The book can be helpful to all who are willing to question their own motives, purposes, and activities in light of Cowan’s observations and insights, even if these insights are not completely in focus.

We might recall that Jesus once talked about trying to get out a mote (speck of sawdust or small stone chip) from another’s eye while having a beam (huge plank or huge stone ashlar) in your own eye (Matthew 7:3–5). Whether it is because of Cowan or someone else, let each learn to examine themselves and ask the hard questions. Cowan’s message should give all pause.

---

16. See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).