



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

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Volume 16 | Number 2

Article 21

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6-1-2004

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#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Midgley, Louis (2004) "Cowan on the Countercult," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 16 : No. 2 , Article 21.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol16/iss2/21>

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**Title** Cowan on the Countercult

**Author(s)** Louis Midgley

**Reference** *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 395-403.

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

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

## COWAN ON THE COUNTERCULT

Louis Midgley

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By *bearing false witness* against our LDS neighbors, we evangelicals have often sinned not only against Mormons but against the God who calls us to be truth-tellers.<sup>1</sup>

Richard J. Mouw

Douglas Cowan, a former clergyman who teaches sociology and religious studies at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, answers the question posed in the title of his book with a resounding yes. While a few Latter-day Saints may have a better command of the literature produced by the anti-Mormon element of the countercult

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1. Richard J. Mouw, foreword to *The New Mormon Challenge*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 11, emphasis added. Mouw, author of ten books, is currently president of the Fuller Theological Seminary, where he also teaches Christian philosophy and ethics. (Mouw is well-known for facilitating so-called interfaith dialogues. See, for example, his foreword to *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?* ed. Thomas P. Rausch (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000), 1–3. Rausch explains that in 1987 Mouw was a founding member of the Los Angeles Catholic/Evangelical Committee, which was the first such local exchange in the United States.)

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.

than anyone else, Cowan clearly has a better command of the entire movement. *Bearing False Witness* is thus the most competent assessment of the countercult industry as a whole.

Cowan's conclusion that the countercult movement bears false witness flows in part from his analysis of what he calls "religious pluralism." For him the "Christian countercult is that branch of evangelical Protestantism most concerned about the growth of religious pluralism" (p. 4). What this expression identifies is the rather recent emergence and then rapid expansion of legally unrestrained choice available to citizens, mostly of republics, between competing religions (or between different versions of some larger religious traditions). He sees this as central to the activities and operations of the countercult. When those in control of regimes (absolute monarchs) were in command and religious establishments prevailed that supported the king, there was essentially little or no religious choice, at least that could be manifest in the public sphere, even when some marginal religion was tolerated by a regime.

What is it that has made possible the diversity of religious alternatives currently available to individuals in modern republics? Cowan claims that it is free choice between religious beliefs, including quite secular alternatives to a traditional faith in God, such as varieties of humanism or movements like National Socialism or Bolshevism. The range of religious choices that is currently available—including not to believe in God—has created a kind of free market in which those with religious commitments must compete for the attention and loyalty of consumers. And, according to Cowan, this situation "invariably threaten[s] the sense of ontological uniqueness that has marked Christianity since its rise to dominance in the West" (p. 4).

Cowan seems to see the free market, in which rival faiths must compete, as an improvement over the previous situation in which those with political power determined the religion of their subjects and enforced their opinions with the sword. He quotes James Madison as having argued that "during almost fifteen centuries . . . the legal establishment of Christianity [has] been on trial. What has been its fruits? More or less, in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy;

ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution” (p. 217 n. 1 to chap. 7). But the freeing of faith from the impact of the links between clergy and princes—remember the old formula “no Bishop, no King”—has not been entirely well received even by those who claim to venerate freedom of conscience.

The unease felt by a faction of conservative Protestants, especially in the United States, has resulted in the countercult movement. In an effort to rid the world of competing faiths, it has replaced cavalry and field artillery, police, and prisons with ferocious rhetoric and sometimes violent and obscene religious propaganda. Cowan describes the variety within the countercult movement that runs all the way from the operations of large, wealthy, corrupt corporations—for example, the Christian Research Institute (CRI)—to tiny mom-and-pop operations or to Web sites operated by businesses or from bedrooms, and from a host of obvious miscreants and nutcases through amateurs and “experts” with phony credentials to a few modestly competent people. The movement lacks probity in part because there is no quality control.

The core of Cowan’s analysis runs as follows: countercultists passionately believe something, and what they believe clearly “contributes to their behavior in the world” (p. 5). At this point in his argument, Cowan draws on the literature of sociology to make the following point: beliefs, whatever their contents, may not necessarily be congruent with actual reality (p. 5), or at least with what others think of as reality. Why? Individuals and groups have socially constructed understandings of the world; hence “individuals and groups operate within the constraints of perceived reality” (p. 5). This seems quite obvious. But there is a corollary. When we strive to understand a movement, we must seek to understand its views of reality—that is, we must strive to grasp its worldview. It will, of course, be the case that individuals and groups will insist that their perception of reality—their worldview—is the actual reality and that all other understandings are distortions or corruptions. This is certainly the case with the countercult. Cowan strives “to describe the subjective construction of reality that governs countercult action” (p. 5). Thus he wants “to understand as far as one is able the various units of knowledge, clusters of beliefs, information

filters, and logical processes around which countercult groups constitute themselves” (p. 5).

To this point Cowan’s analysis seems to me straightforward and unproblematic. We can easily test it by asking ourselves if we believe we are essentially right—that is, right on the crucial issues. Has anyone ever met a rational individual who insists that his or her perception of the world is intentionally distorted and hence false? Of course not. And this means that there is a powerful impulse to see those whose opinions differ radically from ours as deficient in their understanding or as wrong. But there is one additional step. It is to picture those who are wrong as driven by dangerous perversities or even demonic forces and hence as diabolic monsters worthy of very harsh treatment.

At this point in his argument, Cowan holds that countercultists see a radical conflict of worldviews. Of course, they see their own worldview, which they know as an infallible description of actual reality, under threat from competing worldviews in what amounts to a free market available to consumers of religious truth claims. Countercultists, it turns out, also insist that their worldview is “unique, exclusive, and insuperable” (p. 6). This explains why countercultists assume that they have a mandate from heaven to convert (or destroy) those with a different, and therefore false, worldview (p. 6).

These features of the countercult ethos flow, especially in America, which is the heartland of the movement, from the current free market in religion. And it is this market, and the resulting choices offered to consumers, that requires boundary marking or what Cowan describes as reality maintenance (pp. 5–7, 9, 43–60) by countercultists. Later he uses this argument to explain why countercultists have target groups. They actually need targets—enemies—against which they can define themselves. The need for a target is so great that, if an external target is not readily available, they tend to turn on each other. At times the internal fighting among and between countercultists is more intense than the war they are presumably dedicated to fighting with the enemy without. It is this effort to preserve their identity that fuels their behavior. They feel a need to clearly identify, both for themselves and for

their constituents, exactly which symbolic universe they inhabit. And they do this by “bearing false witness” against competing universes.

This explains the propensity—even when there is an intellectual understanding that some language is being used or misused for propaganda purposes—to keep it around anyway and to exploit it unmercifully. A good example of this is the constant abuse of the otherwise perfectly harmless word *cult*. That word—like its relatives *culture*, *cultivar*, or *cultivate*—identifies the ways in which some groups are set apart from others. People who really do know better than to misuse the word, or who could easily know that it is being abused, use it anyway. Given this fact, the problem, then, is to explain this odd behavior. Cowan has, I believe, sketched a plausible explanation for why contemporary conservative Protestants—even when they have realized the difficulties in attacking others with self-serving definitions of the word *cult*—have ended up silently adopting the label *countercult* to describe their own behavior.<sup>2</sup>

However, Cowan goes further in his analysis of the countercult than merely pointing to such oddities and anomalies. He identifies the defining elements of the countercult worldview—that is, what all the competing factions have in common. These defining dogmas are, from Cowan’s perspective, an insistence on the inerrancy, infallibility, and insuperability of their ideology. The notion that the Bible is somehow inerrant, however that is understood, is thus silently translated into a belief that a certain understanding of Christianity is inerrant. The countercult world is, according to Cowan, grounded in the notion that those who speak for it have the one and only correct interpretation of the final truth, which is found only in their understanding of the Bible. Countercultists are driven to see any deviation from their interpretation of the essentials of Christian faith, or of their infallible understanding of their “paper pope,” as an intentional, even demonic, misunderstanding of reality. The Protestant insistence on the sufficiency and inerrancy of the Bible, which explains what appears to be

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2. For additional details, see Louis Midgley, “On Caliban Mischief,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): xviii–xxxii.

the bibliolatriy that lurks near the surface of countercult rhetoric, is now also employed by sectarian anti-Mormons to slam the door shut on the possibility of or need for any additional revelations.

This ideology also explains how and why they need an enemy and why they feel impelled to bear false witness against that enemy (false at least to those outside their worldview). This also explains exactly why the veritable father of the countercult movement—Walter Martin—systematically misused the word *cult* when he employed it as a political weapon or in propaganda. Prior to the emergence of a free market for religious ideas, one would simply have called upon the prince to imprison or kill the offenders, to send an army to pillage and burn the enemy, or to fire not merely rhetorical but real artillery at the dreaded, demonic other. This is my explanation for why it was the clergy who once led mobs against Latter-day Saints and why it is religious groups who even now shout obscenities around Temple Square in Salt Lake City.

Cowan's epistemology does not consist of some arcane philosophical novelty that one might find in a postmodern ideology. Instead, he explains that he first collected and read anti-Mormon literature and then turned to the general countercult literature. He tried to engage in conversations with countercultists to confirm his impressions of their views. When he went back to the university to pursue his doctorate, he drew on this knowledge for his dissertation, for which he also employed some sociological literature. For this book, however, he has winnowed out much of the sociological jargon, which makes it more readable. And he has further expanded his knowledge of the literature produced and marketed by countercultists. Currently, he seems the best informed person on the countercult as a social movement.

Countercultists will likely be troubled by *Bearing False Witness* for two reasons. First, they will be upset to see themselves and their movement treated as one might treat juvenile gangs—that is, as a strange and unseemly anomaly on the social and religious horizon. They will also be stunned to see how easily Cowan has been able to expose the soft underbelly of the countercult world, with the phony degrees, the inflated personal and professional claims, the illegal and immoral behavior, the pompous posturing, the vicious internal



quarreling, and the incompetent and dishonest literature. These folks want to be seen as heroic white knights riding in to save others from demonic forces. I am confident that even those few countercultists who sense that something is rotten in their personal Denmark will be troubled to have Cowan's book floating around for just anyone to pick up and read—assuming that the clients of the countercult are at all interested in understanding how others see both them and those who manipulate and flatter them. *Bearing False Witness* will be brushed aside by indignant countercultists as the work of another evil “cult apologist.” In fact, Cowan has already had that pejorative label pinned on him, and I anticipate that further efforts to deal with his findings will result in similar labels.

The countercult world recognizes only good guys and bad guys; there is simply no room for an honest difference of opinion or for lending a respectful ear. Those who venture to do that sort of thing risk being demonized by the countercult for the reasons Cowan sets out.

### “Bearing False Witness”: A Brief Addendum

As I was drafting this essay, Richard Mouw's admission that, “by bearing false witness” against Latter-day Saints, evangelicals have sinned “against the God who calls us to be truth-tellers”<sup>3</sup> seemed to me an appropriate headnote that would express forcefully and succinctly the conclusion reached by Douglas Cowan, if not about evangelicals generally, at least about the anti-Mormon element within the unseemly countercult movement. Then, on 14 November 2004 in a speech given in the Salt Lake Tabernacle on Temple Square at a rally organized by evangelicals seeking more friendly relations with the Saints, Mouw—who is known as an uncommonly courteous, decent person—repeated and embellished the remark that I have quoted. He granted that “public relations between our two communities have been—to put it mildly—decidedly unfriendly.”<sup>4</sup>

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3. Mouw, foreword to *The New Mormon Challenge*, 11.

4. I am quoting from Richard Mouw, “Response to Criticism of Richard Mouw [We Have Sinned against You],” available at [www.standingtogether.org/Responses\\_mouw.doc](http://www.standingtogether.org/Responses_mouw.doc), p. 3 (accessed 2 December 2004).

Mouw, who is well known for his support of so-called interfaith dialogues,<sup>5</sup> reported that “over the past half-dozen years” he has “been a member of a small group of evangelical scholars who have been engaged in lengthy closed-door discussions about spiritual and theological matters with a small group of our LDS counterparts.”<sup>6</sup> There have been disagreements, he indicated, “but our arguments have been conducted in a sincere desire genuinely to understand each other.”<sup>7</sup> These private conversations have included not only a few Latter-day Saint scholars and some evangelicals but, among others, David Neff, the editor of *Christianity Today*, the paramount evangelical publication.

Mouw commented that he has “learned much in this continuing dialogue.”<sup>8</sup> He also said that he is

now convinced that we evangelicals have often seriously misrepresented the beliefs and practices of the Mormon community. Indeed, let me state it bluntly to the LDS folks here this evening: we have sinned against you. The God of the Scriptures makes it clear that it is a terrible thing to *bear false witness* against our neighbors, and we have been guilty of that sort of transgression in things we have said about you.<sup>9</sup>

These remarks offended many countercultists and some of their clientele, and Mouw has found it necessary to defend himself.<sup>10</sup> There was much concern among the Caliban<sup>11</sup> that he had maligned those

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5. See, for example, his foreword to *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?* ed. Thomas P. Rausch (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000). Rausch explains that in 1987 Mouw was a founding member of the Los Angeles Catholic/Evangelical Committee, which was the first such local exchange in the United States.

6. Mouw, “Response to Criticism of Richard Mouw,” 3.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 4.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 1–3. For much evidence of the hostility generated among those I call Caliban—the countercultists—as well as for some of Mouw’s self-defense, one should consult the massive collection of diatribes aimed especially at Mouw that can be found on Rauni Higley’s blog at [mormoninfo.org/index.php?id=130](http://mormoninfo.org/index.php?id=130) (accessed 2 December 2004). This is a remarkable collection of countercult materials, which illustrates well Cowan’s objections to the countercult movement.

11. For the term *Caliban*, see Louis Midgley, “Editor’s Introduction: On Caliban Mischief,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): xi–xxxvii.

who employ what they call “legitimate confrontational evangelism” or “genuine confrontational evangelism” that attempts to “publicly demonstrate the LDS false gospel.”<sup>12</sup> When challenged to indicate who exactly has been guilty of the sin of bearing false witness, Mouw specifically identified Walter Martin, the veritable father of the countercult movement, and Dave Hunt as primary examples.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, Martin and Hunt were two of the culprits dealt with by Cowan. But it also turns out that some of those busy raking Mouw over the coals are equally guilty of bearing false witness.

I desire genuinely friendly relations with evangelicals. But the anarchy that is Protestantism does not permit our friends to put a stop to the excesses committed against the faith of the Saints by countercultists. As the firestorm over Mouw’s remarks seems to demonstrate, even a modest request for countercult probity is likely to generate an additional target within evangelical/fundamentalist ranks. The result, for evangelicals courageous enough to speak the truth, will likely be more rancid Caliban mischief.

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12. Higley’s blog at [mormoninfo.org/index.php?id=130](http://mormoninfo.org/index.php?id=130).

13. Mouw, “Response to Criticism of Richard Mouw,” 1.