2002

Faulty Topography

Louis Midgley

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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Faulty Topography

Louis Midgley


1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Faulty Topography

Louis Midgley

With playful seriousness and as part of an amusing response to some truly dreadful anti-Mormon literature, in 1963 Hugh Nibley set down “a few general rules observed by all successful writers in this fascinating and lucrative field.” Three decades later, Massimo Introvigne noted that “a new generation of anti-Mormon writers has emerged, and they no longer follow Nibley’s classic instructions on ‘how to write an anti-Mormon book.’” Though “the humor” of Nibley’s essay, according to Introvigne, “is still enjoyable, even though first published more than twenty [now thirty] years ago, a visit to the anti-Mormon sections of most Evangelical bookstores demonstrates that the anti-Mormonism with which Nibley crossed swords is today largely out of fashion.”

1. See Hugh Nibley, “How to Write an Anti-Mormon Book (A Handbook for Beginners),” in his Sounding Brass (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 63. For the most recent version of this essay, see Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 474.


3. Ibid.


What is it that had replaced the older strains of anti-Mormonism by 1994? Twenty years after Nibley set down his insightful and amusing “general rules,” the picture changed when the fundamentalist/evangelical world was bombarded with an unseemly film, shown extensively by clergy, entitled The God Makers, which was then also sold under the same title in book form. Introvigne labeled this (and similar, related sectarian anti-Mormon rhetoric) “post-rational” to distinguish it from the sort of literature that Nibley was spoofing in the sixties, which had at least the outward appearance of rationality. The older, somewhat less irrational varieties of sectarian anti-Mormonism tended to attribute the existence and success of the church mainly to a combination of human greed and gullibility, though Satan was never entirely absent from the explanation. In this recent, post-rational version of anti-Mormon propaganda, according to Introvigne, fundamentalist preachers now insist that swarms of demons are responsible for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and have been in full control of its leaders and benighted dupes right from the start, though greed and gullibility also appear as elements in the mix.

The notion that everything preachers dislike is the direct work of Satan did not suddenly come on the scene de novo in the 1980s; it has turned up here and there in the past. Introvigne was able to demonstrate that the sensationalistic nonsense advanced by Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, and subsequently spelled out in even more lurid detail by writers like Bill Schnoebelen and James Spencer, was in part merely a recycling of much older nonsense. This kind of recycling had been described by Nibley in 1963 as the way in which anti-Mormon literature has been formulated from the beginning. Introvigne also argued that the “theological and historical roots” of this post-rational version of sectarian anti-Mormonism “can be traced to larger movements


5. See, for example, the bizarre book by William J. Schnoebelen and James R. Spencer, Mormonism's Temple of Doom (Idaho Falls: Triple J, 1987).
extending beyond narrow Mormon boundaries," even though it also continues to borrow themes and arguments from both secular and sectarian anti-Mormon predecessors. Of course, anti-Mormonism is still at least partially a hackneyed, formulaic, paint-by-numbers affair, especially when one moves beyond the few agencies and individuals who devote their exclusive or primary attention to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and examines the larger sectarian countercult industry.

But there have recently been some shifts in the anti-Mormon landscape. In the last decade, a small group of evangelicals has sensed a growing awareness of the embarrassing weaknesses in the literature being marketed by the sectarian countercult version of anti-Mormonism. The countercult movement was given much of its current configuration and direction, especially in its approach to the Church of Jesus Christ, by the notorious "Dr." Walter Martin, the veritable "father of Christian cult apologetics." Critics of the Church of Jesus Christ have been put increasingly on the defensive, beginning in 1989, by the publication of sophisticated criticisms of both secular and sectarian anti-Mormon books and essays. For the first time, Latter-day Saint scholars have had a venue in which they could publish such detailed critiques. This response to anti-Mormon literature commenced with the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon (now known as FARMS Review of Books) and was soon supplemented by the publication of two books exposing in considerable detail many of the basic


7. This language is quoted from an editorial note "About the Author" in Walter Martin, The Kingdom of the Cults, rev., updated, and expanded ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1997). Martin's book was first published in 1965 with the subtitle An Analysis of the Major Cult Systems in the Present Christian Era. After 1977, the subtitle did not appear in any editions of the book. The general editor for this thirty-year anniversary edition of Martin's notorious book was Hank Hanegraaff, who, upon Martin's death on 26 June 1989 at age 60, either (depending on whom one believes) filched the Christian Research Institute, the lucrative business venture started by Martin, from his loyal associates and family or else was the hand-picked successor to Martin. What has resulted is a bitter internecine battle for control of the CRI, with considerable controversy over the unusual business practices of Hanegraaff. This is but one of many similar quarrels typical of the inner workings of the countercult movement.
weaknesses of sectarian anti-Mormonism. What was begun in the 1960s by Hugh Nibley in two entertaining books as a momentary diversion from his interest in the scriptures and the ancient world has now been taken up by a host of Latter-day Saint scholars. In addition, anti-Mormonism took some blows with the publication of Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson's *How Wide the Divide?* Countercultists tend to despise this book and have refused to acknowledge it precisely because it does not follow the stereotypical pattern of distortion and dissembling common among anti-Mormons. Its tone was also civil, and it allowed a Latter-day Saint to speak. For the first time it became apparent to some evangelicals that the countercult movement has been producing and marketing a detestable literature. The countercult movement was exposed to morally earnest, conservative Protestants as an intellectual and moral failure—a gross embarrassment to their faith.

If this seems extreme, then one ought to consider the recent statement by Richard J. Mouw, president of the Fuller Theological Seminary. According to Mouw, "as an evangelical I must confess that I am ashamed of our record in relating to the Mormon community." Of course, there are, according to Mouw, deep differences between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints over some crucial issues. "But none of those disagreements give me or any other evangelical the license to propagate distorted accounts of what Mormons believe. By *bearing false witness* against our LDS neighbors, we evangelicals have often sinned not just against Mormons but against the God who calls us to


9. *The Myth Makers and Sounding Brass*. Both are now included in *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass*.


be truth-tellers.” Mouw clearly wishes to distance himself from the abysmal literature produced and marketed by the anti-Mormon elements within the fundamentalist/evangelical countercult movement; he is appalled by what he describes as the “very poor quality” of the “exchanges between evangelicals and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” The two groups, he thinks, have either traded insults or talked past each other. Perhaps, but in my own experience, anti-Mormons do not primarily target the Latter-day Saints as their audience. They are not really seeking to evangelize or educate Latter-day Saints. Instead, they are busy selling a product to those anxious to learn more of the challenge posed by the dreaded cults. Their target audience is composed of Baptists or other conservative Christians who have an appetite for lurid tales about the Saints, or those who sectarians fear are vulnerable to the proselytizing efforts of Latter-day Saints.

The Latter-day Saint responses to anti-Mormon propaganda have been defensive. We have not imagined that we must persuade or can even educate those in the countercult industry. We have learned from sad experience that it is simply not possible to have a genuine conversation with those whose business is to attack our faith. The few efforts that Latter-day Saint scholars have made to befriend and educate countercultists have been dismal failures. After some initial friendly banter, nothing ever really changes. Latter-day Saint apologists have instead sought to provide resources that answer questions raised by those interested in hearing our message or those troubled by anti-Mormon charges or claims.

What Mouw seems to wish for is a reasonable exchange of opinions between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints. Specifically, he anticipates a civil, respectful, responsible conversation with what he describes as “a community of gifted Mormon intellectuals.” With this group

12. Ibid., emphasis added.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 12
he hopes for a “mutual exploration of some of the fundamental issues that bear on the human condition.” However, this conversation is not one between equals or for the purpose of mutual understanding. Building on some earlier experiences of countercultists actually negotiating what may have amounted to an ideological surrender by the Worldwide Church of God and by the leaders of the Seventh-Day Adventists, Mouw and his colleagues may hope that conversations with a few Latter-day Saint intellectuals will eventually turn Latter-day Saints (or the Church of Jesus Christ) into their brand of evangelicals. Mouw seems to anticipate—or at least hope—that such an “exploration” might make possible a “significant theological revision” of Latter-day Saint beliefs, perhaps as the result of what he believes are signs of “LDS theological fluidity,” which he links with the “strong emphasis on continuing revelation” among the Saints. He is thus “hopeful that Latter-day Saints will respond to the invitation to keep the conversation going.” So it seems that a few evangelicals believe that a conversation or dialogue has already begun that may eventually lead the Saints to move more in the direction of what evangelicals insist is orthodox, historic, trinitarian, biblical Christianity. If this is the case, they clearly do not understand the Church of Jesus Christ. They mistake signs of comity as an indication of our propensity to seek their approval and even as a willingness to adopt their ideology. What they offer is merely a less strident, somewhat better informed version of sectarian anti-Mormonism. Why?

Mouw’s remarks are found in the foreword to a book entitled The New Mormon Challenge. This collection of essays is not an effort by evangelicals to set out the history of their faction of conservative

16. Ibid., 11.
17. For a countercult perspective on the shifts that have taken place among Adventists and the movement founded by Herbert W. Armstrong, see Kurt Van Corden, “The Worldwide Church of God: From Cult to Christianity,” in Kingdom of the Cults, 471–94; and for Walter Martin’s description of how he and Donald Grey Barnhouse in the 1970s brought about a capitulation on various issues by the leaders of the Seventh-day Adventists, see Martin, “The Puzzle of Seventh-day Adventism,” in Kingdom of the Cults, 517–608.
Protestantism and its complex relationship with the Christian past, to explain to the Saints the various strands and currents in evangelical dogmatic theology, or to set out evangelical stances on issues important to their faith community or currently being debated within it. Nor are these individuals offering—or even able—to engage in an interfaith dialogue, a genuine conversation between equals. It is also clear that the few Latter-day Saint intellectuals with whom they have had some friendly conversations are not authorized to engage in such a dialogue. When they talk about a “respectful” conversation, do they have in mind one in which there is deference or esteem granted by each party to the views of the other party? For a genuinely respectful conversation to take place, there must be an informal and entirely voluntary recognition of the claims of the other one. To this point, there has been nothing approaching the kind of interfaith dialogues that have taken place between various versions of Christian faith. Instead, The New Mormon Challenge is merely the latest attack on Latter-day Saint beliefs. It differs from the older literature in that it is less acerbic and much better informed and more polite, courteous, and civil. It is still, however, anti-Mormon to the core.

Carl Mosser, the driving force behind this new endeavor, makes it clear that he believes that the existence of the Church of Jesus Christ threatens “the health of evangelicalism.” Since he has discovered that Latter-day Saints are both willing and able to provide sophisticated accounts of their beliefs and defend them against various criticisms, he has been concerned over this “new Mormon challenge.” He and his associates seek “to prevent Mormonism from becoming one of the largest worldwide faiths at our expense.” For these and other reasons, he speaks of the need to “retard the spread and growth of the LDS faith.” The analysis and arguments that inform and flow from this new, somewhat more academic, evangelical apologetic

20. Ibid., 69.
21. Ibid.
effort being led by Mosser differ in several ways from the propaganda advanced by the spate of countercult preachers and agencies inspired by the late "Dr." Walter Martin. In addition to not being nasty or vitriolic and manifesting an awareness of Latter-day Saint scholarship, this new, more sophisticated attack on the foundation of the faith of the Saints may have as its goal the radical transformation of the church and not simply the persuading of individual Saints to abandon the faith—a kind of negotiated surrender, first by intellectuals and then eventually by the Brethren. If they imagine that such might be possible, they are still losing the battle without knowing it.

In short, what Mosser and company seek is not a dialogue but an end to Latter-day Saint proselytizing. Mosser insists that he cannot "in good conscience consider Mormonism a legitimately Christian faith." He likes what he considers to be signs that some of the Saints are now moving in the right theological direction, and he hopes that "the LDS Church as a whole follows" their lead. He and his associates imagine that they are having a conversation with people who are not genuine Christians. They claim to be evangelizing the Saints and perhaps the Church of Jesus Christ. But they are wrong; they are entirely in the proselytizing mode. They are not evangelizing those who have not accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, since on this crucial issue Latter-day Saints are and have always been fully evangelical.

The Saints see themselves as the children or seed of Christ through a covenant in which they take upon themselves his name. But from the perspective provided by the dogmatic theology of Mosser and his associates—that is, from their reading of the Bible—"Mormonism's heresies are legion." Well, there are in fact some deep differences in the way we read the Bible and what we believe about divine things. But if the issue is whether the Saints accept Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Savior, and not whether we agree with a particular reading of the Bible (and thus with a particular theological formulation that evangelicals assume necessarily constitutes a genuine Christian), then

22. See ibid., 87.
23. Ibid., 85.
Mosser and his associates cannot in good conscience exclude Latter-day Saints from the ranks of Christians. And to grant that Latter-day Saints put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior would then make a mockery of the evangelicals’ claim that they are evangelizing. One does not, according to their own ideology, evangelize those who already trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. But, of course, Latter-day Saints make no distinction between evangelizing and proselytizing, so we find nothing problematic about baptizing Baptists.

Though they may not realize it, the editors of *The New Mormon Challenge* are following rather closely some of the rules that Nibley set out in his “Handbook for Beginners.” They hold the reader’s hand tightly, insisting on pointing out their own qualifications and accomplishments. With no trace of modesty, they claim that the book they have written and edited “is a rare book that is worth reading,”24 that it “pioneers a new genre of literature on Mormonism” with its “outstanding scholarship and sound methodology” (dust cover). They assert that “if you are sharing the gospel with Mormons or investigating Mormonism for yourself, this book will help you accurately understand Mormonism and see the superiority of the historic Christian faith.” They also maintain that “this book really ought to be read by anyone with an interest in the truth claims of Mormonism, regardless of religious background or reason for interest. We think we can safely say,” they boast, “without presumption, that *The New Mormon Challenge* is a truly groundbreaking and epoch-making book.”25 Nibley’s first playful bit of advice to the fledgling writer of an anti-Mormon book reads as follows: “Don’t be modest! Your first concern,” he informs the neophyte anti-Mormon, “should be to make it clear that You are the man for the job, that amidst a mass of lies and contradictions you are uniquely fitted to pass judgment.”26

On the heels of this advice comes Nibley’s second rule, followed closely by Beckwith, Mosser, and Owen: “A benign criticism of your

---

25. Ibid.
predecessors will go far towards confirming your own preeminence in the field. Refer gently but firmly,” Nibley admonishes, “to the bias, prejudices, and inadequate research, however unconscious or understandable, of other books on the subject.”27 It should be noted that Mosser and Owen began their venture into anti-Mormonism with an essay in which they neatly positioned themselves to come to the rescue of the evangelicals overwhelmed by the “new Mormon challenge” by doing what previous writers have lacked the skill and knowledge to accomplish.28

Mosser thus still lectures his fellow evangelicals that “as a community, with respect to Mormonism . . . , we have often succumbed to the sinful habits of caricaturing and demonizing the enemy, recycling arguments that have long been answered, refusing to admit genuine mistakes, and being generally uncharitable.”29 He thinks that God is calling evangelicals to change their evil ways and become more charitable, courteous, and respectful of those they still insist are not Christians. But how can one have benevolent goodwill toward those one must characterize as essentially unbelievers—even pagans—who have not come unto Christ, simply in order to get them to submit to a particular brand of theology? Is it the Christ who saves or some theological dogmas to which one must assent in order to be included by evangelicals in their club?

Nibley correctly saw—Satan, greed, and gullibility notwithstanding—that the “real villain of every anti-Mormon book is Mormonism.”30 And he also reminds his readers that “every anti-Mormon book is a sermon.”31 Without realizing it, Mosser and his associates have followed Nibley’s impish advice on this matter. One only has to look at the homilies that begin and end The New Mormon Challenge

27. Ibid., 474–75.
31. Ibid.
to encounter the passionate sermonizing element. Mosser insists that this new challenge—a dire threat posed by our proselytizing efforts—is such that it "cannot be accomplished by leaving the task solely up to the numerous small and financially strapped apologetics ministries. Nor," he adds, "are the vast majority of those engaged in such ministry equipped to do all that needs to be done, even if finances and personnel were not so limited. A proper response to Mormonism . . . will require the entire evangelical community." He seems to want to turn the entire fundamentalist/evangelical movement into one large countercult agency with the Church of Jesus Christ as the enemy in a battle for the souls of millions.

*Mormon America* and *The New Mormon Challenge*—"An Excellent Companion"

Mosser and his associates grant that they do not provide in *The New Mormon Challenge* "an introductory overview of LDS history, culture, and belief." But they are confident that such a thing is available from an evangelical perspective. They "heartily recommend" *Mormon America*, which they claim "will serve as an excellent companion" to their own collection of essays attacking Latter-day Saint beliefs. The authors of both *Mormon America* and *The New Mormon Challenge* distance themselves from the disreputable anti-Mormon literature peddled by the essentially fundamentalist countercult movement, but not from the enterprise itself. The Ostlings seem to speak for a new evangelical response to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

---

34. Ibid.
day Saints—one that is both less repugnant and somewhat better informed.

Instead of imitating the petulance of sectarian countercultists or the waspish qualities common among secular anticultists, with whom jaded journalists frequently have ideological affinities, Richard and Joan Ostling, the husband-and-wife team responsible for *Mormon America*, are said to have produced a religiously sensitive, evenhanded, fair-minded, well-researched, scrupulous, clear-eyed, balanced, exhaustive, thoroughly documented, instructive introduction to the Church of Jesus Christ.36

Is this language merely hype? In answering this question, I have chosen to overlook such typical anti-Mormon bromides as the obsession the Ostlings have—which must come with the craft—with the “fabled wealth” (p. xi) of the “Mormon economic empire” (p. 395). (Just think of all that tithing, and then add in those chapels and temples and their huge monetary value, and imagine the resulting financial and political power the church must wield!) And contemplate for a moment what the Ostlings imagine as a Mormon “penchant for secrecy” (p. xxvi), Mormon “authoritarianism” (p. 383), or the failure to have an administrative style modeled on “democratic America” (p. 374). According to the Ostlings, the “church is rigidly hierarchical, centralized, authoritarian, and almost uniquely secretive” (p. xvi). And yet the Ostlings think that “Mormonism began as, and still is, a uniquely American faith” (p. xviii) and that “Mormonism . . . provided nationalistic Americans with a very American gospel” (p. xix). However, despite—or because of—these supposedly profoundly American qualities, “no religion in American history has aroused so much fear and hatred, nor been the object of so much persecution

36. I have drawn this language from the twenty-two brief passages quoted by the publisher of *Mormon America* from various favorable reviews of this book. These blurbs could be found in October 2002 at www.harpercollins.com/catalog/book_xml.asp?isbn=0060663723. Since its publishers are in the business of selling this book rather than accurately representing its contents, there is, of course, no hint on this Web site that informed Latter-day Saints have faulted *Mormon America*. See, for example, Raymond T. Swenson, “Faith without Caricature?” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 64–77.
and so much misinformation” (p. xvi). In light of all this, the reader should ask, why the catchy title? Does not the title Mormon America announce yet another potboiler, and not, as the authors of this book claim, an important achievement in understanding the faith of the Saints? The Ostlings ask their readers to accept implicitly the fiction that Mormon America sums up the topic, without taking into account the facts that the Church of Jesus Christ is spread around the world and that the majority of Latter-day Saints have virtually no special interest in things American. If, in assessing Mormon America, one can ignore these and many other similar predictable canards and quirky proclivities (which tell us more about the Ostlings and their conceits than about the Saints), have they, as curious outsiders, somehow managed to explain “the power and the promise” of the Church of Jesus Christ to those both outside and within the church? Does Mormon America really provide a competent “introductory overview of LDS history, culture, and belief,” as the editors of The New Mormon Challenge claim? Or are we merely faced with a somewhat less recognizable form of anti-Mormon propaganda?

Despite deficiencies, some of which I will examine, Mormon America is superior to previous, comparable journalistic potboilers.37 One reason is that the Ostlings are better informed than most journalists striving to market essentially lurid exposés. In addition, they have religious sensitivities, and these tend to set their book apart from run-of-the-mill, secular anti-Mormon journalism. The Ostlings, however, seem a bit coy about their religious commitments—describing

themselves as, “admittedly, conventional Protestants” (p. xi). Their careers have been focused on religious journalism. In promoting their book, illustrating rather well one of Nibley’s general rules for fledgling anti-Mormon writers, they claim to be good at what they do and to be widely recognized for their accomplishments. Richard Ostling is the better known of the two, being a religion writer for the Associated Press who formerly wrote for Time magazine. In that venue, when the opportunity presented itself, he offered a crafty spin on Mormon things. Having their own religious ideology seems to have yielded a somewhat different thrust and tone in Mormon America than is common in the usual highly secularized treatments of the church written by journalists.

In addition, the Ostlings do not seem at home in the world of countercult individuals and agencies that make war on dreaded and dangerous “cultists.” They merely mention bits of the literature produced by the swarm of countercultist anti-Mormon agencies. Under the category “critics” in a section entitled “For Further Reading,” they list only two out of the vast horde of items sold by countercult anti-Mormons: what they wryly describe as a “self-published and frequently updated book by Salt Lake City’s best-known former Mormons [Jerald and Sandra Tanner]” and a tawdry tome by James R. White, which they indicate—perhaps with a dab of irony—is “a fairly articulate analysis of theological differences as seen from an Evangelical perspective” (p. 436). The Ostlings, unlike the older, essentially fundamentalist countercultists, seem to speak for a new style of anti-Mormonism—one that is kinder, gentler, and less abrasive.

38. For evidence that the Ostlings are known to others as evangelicals, see Swenson, “Faith without Caricature?” 66, where reference is made to comments about the religious ideology of the Ostlings by Richard J. Neuhaus in his “Is Mormonism Christian?” First Things, March 2000, 97–102.
The Ostlings Enter the Book of Mormon Wars

True to the disposition of many journalists, the Ostlings focus on controversy. Thus *Mormon America* contains accounts, somewhat loosely linked, of the debate over the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon and the question of how the essentials in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ ought to be set forth by Latter-day Saints. They make much of recent squabbles over these matters, and their account of them turns out to be a key ingredient in the tale they tell. As it turns out, whatever virtues *Mormon America* may have, it is at crucial points partisan, partial, and impaired. Despite showing some familiarity with certain portions of recent Latter-day Saint scholarship, their examination leaves much to be desired.

The Ostlings recognize that “the Book of Mormon was controversial from the outset” (p. 261). They also realize that, “from the beginning to this day, the reaction of Book of Mormon readers has been divided between those committed to it as ancient literature and those who consider it a product of the nineteenth century” (p. 261). They argue that these “older polemical traditions” also “split on two sides of a simple prophet/fraud dichotomy: either Joseph Smith was everything he claimed to be, a true prophet entrusted with a new scripture from authentic ancient golden plates, or he was a charismatic fraud” (p. 261). They exploit the fact that recently a few authors operating on the fringes of the Mormon academic community, while denying that Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet and the Book of Mormon an authentic ancient text, have striven to avoid directly charging him with being a conscious fraud. The Ostlings are correct in claiming that some of these writers recognize that a “simple prophet/fraud dichotomy” does not exhaust all possible explanations (p. 261). They then indicate that “some participants in [the] current discussion” over the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, while rejecting its authenticity, “would like to carve out a middle path” (p. 261) somewhere between its being read as an authentic ancient text and as a nineteenth-century sham. This effort by a few cultural Mormons,
dissidents, and former Latter-day Saints is then turned by the Ostlings into a main component of their campaign against the Book of Mormon.

What is described as a "middle path" identifies the efforts of a few critics who refuse to consider the possibility that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history. They seek to avoid the use of harsh words like hoax when they offer their accounts of how and why we have the book. Who are those who seek this so-called middle path? The answer the Ostlings give is instructive—they indicate that these are "respectful and sympathetic non-Mormons who recognize the moral and spiritual values in the Book of Mormon as well as liberal Mormons who value their heritage" (p. 261). I am, of course, pleased when "respectful and sympathetic non-Mormons" choose to stress the value of the Book of Mormon for the faith of the Saints. Unlike sectarian anti-Mormons who continue the parade of invective against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, a few gentile scholars currently tend to adopt a somewhat more respectful stance toward both. They have tried to find language with which they can appropriately recognize the power that the existence of the Book of Mormon, as well as the message set forth in it, has for the Saints, without thereby also granting that it is what it claims to be. Unfortunately, these writers are sometimes allied ideologically with dissidents, former Saints, and cultural Mormons.

In this category the Ostlings include Martin E. Marty (a prominent, contemporary American religious historian), Rodney Stark (a sociologist), Harold Bloom (a literary critic), and Jan Shipps, among others, all of whom, according to the Ostlings, see "the moral and spiritual values in the Book of Mormon" (p. 261). Whether the Ostlings are right in their claim about these authors is beside the point, since they do not appeal to them in their own attack on the Book of Mormon. Instead, they turn to those they label "liberals"—that is, to cultural Mormons who flatly deny that the Book of Mormon is true despite whatever lingering sentimental attachments they may still have to their religious roots. Why? The Ostlings grant that, "from its beginning, the church has declared it essential that the Book of Mormon be accepted as it presents itself, as historical fact, not inspired
fiction” (p. 263). Accordingly, those in thrall to various and sometimes conflicting revisionist explanations of the Book of Mormon\(^{41}\) are outside the circle of faith, though some may, of course, choose not to remove themselves formally from the church. The Ostlings realize that this is the case—they grant that among those who want to carve out this so-called middle path are “many excommunicated Mormons who still identify themselves as Mormon, as well as some thoughtful Saints who are carefully circumspect in what they say and write but regard the Book of Mormon as most likely of nineteenth-century origin” (p. 261).

Those described by the Ostlings as “thoughtful Saints”—that is, those cagey about their disbeliefs—are depicted as fighting the good fight against those the Ostlings denigrate as “loyalist scholars,” who accept and defend the truth of the Book of Mormon. Whatever else one might say about them, these “thoughtful Saints” would sometimes seem to lack what the Ostlings report that the former Mormon historian D. Michael Quinn calls “simple honesty among scholars” (p. 251), since “in what they say and write” they appear to cloak their infidelity. In their own polemic, though, the Ostlings turn these dissidents into heroes. The Ostlings do not hold sly unbelievers to Quinn’s lofty standards. In this they are, however, following Quinn’s lead, since honesty seems to be for him something the Brethren and his critics lack. All of this, of course, is familiar territory; the Ostlings add nothing to what is already known to those familiar with the recent debate over the Book of Mormon.\(^{42}\) They exploit for their own purposes what amounts to a tiny quarrel going on between Latter-day Saint scholars and some dissidents on the fringes of the church.

Regrettably, the Ostlings gossip about what are serious intellectual issues, calling attention to them merely for partisan polemical

\(^{41}\) The array of conflicting and contradictory explanations of the Book of Mormon is illustrated by the essays assembled by Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).

\(^{42}\) The entire debate over the Book of Mormon, which began even before its publication, is examined and assessed by Terryl L. Givens in his *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University, 2002).
purposes. They fail to clarify or contribute to the conversation currently taking place. Consequently, when they confront Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims, they confine themselves to describing the middle-path stance between reading the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text or dismissing it as a blatant hoax. There is, however, no indication in Mormon America that the Ostlings see anything either inspiring or inspired in what they label a historical hoax; they remain squarely in the old sectarian anti-Mormon camp. For their partisan, polemical purpose they exploit bits and pieces of the conversation that has been going on for twenty years over the Book of Mormon and are thereby able to make use of the fact that a few gentle observers, former Latter-day Saints, and cultural Mormons have suggested that something might be inspiring in the Book of Mormon even if it is not true—with the emphasis on the latter qualification.

Those who make this argument, with perhaps one or two exceptions, do not indicate what exactly they find either interesting or edifying in the Book of Mormon once they have rejected it as an authentic ancient history. On the contrary, they often boast that they find nothing of genuine value in the book. Robert Price, for example, in a most instructive instance, finds something at least a bit interesting in the Book of Mormon when it is read as frontier fiction. A member of the Jesus Seminar who is also heavily involved in the secular humanist movement, Price sees in the Book of Mormon something resembling what he finds in the Gospels of the New Testament when they are read through the lens provided by essentially secular humanist assumptions about divine things.43 If Price had published this essay earlier, the Ostlings could have added his name to the list of “sympathetic non-Mormons” (p. 261), some of whom, with urbane tolerance and even compassion for virtually all communities rooted in the Bible, and with ever so gentle strokes, dismiss the truth claims of both the Bible and the Book of Mormon for somewhat similar rea-

sons. But, of course, his reading of the Bible challenges the Ostlings’ evangelical religiosity at least as much as it does our faith. This is also true of Harold Bloom’s way of reading both the Bible and Protestant sectarian history.  

Massimo Introvigne has shown that “the Book of Mormon wars” are currently being ‘fought not around interpretation, but around the very nature of the Book of Mormon. Is it what it claims to be? Or is it merely somehow a product of Joseph Smith’s creative genius or religious imagination?’ This way of framing the question gets to the heart of the current squabbles. Introvigne also argues that “those claiming that it is neither of the two, but a fraud, exclude themselves from the debate and join the ranks of mere anti-Mormonism.” This is, of course, where the Ostlings are situated. Though they describe sympathetically the stance of those few who want to picture the Book of Mormon as a product of Joseph Smith’s unaided inventive powers and not an outright, blasphemous fraud, they end up advancing “mere anti-Mormonism.”

I am, however, gratified that the Ostlings describe me as one of the “current loyalist scholars” opposed to the so-called middle path. I am also not displeased that the Ostlings quote me as follows:

To reduce the Book of Mormon to mere myth weakens, if not destroys, the possibility of it witnessing to the truth about divine things. A fictional Book of Mormon fabricated by Joseph Smith, even when his inventiveness, genius, or “inspiration” is celebrated, does not witness to Jesus Christ but

46. Introvigne, “The Book of Mormon Wars,” 5 (in Davies, Mormon Identities, 26).
47. Ibid.
to human folly. A true Book of Mormon is a powerful witness; a fictional one is hardly worth reading and pondering. (pp. 263–64)  

History and the Faith and Memory of the Saints  

Just as the Ostlings do not entirely slight the conversation that has been taking place over how to read the Book of Mormon, neither do they completely ignore the related discussion of how to explain Joseph Smith. Indeed, they devote two chapters to these closely related issues (see chap. 15, “Faithful History,” pp. 238–58, and chap. 16, “The Gold Bible,” pp. 259–77). They are, however, not clear on the relationship of accounts of the Latter-day Saint past to the crucial question of how the Book of Mormon ought to be read, and hence they offer a confused commentary on the debate over how best to approach Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims. In this they go down a well-worn path—one familiar to the Saints from some recent cultural Mormon polemics and now also found, regrettably, in some sectarian anti-Mormon literature.  

In addition to describing briefly the place of the Book of Mormon in the faith of the Saints and the debate over its truth that began even before its publication, the Ostlings also focus attention on the way the Saints devote themselves to understanding crucial, even fateful, aspects of their past. They complain that “the church has always tried to retain a proprietary hold over the telling of its own history” (p. 250). Surely, though, they cannot be suggesting that the Saints could possibly be indifferent to the way the story of the restoration is told, for they themselves state that in “a very real sense . . . the church’s history is its theology” (p. 245)—that is, they realize that some of what has taken place in the past both grounds the faith of the Saints  

48. The Ostlings are quoting from my essay entitled “The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography” in Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 214. They could have quoted many related passages. What they chose to quote represents only some of my argument on the issue they address.
and provides much of its content. The Latter-day Saint past has always been contested territory. The moment Joseph Smith began to tell of his encounters with heavenly messengers, those who were skeptical, hostile, full of disbelief, threatened by his claims, or disenchanted have been busy telling their own versions of what they think happened—reporting on events in negative terms and contesting virtually every detail and every prophetic claim. The church has never controlled its history. Instead, the Saints have struggled to tell their story in a way that is consonant with, rather than destructive of, faith. What the Ostlings neglect to say is that, for all those whose faith is rooted in the Bible, an understanding of at least a segment of the past is crucial. Why? That Jesus, understood as the Messiah or Christ, was crucified is a historical statement, as is the claim that after three days he rose from the grave. The main difference between Latter-day Saints and others is that, for the Saints, the story did not end with the death of the apostles—it continues even now. For the Saints, this is one reason why history takes the place of theology, as that endeavor is undertaken by Christians generally.

The Ostlings acknowledge that, when contrasted with the Saints, sectarians are rather indifferent to their history, though, of course, “Protestants vary in their degree of historical amnesia” (p. 247). From my perspective, the Protestant historical amnesia is not limited to indifference to the quarrels of churchmen and to the divergent speculation of theologians through the ages; it is also manifested in an indifference to recent Protestant sectarian and denominational history, little or none of which forms part of the ground or content of their brand of Christian faith. For example, those currently associated with the Southern Baptist Convention certainly do not have as part of the ground of their faith a passionate awareness that the denomination to which they subscribe was founded by preachers who were eager to

defend slavery against their abolitionist brethren in the North. Instead, they are indifferent to much or all of their own denominational history, with all its twists and turns and factional and sometimes brutally internecine quarreling, since their faith, as they insist, is drawn from and rests upon an interpretation of the Bible alone. The history they turn to is thus far away and long ago and not, as it is with the Saints, also here and now, with the heavens still open and the story continuing. This is significant, since factions of contemporary conservative Protestantism tend to see themselves as guardians of something they imagine to be orthodox, historic, trinitarian, biblical Christianity. To the Saints, however, they appear as formalists, who still manifest a form of godliness but who, by dogmatically closing the heavens, deny the power of God, arbitrarily limiting him by restricting what he can and cannot do. Instead they turn to a closed canon of scripture read through the lens of categories and explanations worked out in partly understood and long-forgotten theological controversies, ending at times in formal statements of faith.

And unless conservative Protestants are doing battle with Roman Catholics (which some of them have a penchant to do, especially if they subscribe to some strain of fundamentalism), they tend to ignore the details of what took place from the first century to the Reformation within and among various, often warring, factions of Christians. In general, they insist on an apostasy of large proportions and consequently a need for the church, or at any rate the essentials of faith, to be radically reformed by theologians, though not necessarily restored by God. But history is not a central concern in the disputes over theology found today among the various factions of conserva-

50. On 18 November 1830, the Reverend John Sherer wrote to the Reverend Absalom Peters of the American Home Missionary Society, his Presbyterian supervising agency, indicating that he had encountered Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, as well as the tiny Colesville branch of the fledgling Church of Christ. Sherer's letter is quoted by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 187. This tiny group of Saints, according to Sherer, "call themselves a church of Christ, and the only church of Christ. All professing christians who do not adhere to their system, they consider as formalists, 'having the form of Godliness, but denying the power.'"
tive Protestants—for example, the controversy between radical and more moderate Calvinists, not to mention Arminians, over the atonement and over what are thought to be the attributes of God. These kinds of sometimes fierce battles are mostly fought by proof-texting the Bible. With few exceptions, contemporary Protestants—those in the pews—tend to disregard the bulk of Christian history, dismissing most of what actually happened in the past as irrelevant to the content and truth of their own faith, which preachers tend to reduce to simple formulas. Except for a few specialists in the history of dogma, contemporary conservative Protestants seem to me to want to believe that everyone, everywhere, almost always has agreed on the fundamentals, whatever they are currently thought to be. And when they represent their own sometimes ferocious domestic theological quarrels to those of us on the sidelines, they downplay these controversies by representing them as merely slight differences of opinion over nonessentials.51

In fact, though, some of these quarrels seem to me to be of considerable importance. An instructive example of the kind of controversy I have in mind can be seen in a recent bitter exchange between Norman Geisler and James White, both of whom are, incidentally, strident anti-Mormons. After Geisler published a work on a moderate version of Calvinism,52 White countered with a passionate defense of what he considers to be Reformed, or Calvinist, principles.53 The chief

51. For a description of the enormous variety of positions entertained by presumably orthodox Christians since the second century on such matters as scripture, divine revelation, tradition and its relationship to scripture, salvation, the church, God, the Trinity, life beyond the grave, what is essential and not essential to Christian discipleship, the estrangement and goodness of human beings, and divine providence, see Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002). Olson situates his own theological heresies, which are Arminian rather than Calvinist, squarely within the unity he finds somewhere behind all the diversity that constitutes the history of Christian theology.


issue was the soundness of an “extreme” reading of Five-Point Calvinism, or what is often called TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints). Geisler had argued that even Calvin was not a Calvinist in the way he is depicted by some Calvinists and that the contents of TULIP could be traced no further back into the Christian past than St. Augustine, who advanced something like the heresies of TULIP only late in his career—that is, after A.D. 417. This sent White into a round of proof-texting from the New Testament. He never addressed Geisler’s claim that nothing approaching “extreme” Calvinism could be found among Christian theologians earlier than the last part of Augustine’s career, when he wrote things that, if Geisler is at all correct, were novel, unbiblical, and simply wrong. White dismissed Geisler as an Arminian heretic, a charge Geisler flatly denied. According to Arminian views, the atonement is believed to have been universal and not limited—that is, the atonement is in force for all human beings and not just for a few lucky saved ones. At least some evangelicals entertain this view. Latter-day Saints who bother to read this kind of literature find it both amusing and instructive: it demonstrates some of the problems associated with yielding to the urge of conservative Protestants to do theology. We find it odd that both fundamentalists and evangelicals often assume that getting such matters reduced to neat formulae is a kind of necessary analog or even prerequisite to getting oneself saved—even, ironically, when one insists on an “extreme” understanding of predestination and election.

This helps to explain the tendency among conservative Protestants to substitute minimal, vague creedal statements—as well as assent to the supposed infallibility or inerrancy of the Bible, the meaning of which is notoriously difficult to pin down—for an understanding of the full range of theological controversy going on now and in the past. These tendencies manifest elements of the historical amnesia to which the Ostlings casually testify. Conservative Protestants can thus conveniently overlook the fact that the creeds and confessions are themselves but the outward sign and end result of fierce
battles that once raged beneath the surface of traditional, presumably orthodox faith, where it is assumed that nothing much has ever happened that makes a real difference.

This is not, however, to say that Protestants of different stripes do not have historical content in their faith, for they do. Even if they wanted to, they could not entirely banish crucial historical elements. As mentioned, the claim that Jesus is the Messiah (or Christ) is necessarily historical, unless one has adopted a radically liberal Protestant understanding of the Bible such as people associated with the Jesus Seminar might now advance. And the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and later rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples is a historical one. But conservative Protestants tend to focus on events and teachings recorded in the Bible understood through the lens provided by the creeds and other confusing theological speculations, the history of which is of little concern to the vast bulk of communicants.

The Ostlings, after granting that Protestants have varying degrees of historical amnesia and after noting correctly that Latter-day Saints take elements of their own history seriously, affirm that, in the place of history, the “creedal churches”—which presumably still include at least many if not most Protestants, as well as pious Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics—“have official statements of faith, [while] the Mormon Church tends to have official versions of sacred history” (p. 245). The Ostlings thus assume, since their own religious world is dogmatically set in polished theological formulae, that the Saints must necessarily have something analogous that takes the place of official creeds and confessions. This may help explain why they and anti-Mormons generally target accounts of our past and seek to offer their own revisionist versions. They assume that identifying a flaw in some account of the Latter-day Saint past will do irreparable damage to the faith of the Saints. The Ostlings then wrongly surmise that this “official history” includes “everything that has happened to the church ever since” the restoration, setting the stage for claims that “sensitive historical issues are frequently downplayed, avoided or denied” (p. 247)
and for gossip about how the Brethren have recently been mean to some Mormon historians, restricted access to church archives, and so forth.

On the other hand, the Ostlings correctly sense that history is important for the Saints, who can be said to live by and in a story. And we tell stories about our own encounters with the divine that anchor our hopes and expectations for the future. At least part of what this means is that the faith of the Saints is not derived from or dependent on recondite theological or philosophical speculation, nor is it the result of some mode of biblical exegesis—learned or otherwise—fashioned by theologians in long-forgotten and little-understood controversies. Although we make use of such work and even do some of it ourselves, it is always an auxiliary to the faith. We are painfully aware of how our hopes, assumptions, and preunderstandings control or at least influence what we make of texts, so we are cautious about biblical studies or any apparent finding that might in some way bear on prophetic truth claims. We certainly do not see such scholarly endeavors as yielding proofs but perhaps as assisting in our understanding and in our dedication to God. We see the basic plot in the Bible as unfinished and therefore see ourselves living in a kind of charmed or enchanted world in which the divine is, from time to time, manifest in our own lives in ways not at all unlike those described in our scriptures, with God still active among his covenant people in essentially the same manner as that depicted in those texts. So, for the Saints, the heavens are not closed, the canon of scripture is not finished, the story has not ended, the great drama continues, and we are part of it. We strive to fuse our own stories with those we find in the Latter-day Saint past and in our scriptures. Both the Book of Mormon and the story of its recovery have invited and facilitated our entry into a world pulsing with divine power. They work together to invite those who receive them to leave the world of sectarian controversy over theology and live, instead, in a world much like the one described in our scriptures.

For the Saints, the scriptures are thus not mere artifacts from a dead past. And though they obviously describe many theophanies
and other divine special revelations, what really counts is not assent to their infallibility nor to their being the final, finished divine revelation. We are not into bibliolatry. The scriptures are not themselves revelations for us, unless or until the Holy Spirit brings them to life in our hearts and minds—and then in our deeds. In this way the scriptures provide us with a guide and a model for our own immediate link, here and now, to the presence and power of God in our lives. What this means is that, far more than with other Christians, our faith is both grounded in history and has historical events central to its content. And these form and direct our identity in the present and direct our aspirations for the future, both here below and beyond. I have tried to capture this ethos by referring to the faith and memory of the Saints. What counts for us is not merely an assent to theological formulae; an initial, momentary confession; or acceptance of an invitation to come to the altar and be saved. We seek instead a transforming, eventually sanctifying, individual and communal experience that involves a long and sometimes painful process of rebirth, faithfulness to our covenants, constant repentance, and a powerful linking of faith and deeds that often offends sectarian critics.

Thus the faith of the Saints tends to be contested in the arena of history and not that of theology, either dogmatic or systematic. Submission to pat theological formulae cannot justify or sanctify anyone any more than obedience to the ceremonial law requiring circumcision can determine who is or is not genuinely right with God. What seems to trouble some sectarians about the Saints is that we now live, like the former Saints, in a world of wonders—including seers and prophets among the covenant people of God—and not in the sectarian world dominated by theological speculation, controversy, carefully crafted creeds, and dogmatic hair-splitting. Evangelical critics of the Church of Jesus Christ need to realize that, instead of doing theology, especially in their way—that is, striving to sort out puzzles generated over years of uninspired and uninspiring theological disputation—we tell stories. These stories link us to the past, recalling God's mighty deeds, and shape the future as they form our identity as the covenant people of God.
A world like that of the Bible, in which the heavens are not closed, is a world pulsing with divine purpose and power and thereby permeated with gifts from God. To testify to these things, for us, is not to play the game of theological or philosophical disputation, however enticing and amusing that sort of thing may be. Neither is it to invoke language that the evangelicals tend to call witnessing—a language in which, in addition to confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior, one must also have the correct theological dogma setting out the doctrine of justification, and one must proclaim the dogma that God, understood as Being-Itself, created everything (including time and space) out of nothing. Our approach is, instead, a public witness of a reality in our lives that is vouchsafed to us by the Holy Spirit. Evangelicals may sometimes imagine—building perhaps on their own experience of a momentary emotional twinge as they answered an altar call or had some similar initial experience, when they were presumably regenerated once and for all—that our faith is set out in the routine ways they commonly employ, or found in something similar to their own witnessing rituals. It is not. Instead, it is grounded in our own experience with the guiding, healing, and sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit.

The Ostlings sense that something like this is true by noting Jan Shipp's's comment that the early Latter-day Saints "were conscious of living through their own sacred history in a new age. They were also, in a sense, recapitulating the sacred history of scripture through their own experiences" (pp. 246-47).\(^5\) This explains why the Ostlings focus their attack on the Book of Mormon as a way of debunking the faith of the Saints and counteracting the prophetic truth claims made by Joseph Smith, whose experience opened the heavens for those who have genuinely trusted the restored gospel. This also explains why we see the efforts of dissidents or former Latter-day Saints to fashion radically revisionist explanations of the founding or generative events, or anyone's efforts to explain away the Book of Mormon, as frontal attacks on our faith.

\(^5\) While the statement is accurate as far as it goes, it is a mistake to think that the Saints no longer see themselves this way.
The Ostlings clearly recognize that our faith rests on history. They sense that, unlike Protestants, the Saints "remember" the past, "and they remember in great detail. The remembrances bind them as a people" (p. 239). This is exactly right.55 And it explains why the Ostlings mock our sometimes clumsy efforts to defend, keep alive, and deepen the memory of the crucial founding theophanies. It also explains why the Ostlings offer a rather pedestrian selection of complaints about the way we understand our own past, tell our story, and deal with revisionist accounts.

It appears important for the Ostlings to challenge the integrity of what we see as the hand of God in our immediate past. Unlike some of the less thoughtful sectarian critics, they sense that nothing much is to be gained by quarreling with us over competing interpretations of the Bible. They focus instead on squabbles over the Latter-day Saint past, borrowing from a few dissidents or former Latter-day Saints a tale of how "the church suppresses evidence that is contrary to the official interpretation" and of how it has "censured Mormon historians" (p. 251) who challenge what they call "official history." To defend "traditional" or "faithful history," according to the Ostlings, "means that sensitive historical issues frequently are downplayed, avoided, or denied" (p. 247). This is, of course, the ideological stance currently being advanced by those who are anxious to place the church in the worst possible light, who want to create public relations problems, and who engage in sensationalism or partisan propaganda as they avoid dealing with substantive issues.

Certainly, Latter-day Saint history cannot be shielded from critical attention (see p. 247). Thus, in order to point out efforts by the Saints to downplay "sensitive historical issues" in an attempt—as they see it—to shield our faith from the real truth about the past, the

55. I have advanced more detailed versions of this argument elsewhere. See, for example, the argument set out in my essay entitled "Modernity, History and Latter-day Saint Faith," which appears in Mormon Identities in Transition, 20–24; and also see a more elaborate version of the argument in "To Remember and Keep: On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book," in The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 95–110.
Ostlings quote Martin E. Marty, a distinguished Protestant historian of American religion. Marty was actually making a somewhat different point about the Saints, which the Ostlings seem to ignore. What he argued is that "faith attached to or mediated through historical events"—which is the kind of faith characteristic of mainstream Christianity, Judaism, and Islam,

has always had some dimensions of an "offense" or "scandal" to the insider just as it has been only that to the outsider who despises. Awareness of the pettinesses and peccadillos among leaders or injustices in the record of a people—one thinks of the Christian Crusades and Inquisition or the papal corruption in many ages—has to be some sort of threat to the clarity of faith's vision, though it clearly has not meant the loss of faith... on the part of so many who are aware.\textsuperscript{56}

According to Marty, "whoever knows how Christian faith survives and can survive knowledge of all the evidences of fallibility and scandal that occurred through history will understand why the outsider historian finds trivial the question of whether the faith [of Latter-day Saints] is threatened by the revelation of human shortcomings."\textsuperscript{57} But, in order to appreciate Marty's point, one must have scrutinized accounts of Christian history that move beyond the first century.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} Martin E. Marty, “Two Intelligences: An Address to the Crisis of Mormon Historiography,” in \textit{Faithful History}, 174.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 175.
\textsuperscript{58} I have come away from reading Roger E. Olson's \textit{Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform} (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1999), with a deep melancholy. Olson provides a nice intellectual history covering the main outlines of postbiblical theological disputation, but the even more depressing accounts are essentially social and political. And there, even with the help of a faithful guide, one cannot avoid the ugly, depressing tales of human depravity that constitute the very substance of the story being told. It is in the face of these appalling details, Professor Marty argues, that those with pious dispositions find various ways to see a glimmer of light in the midst of all the intrigues and maneuvering, the pomp and politics, the blood and gore. For an effort to put this terrible tale in the best possible light, one might consult a social history of Christianity like that provided by Justo L. Gonzalez, \textit{The Story of Christianity}, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984–85). Nothing in the Latter-day Saint past resembles the dreadful story told by Gonzalez.
Of course Marty sees that we are concerned about what he calls “public relations” issues. The problem is not that we have not and cannot continue to come to terms with such matters, or that our faith cannot survive an awareness of our rather obvious imperfections, but that these human imperfections and mistakes—if we are certain they are such—are constantly being used to damage the church by critics who, it must be noted, are often not interested in the full truth about our past. And yet the faith persists and prospers. The reason is that revelations of shortcomings among the Saints do not somehow nullify our experiences as individuals and as a community with the guidance and assurance of the Holy Spirit. The constant barrage of efforts to embarrass the church that appears in books, newspapers, magazines, and tabloids is, of course, a concern to the Saints. But the Saints have never known a time when this sort of thing was not taking place. And the stark contrast between the reality we experience and the lurid stuff in the latest offensive tabloid only deepens our appreciation for the gifts that come from God.

“Yet intellectually,” according to Marty, addressing directly the issue of the sins of the Saints, “these are not of much interest.” The reason is that “most of the writing on Mormon history that poses a problem” concerns what he calls the “generative events”—the founding theophanies and the Book of Mormon. According to Marty—and he is correct on this issue—the reason is that, “if the beginning of the promenade of Mormon history, the First Vision and the Book of Mormon, can survive the crisis, then the rest of the promenade follows and nothing that happens in it can really detract from the miracle of the whole.” If the founding theophanies and the Book of Mormon “do not survive, there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full, interest in the rest of the story.”

Gossip about a few dissidents and apostates (those the Ostlings call “Dissenters and Exiles,” pp. 351–71), the alleged mistreatment by

---

59. Marty, “‘Two Intelligences,’” 176.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
some of the Brethren of a few historians, complaints that some materials in the church archives are not available to just anyone, or efforts of a few to focus attention on the evils of polygamy or the terrible event at Mountain Meadows should not be of major concern either to the Saints or to those familiar with the history of religious movements generally. And this is, I believe, the point made by Martin Marty. Those who focus on such issues—whether dissidents, former Latter-day Saints, or secular or sectarian anti-Mormons, including journalists—have a superficial understanding of the ground and content of our faith, at best. At worst, they prove themselves willing to employ any means for essentially polemical purposes.

Contrary to what some sectarians assume, we do not view ourselves or our leaders as infallible or inerrant. Instead, we recognize that our best efforts to find favor with God, our sincerest struggles to keep the commandments and to build Zion, even with assistance provided by God, are always flawed. We are always in need of divine mercy. So pointing out mistakes or trotting out tales of what appear to be imperfections does not accomplish what our enemies desire, though it may sometimes constitute a public relations problem for us. And what might we make of the fact that our critics sometimes have their own rather embarrassing foibles? These are often ignored. Dissidents, journalists, and revisionist historians are not particularly eager to reveal embarrassing tendencies about themselves and certainly do not welcome an inspection of their own shortcomings, which are sometimes relevant to the issues being contested. Anti-Mormons who are obsessed with our faults, and especially with those of the Brethren, have often not been willing to make public certain details about dissidents whose reputations they have found it useful to protect for their own partisan purposes.63

63. For example, Sandra and Jerald Tanner, inveterate sectarian anti-Mormon publicists, knew about D. Michael Quinn's homosexual proclivities long before he finally made these public. Sandra Tanner told me, for example, that she found his notorious sex survey simply revolting. But the Tanners said nothing then or subsequently about this matter. Why? Is it that they find his revisionist history and his personal attacks on the Brethren useful? This appears to be the case, since they market his stuff. If so, we have an explana-
Some Unfortunate Ideological Labeling

In addition to the debate over the truth of the Book of Mormon, the Ostlings mention my closely related contribution to the recent controversy over how best to approach the Latter-day Saint past. However, instead of dealing with my arguments, they merely classify me as “very conservative,” while they lionize former Latter-day Saint historian D. Michael Quinn, whom they label a “liberal.” Quinn is made into a truly heroic figure, presumably because of his self-proclaimed insistence on “simple honesty among scholars” (p. 251), as mentioned above. The use of amorphous, highly politicized labels is, I suppose, to be expected from journalists whose world comes in the form dictated by the seating arrangements in the French parliament—that is, right, center, left (or conservative, moderate, liberal). This stuff is the very lifeblood of journalists but the deathbed of genuine understanding. The Ostlings, regrettably, employ such crude, ideological pigeonholing when they seek to describe the conversation going on among historians on how best to deal with the essentials of church history.

When journalists label something “traditional” and those who defend it “conservative,” they consign both to the dustbin. That is just the way this kind of labeling works. One hardly needs an argument when one can substitute pejorative labels for plausible, coherent analysis and a careful weighing of evidences. To cite one instance with which I am well acquainted, the Ostlings picture me as one of the “articulate adherents of the conservative position” on how best to approach the past of the Latter-day Saints (p. 416). But beyond this, the Ostlings neglect to explain exactly what my position is. Instead, they contrast me with Richard L. Bushman, whom they describe as holding a “moderate stance” (p. 416). They fail to indicate on which issues and in what ways I am supposed to differ with Bushman. Differences in style among writers would not seem to be sufficient grounds for the distinction the Ostlings want to make. I am fond of
Bushman's essays on the Latter-day Saint past;64 I cannot identify one issue on which I am aware of a disagreement with him. Why, then, am I placed in a different category? Is it perhaps because the Ostlings do not really understand the literature they cite? Or if they understand this literature, why do they choose to employ clumsy ideological labeling? Is it because they are engaged in a partisan, polemical campaign? If not, then why not confront the arguments?

The Ostlings are, however, correct in distinguishing my position—and also that of Bushman—from that of Quinn, as well as in reporting that he claims not to be driven by an agenda or ideology and therefore to be an objective historian.65 Both Bushman and I maintain that such claims are substantively empty, conceptually confused, and self-serving.66 Disregarding the literature on the possibility and desirability of objectivity in doing history, Quinn contrasts what he describes as his desire to be “fair and objective” with what he labels “ultimate objectivity.”67 Seemingly, he refers to those who want their readers to view them and their associates as “fair and objective”—that is, disinterested, detached, honest, balanced, or dispassionate—in the things they write about the past, while they picture those with whom they disagree, especially their critics, as biased, polemical, and essentially dishonest. But, in fact, no one either defends or criticizes what Quinn describes as “ultimate objectivity,” and Quinn himself ignores the literature that is focused precisely on such claims. He blasts away at a straw man, seemingly as a way of preserving his attachment to a thin version of the myth of objectivity rather than dealing with the actual criticisms of that ideology. This approach has

64. See, for example, Richard L. Bushman's Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).


67. Quinn, “Editor's Introduction,” to The New Mormon History, viii.
become Quinn's stock-in-trade. Does he want his readers to believe that he is allowing evidence to speak its truth through him as a detached, objective, neutral observer, while his critics are pictured as pernicious partisans or polemicians driven by a corrupting ideology? Seemingly. He charges those with whom he disagrees with dishonesty. He ignores the need for comity among scholars involved in conversations over intellectual issues. In addition, some rather deeply held prejudices seem to dictate his understanding of what constitutes evidence, as well as to control his interpretations and explanations.\(^\text{68}\)

Is someone wholly "fair and objective," however those words are understood, while covertly advancing a private agenda?\(^\text{69}\) The Ostlings ignore such questions. Instead, they identify Quinn as a "liberal" and also as "a 'new Mormon history' scholar who attempts to combine the goal of objective scholarship and candor with taking faith claims seriously" (p. 416). Leonard Arrington granted that "every historian's judgments were inescapably influenced by their interests, values, and private beliefs."\(^\text{70}\) If this assessment is true, and I believe that it is, then we have grounds for wondering if individuals are being open and honest if they do not make public their lifestyle preferences until after they are excommunicated from the church, while telling what amounts to tall tales about why they were "officially" removed from the community of Saints.\(^\text{71}\)

---

68. In his "The New Mormon Hysteria," Sunstone, March 1993, 5, Quinn claims that what he labels dishonest "Traditional Mormon History," whatever that is, "sanitizes the Mormon past of human infallibility" (emphasis added). What he may have been trying to say in this diatribe is that the history he loathes does not emphasize "human fallibility."


Quinn has become a major figure in anti-Mormon attacks on the church. He has fitted himself well for this role by, among other things, fashioning a reputation for quarreling with the Brethren over how the past of the Saints ought to be approached. This makes of him a stick with which others can beat the church. The Ostlings make considerable use of him in that role. But why would journalists cite and quote my writings? The reason seems to be that the Ostlings have a story to tell, and they need, in addition to heroes like Quinn, a few knaves to serve as foils. From their perspective, therefore, there has been a struggle between heroic “liberals” (like Quinn), who seek to be “objective and fair,” and malevolent “conservatives,” who can be portrayed as wanting to hide or ignore the truth about the Latter-day Saint past, presumably so that the Brethren can continue to mollify and manipulate the faithful. Or, put in an alternative vocabulary, the Ostlings want to describe a struggle between “new Mormon historians,” who are pictured as wholesome truth-lovers, and “traditionalists,” who insist on sanitized, distorted versions of the past. This is not an exaggeration: the Ostlings actually picture me as anxious to avoid telling the truth about the Latter-day Saint past (see pp. 250, 416, 418, 425, 426, 436). In addition, they report that Elder Boyd K. Packer, speaking to teachers in the Church Educational System assembled at Brigham Young University in 1981, commented on the way he believed they ought to present the Latter-day Saint past to their young students (see p. 249). The cautions offered by Elder Packer are briefly set forth by the Ostlings, who then claim in melodramatic language that his “stance has led to open warfare in history scholarship” (p. 250).

In aligning the practitioners of this “new history” on one side and “the proponents of ‘faithful history’” (p. 250) on the other, the Ostlings abuse an expression once employed by Richard Bushman,

---

while ignoring his analysis.73 Bushman was not calling for lying for
the Lord or for a sanitized history that covers over or ignores anything,
and neither am I. What he invited is a more thoughtful history—one
more consonant with faith and thereby less dependent on the indoctrina-
tion that students undergo in secularized graduate schools. He
sought a history more genuinely devout and less disinterested and
detached. Bushman’s own work as a Mormon historian has exempli-
fied his prescriptions. We are not asking that the Brethren or the Saints
be presented as faultless heroes; they ought to be known in their full
humanity, which is clearly not without its occasional blemishes. We
are, after all, struggling to obey God, and like everyone we are imperfect.
I go a bit further than Bushman, though: I also want my historians
portrayed without halos. This has led, of course, to some consterna-
tion among those who have no qualms about exposing the faults of
the Brethren but prefer that their own remain hidden.

The Ostlings report that I am among those who are “not histori-
ans,” but who are, instead, “professors of political science at Brigham
Young University” who have been critical of something vaguely called
“new Mormon history” or “revisionist history.” There is some truth
to this, but not much. Instead of criticizing “new Mormon history,”
I have merely tried to trace the history of that slogan. I have also
sought to figure out the function of this label in polemical literature
like Mormon America, since there simply is no identifiable movement
that carries this name. Be that as it may, along with some others I am
said to occasionally

write essays for independent journals such as Sunstone as
well as church-sanctioned publications, defending the idea
that “objective” or neutral history scholarship is an illusion.

If one’s research into history proceeds from naturalistic

73. See Bushman’s essay entitled “Faithful History,” in Faithful History. 1–17. A glance
at this essay will indicate how journalists, following critics of the church, have mangled
the meaning of Bushman’s language by turning it into a silly slogan.
presuppositions, it will inevitably do violence to faith claims. Only history that proceeds within the language of faith can do justice to an understanding of the sacred. (p. 250)\textsuperscript{74}

Elsewhere the Ostlings describe Sunstone as “a stylish outlet for liberals and dissidents” (p. xx). For this and other reasons, I have not been eager to publish in that magazine. The Ostlings must have in mind essays by others, since all I have published in that venue is a brief essay dealing with the myth of objectivity that captivates the rhetoric and imagination of some Mormon historians, and two letters responding to radically revisionist essays.\textsuperscript{75} What the Ostlings fail to mention is that the vast bulk of the response to the radically revisionist literature produced by dissidents and former Latter-day Saints has been published by FARMS. In addition, the Ostlings neglect to set forth my arguments or those of others who have dealt with attacks on the Book of Mormon or our many responses to various efforts to fashion some so-called middle-path explanation of Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims. Neither do they indicate that, after two decades, these arguments, as far as I can see, have not been answered, except with slogans and name-calling.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{74} This description might also fit Dialogue, which has now lost much of its credibility. That fact explains why most Latter-day Saints view these publishing venues with a measure of suspicion.

\textsuperscript{75} See my review essay of Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), entitled “The Myth of Objectivity,” Sunstone, August 1990, 54-56; as well as a letter entitled “Revisionist Pride,” Sunstone, October 1991, 4-5; and a letter I wanted entitled “The Mormon Story,” but which the editors entitled “The Mormon (His)story,” Sunstone, February 1992, 9-10. This fiddling with my title convinced me that it is pointless to publish in that venue, since the editors were not taking seriously the things they included in their magazine.

\textsuperscript{76} An example of obfuscation, ironically passing as presumably “objective” scholarship, can be found in D. Michael Quinn’s Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, rev. and enlarged ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998). In numerous passages, Quinn turns his critics into “LDS polemicists” or “FARMS polemicists” by fabricating an idiosyncratic notion of what constitutes a polemic; then they are routinely accused of dishonesty, and their views are caricatured and rejected without being confronted. See William J. Hamblin, “That Old Black Magic,” FARMS Review of Books 12/2 (2000): 225-393, for some of the details.
The Ostlings, Countercultists, and Mainstream Evangelicalism

As I have indicated, the Ostlings do not seem to be comfortable with the zealots who constitute the bulk of the sectarian countercult industry. Instead, they seem to represent a somewhat more sophisticated and responsible brand of sectarian anti-Mormonism—one that is somewhat better informed and more courteous. (In fact, the evangelical movement, into which the Ostlings seem to fit, was started by Billy Graham and others in the 1940s in an effort to blunt and replace excesses found in the fundamentalist ideology that had come to dominate conservative American Protestantism between the two world wars.) The Ostlings seem to me either not to have firsthand knowledge of essentially fundamentalist countercultism or to have chosen not to follow in the footsteps of the anti-Mormon segment of the industry.77 In effect, they seem to have borrowed much of their characterization of the agencies and individuals that produce or promote anti-Mormon propaganda from one of my commentaries on contemporary sectarian anti-Mormonism (see pp. 345–50).78 I am not sure how this fact will play out among countercultists, who may not be aware that the Ostlings move in other and somewhat higher circles. They may conclude that an enemy of their enemy, despite the differences, is at least temporarily a friend. However, to fail to distinguish this new brand of anti-Mormonism from their own would be a manifestation of the propagandistic nature of these quarrels. For similar


reasons, secular critics of the church form temporary alliances with sectarian countercultists when firing at the Saints, and countercultists may borrow from and be dependent on former Latter-day Saints who, in other situations, are their mortal enemies.

The Ostlings, it turns out, mention my analysis of the current crisis facing what was once known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the controlling faction of which is now known as the Community of Christ (p. 426). In this setting, their treatment of my publications is much like their treatment of those of the countercult industry—that is, my essays are not, as elsewhere in Mormon America, unfavorably contrasted with the ideology of various noisy dissidents, cultural Mormons, or former Latter-day Saint historians. Instead, my work on the countercultists and on the RLDS seems to have been mined by the Ostlings for useful information. Thus, when borrowing from some of my essays, the Ostlings do not hint that I am a kind of Neanderthal conservative. But when they portray the issues at stake in the current battle over the Book of Mormon, their way of dealing with my writing, and that of others as well, shifts into a familiar negative mode.

I am not the only Latter-day Saint scholar who has been puzzled by the way the Ostlings deal with their work. Others whose names show up here and there in Mormon America have indicated to me that their positions on various issues have been distorted in one way or another. None of these scholars reports being interviewed by the Ostlings, and none was offered an opportunity to comment on the book prior to its publication. The Ostlings could easily have improved the overall quality of their book if they had sought the assistance of those best fitted to comment on their work, rather than turning to those who are perhaps eager for a vindication for their own emotional estrangement from the mainstream Latter-day Saint intellectual community.

Significantly, even moderate evangelicals like the Ostlings make use of former Latter-day Saint historian D. Michael Quinn. His essays are cited and quoted more often in *Mormon America* than those of any other author. In other contexts one can assume that the Ostlings would not be fond of his new ideology. The Ostlings indicate in an endnote that “three years after his excommunication, D. Michael Quinn let it be known publicly that he is homosexual, but that issue played no part in his years of difficulty with LDS officials” (p. 427). How do they know what did or did not play a role in his excommunication? Did “LDS officials” provide this information? Elsewhere they opine that “officially his 1993 excommunication stemmed from an article . . . claiming that Joseph Smith effectively gave women the priesthood” by including them in the endowment and sealing ceremonies “and a 1992 *Sunstone* essay on church repression” of what he considers the truth about the Latter-day Saint past (p. 357). Currently the church makes no statements, official or otherwise, on disciplinary matters. There are no official announcements upon which the Ostlings could possibly have relied. Instead, they parrot Quinn’s account and label it “official.” But they are, after all, investigative journalists, and there are ways of figuring out what might have led to Quinn’s excommunication. Even without an official announcement, it would not be entirely implausible to suspect that his excommunication and his homosexual leanings might be linked.

Lavina Anderson, in an *apologia* for Quinn, reports that in a letter dated 18 May 1993, Paul Hanks, his stake president, mentioned “very sensitive matters’ that were not related to Michael’s historical writings.” And what might they be? According to Anderson, “the allusion to Michael’s sexual orientation, which Michael had not yet made public, was unmistakable.” Despite this acknowledgment, Anderson reports that Quinn remained skeptical “that nonhistorical questions prompted Hanks’s persistence” in trying to have a conversation with him in which these “very sensitive matters” could be

resolved. Despite what appears to Anderson as an allusion to moral issues, Quinn seems to have wanted to believe that his problems with the Church of Jesus Christ resulted from concern about what he had published and not his “sexual orientation.” Why? I wonder if he avoided having a conversation with Paul Hanks so that he could continue to assert that what he had written about the Latter-day Saint past led to his excommunication. He clearly wants to be seen as an honest truth-teller who has been hounded for his virtues. Lavina Anderson, though, has now provided a more plausible explanation of Quinn’s excommunication than the one he has insisted on.

Lamentably, much like both secular critics and countercultists generally, the Ostlings use Quinn when it suits their own partisan polemical purposes, while ignoring or downplaying the genuinely tragic side of his story and its implications for the tales he tells.

**Partisan Advocacy**

Like the editors of *The New Mormon Challenge*, the Ostlings do not want to seem openly or stridently hostile toward the Saints. They are, instead, condescending in ways that are analogous to the way virtually every community of believers gets treated by journalists, including evangelicals and their allies. But at times the Ostlings drop the guise of balanced, objective reporters. An example of this lapse into partisan advocacy can be found, among other places, when they confront the issue of human deification (see pp. 307–14). They garble what the Saints teach and believe on this matter by initially reducing the early Christian doctrine of deification to an extension or reflection of a bland “Methodist and Arminian view of sanctification, a doctrine of man’s potential perfectibility through free choice with the help of God’s grace” (p. 307). But they then claim that this Arminian-style sanctification, which is presumably entirely unlike the Latter-day Saint teaching, “was thoroughly trinitarian and retained a dis-

---

81. Ibid., 351.
tinction between the creature and the creator” (p. 307). "In Mormonism man has the potential for actual godhood” (p. 307). They also more than hint that we do not distinguish between ourselves and God, while they claim that patristic writers did not really mean deification as the fulfillment of the potential for actual godhood. For those who reject the most radical or extreme versions of Calvinism and consequently believe in genuine moral agency, if the Ostlings are correct, sanctification bears little resemblance to deification.

In this way the Ostlings strive to rebut some of the scholarly appeals by Latter-day Saint scholars to the patristic literature in which deification is a central teaching. They cite a few scholars outside the Latter-day Saint tradition who in some cases have been coached to distinguish what is found in the patristic literature from LDS teachings (see pp. 310–12). One of these insists on “an ontological gap” between man and God (p. 311), whatever that strange, nonbiblical language may mean. The Saints do not, of course, deny that profound differences exist between God and his children. But philosophical notions associated with the Greek word for Being (on)—ontology, ontological gaps, and so forth—do not account for these differences. Since we do not imagine that God, understood as Being-Itself, created everything, including time and space and human beings, out of nothing, we have no difficulty with the biblical concept that, whatever our current weaknesses and limitations, we are of the same genus as our Father in Heaven and his Son. We also believe that all of our Father’s children have, through faith (understood as trust in Jesus as Redeemer from sin, and also as Lord and Savior), the possibility of becoming the seed of Christ. We thus hope to become one with the Messiah or Christ, just as he is one with his and our Father,

82. By “thoroughly trinitarian” the Ostlings may have in mind a form of the old Sabellian or modalist heresy—which is rather common among critics of the Church of Jesus Christ. This heresy effectively denies that there are three distinct members of the Godhead. This is done in an effort to protect their understanding of monotheism against what they wrongly conceive of as Mormon polytheism.
by making and keeping a covenant that makes possible our eventual full rebirth through his gifts, in his likeness, and with whatever of his attributes he can equip us with.

Following those who invoke categories foreign to the scriptures, the Ostlings also make much of what they call the "nature" or "essence" of God (p. 311), which they insist is both incorporeal and nontemporal. This is presumably done in an effort to drive a radical wedge between God and human beings such that no one ever really has "the potential for actual godhood." They strive to turn their understanding of the ancient view of theosis into a version of Arminian notions of sanctification. What the Ostlings do not set out is exactly why and how the Latter-day Saint idea of deification is linked to sanctification—sometimes also called exaltation. If they had done this, they would have had to inform their readers that the Saints believe that sanctification is possible only as a gift from God. It is God's work through the Holy Spirit. But this would have then removed their primary objection to what the Saints believe about deification. In the Book of Mormon we find the following: "And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot" (Moroni 10:33). The Latter-day Saint scriptures offer no teaching of self-salvation, which is the belief that the Ostlings seek to attribute to Latter-day Saints.

The Ostlings struggle to show that the Saints have no support for their understanding of deification in the patristic materials. But this is not true. The Saints have not, of course, claimed that there is a perfect correspondence between what we believe and what the church fathers taught. The real question is whether conservative Christians of any stripe can find in the patristic literature support for their understanding of the destiny of human beings. Put another way, which evangelical is willing to grant any version, Latter-day Saint or otherwise, of human deification? How exactly do the Ostlings propose to square the patristic materials with their own faith? Do they believe in
deification "by grace"? If so, on this issue they are closer to the Saints than to evangelicals generally.

The Ostlings also make an effort to distinguish the belief in deification found in the writings of C. S. Lewis from what the Saints really believe. They are obviously troubled by the use that some of the Saints have made of language found in the writings of Lewis. They describe "Jack," as he was known to his friends, as "the twentieth century's best-loved and most influential apologist for traditional Christianity" (p. 307). But they also have to admit that Lewis believed in deification. They do so reluctantly. They seek ways of distinguishing what Lewis taught from what the Saints believe. This is not difficult; there are obviously some matters upon which Lewis held opinions that differ from those held by the Saints. I wonder if the Ostlings accept what Lewis taught about deification. If so, how do they respond to contemporary conservative Christians, including both fundamentalist and evangelicals, whose dogmas simply do not tolerate anything approaching deification, however it is understood? And pointing out that Lewis may have subscribed to some of the classical trinitarian ideas about God hardly explains away, but merely qualifies, his belief.

The Ostlings quote several passages from the writings of C. S. Lewis in which he set forth in his clear and forceful style his belief that it is our destiny—if we so desire, and of course through the grace of God—to become "gods and goddesses" (p. 308). I will add one little passage that they neglected to quote. In a letter consoling a woman for some suffering she had witnessed, Lewis wrote as follows: "It is so very difficult to believe that the travail of all creation which God Himself descended to share, at its most intense, may be necessary in the process of turning finite creatures (with free wills) into—well, Gods." When confronted with the claim that Lewis taught deification and finding it necessary to grant that he did, they still ask: "Did he?" (p. 308). Then, instead of granting the obvious, they dance

around this uncomfortable fact. They do this initially by pointing out that “the real C. S. Lewis was aware of the Book of Mormon and assumed that Joseph Smith wrote it” (p. 308). This is true, but it does not address what the “real C. S. Lewis” believed about deification, which is the issue they were presumably confronting. Then they point to theological differences between Lewis and the Saints. Something like this is also true, but I am unaware of Latter-day Saint scholars who do not acknowledge this fact. So I must ask their question again: “Did he” teach deification?

The Ostlings eventually grant that “Lewis did write a number of passages that do appear to express deification” (p. 309). “Appear”? Lewis is not murky on this issue—much of his popularity stems from his clarity. It is not the case that he merely appears to have taught deification—he did so, precisely and often. He did not thereby, according to the Ostlings, erase the distinction between God and all those with the potential to become Gods, but no Latter-day Saint scholar has said that he did. And the Saints do not deny or blur this distinction. Lewis, again according to the Ostlings, taught that “man has no luminosity of his own; he is only capable, through grace, of functioning as a clean mirror to reflect the brightness of God” (p. 309). What the Ostlings apparently do not realize is that something like this is also what the Saints believe and what is taught in our scriptures. It seems that the Ostlings have not understood that the Saints believe that only God can save us and that salvation from both death and sin, as well as sanctification (or exaltation), is always a gift from God and never an autonomous human accomplishment. The Saints do not believe in self-apotheosis. And the Ostlings are confused about our understanding of the atonement. This confusion seems to explain why they disregard scholarly Latter-day Saint appeals to the church fathers and to writers like C. S. Lewis on the issue of deification or sanctification. They wrongly assume that they have overcome the arguments presented by Latter-day Saint scholars by quoting people who insist that deification involves sharing in the manifestations and activities of God, “but only by grace, never of right” (p. 312).
Another issue upon which the Ostlings tend to flounder is the vexing matter of the use by Christian churchmen and theologians of categories borrowed from Greek philosophy. I personally do not believe that the apostasy was caused by Greek philosophy. Instead, when things went wrong, efforts were made by clerics to sort the issues out by turning to philosophy. This tended to corrupt both philosophy and Christian faith. Be that as it may, the Ostlings correctly sense that Latter-day Saints have not been impressed with what theologians or councils have managed to do with materials they borrowed from alien sources. At times the Ostlings want to deny that much of anything was borrowed. But they could know something of its extent if they would consult some of their own best scholarship. They rationalize this borrowing by invoking writers who assert that it was rather incidental and did not, when it did take place, impose "alien philosophical categories" on biblical teachings, but was merely "the result of a necessary search for words that would capture the sense of Scripture to guard against dangerous misreadings of the biblical text" (p. 317). No doubt, if we put the best face on it, something like this took place. So there is some truth in the Ostlings' assertion. But granting this much, they have not thereby overcome the difficulties generated when the vocabulary and concepts employed by pagan philosophers were taken over, especially when they formed some of the crucial scaffolding around which the biblical materials were then subtly woven and theological disputations played out.

Are the Saints Unsettled over Crucial Beliefs?

"Within Mormonism today," according to the Ostlings, "there appear to be important competing strands relating to such core doctrines

84. Olson, for example, does not deny or sweep under the rug the heavy impact of Greek philosophy—specifically a combination of Stoicism and Neoplatonism or Middle Platonism—on early efforts to fashion a systematic Christian theology. See his Story of Christian Theology, 56, 86–88, 99–106, 173–95, 256–64.

as sin, grace, and the atonement, and how to express them” (p. 324). They then introduce the speculation of O. Kendall White Jr., a sociologist who has been disaffected from the church from the moment he began to write about Mormon things in 1967, thus continuing their alliance with “liberals” among the Saints. Building on White—and after rejecting as a “neo-orthodox” perversion of traditional Latter-day Saint beliefs what is clearly taught in the Book of Mormon, hymns, sermons, and lesson materials—the Ostlings claim that one strand of Latter-day Saint thought downplays the atonement of Christ. They then contrast White’s highly idiosyncratic understanding of our beliefs—one not found in our scriptures—with mainstream evangelical opinions on the atonement.

The Ostlings invoke White to identify a profound shift in Latter-day Saint teachings. According to him, “the cultural crises since World War II have produced, inside Mormonism as well as among non-Mormon Christian theologians, a perspective of pessimism” (p. 324). By “produced,” what White has in mind is “caused” since he holds that beliefs are merely ideological reflections of the underlying economic substructure that change when it changes. White insists that there was, in post-war Europe and America, a tragic turning away from a liberal, life-affirming, optimistic understanding of human things in which a redemption from death and sin was not stressed and may not have been seen as necessary or desirable. What took the place of these older liberal, optimistic beliefs was “a more negative view of human nature . . . , along with an increased emphasis on the aspect of sin in human nature” (p. 324). He claims that these shifts were taking place among both Protestants and Latter-day Saints and insists that the desire of the Saints for respectability and the urge to present themselves “as mainline Christian[s]” is leading them to speak more “of grace” (p. 324). The Ostlings are encouraged by this presumed shift, since it leads them to think that we are rapidly moving toward evangelical dogmas. They also recognize that I have argued that the assertions made by White are nonsense. Hence the following:
LDS apologists at FARMS hated White’s book. The reviewer Louis Midgley called it a “fine example” of a book that fails to take the Book of Mormon seriously. White’s “underlying assumption” is that faith is “challenged by modernity” and that “believers ought to reach an accommodation with modernity by adopting its assumptions and reflecting its values.” Midgley criticizes White for ignoring “notions of sin and dependence upon deity that are found in the Book of Mormon and in the early revelations to Joseph Smith.” (p. 324)\(^6\)

In addition, I established that White was wrong in claiming that there once was a “traditional Mormon theology” that had downplayed or abandoned the atonement of Jesus Christ. We have never resembled liberal Protestants on these issues. Even the newer manifestations of evangelical anti-Mormonism cling to portions of White’s speculation. For example, Mosser has recently insisted that “White convincingly showed that there was indeed a noticeable trend within Mormon theology away from the traditional synthesis,” which he described as constituting, among other things, an “optimistic humanism.”\(^7\) Mosser correctly holds that White has tried to show that the new orthodoxy he thought he saw developing was “closer to Protestant fundamentalism and neo-orthodoxy than what [Mosser] and others esteem to be traditional Mormon thought.”\(^8\) However, he objects to White’s claim that the new emphasis on the contents of Latter-day Saint scriptures has moved the Saints toward the Protestant theology known as neo-orthodoxy because “the characteristics Kendall White associated with neo-orthodoxy—God’s sovereignty, human


\(^8\) Ibid., 80.
depravity, and salvation by grace—are not the first ones that the word *neo-orthodoxy* conveys to many people’s minds, at least among evangelicals.\(^{89}\) The differing opinions of evangelical theologians on neo-orthodoxy are a small but instructive manifestation of what I consider to be evangelical theological promiscuity or looseness.

Mosser also implies that White maintains that the success the Church of Jesus Christ has enjoyed is due to an essentially humanist or “anthropocentric (human created) theology” and that the trends he imagines to be taking place among some Latter-day Saint scholars present an “ominous threat to Mormonism’s future.”\(^{90}\) Mosser also realizes, however, that the current attention being given to the teachings in the Book of Mormon has not taken the Saints in the direction of either Protestant neo-orthodoxy or the fundamentalist faction that turned up in Protestant circles between the two great wars, which still has influence in contemporary evangelical religiosity.

Mosser seems somewhat encouraged to see indications that the Saints stress human sinfulness, the atonement made by Jesus for our sins, and our dependence on God for whatever is good.\(^{91}\) What he does not grant is that there has never been a time when the faithful believed otherwise. Mosser invokes White because he wants to show that Latter-day Saint emphasis on the atonement is a genuinely new development. He wants to believe that he and his associates may now be able to evangelize the Church of Jesus Christ. In some ways, he likes the renewed emphasis on the Book of Mormon, since he believes that “its theology is largely orthodox in nature”\(^{92}\)—that is, somewhat similar to what is believed by at least some factions of evangelicals. He and his associates want to see signs that on some

---

89. Some evangelicals see Karl Barth as a kind of Protestant liberal. Some prominent evangelical theologians have, however, been fond of Barth. Bernard Ramm is a good example. See Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 297, 303, 307–8, cf. 65–77.


91. Ibid.

92. Ibid., 79.
crucial issues the Saints are moving toward their own understanding of orthodox Christianity. They then wrongly imagine that they can persuade the church that “many Mormon teachings depart radically from biblical and historical Christian faith”\(^{93}\) by pounding away at the Book of Mormon, by showing that Joseph Smith was not a genuine prophet, and so forth. At this point, exactly like the Ostlings, Mosser and his associates have an agenda common to the more strident and less well-informed countercult versions of anti-Mormonism. They are not the least bit interested in a genuine interfaith dialogue in which we and they strive to understand each other better; they are, instead, interested in attacking our faith and its foundations. The difference is that they assume that they may be able to evangelize the entire church. They entertain this hope primarily because they have had a few civil conversations with a few Latter-day Saint scholars who have learned some of their code language and have been successful in communicating that we are in some ways closer to them than they had previously suspected. Thus they wrongly assume that a radical shift is taking place among the Saints that portends a possible negotiated surrender to their quaint notions of Christian orthodoxy. But it is simply not the case, as the Ostlings claim, that there are two “camps” that “claim to be speaking for ‘traditional’ Mormonism, quoting proof-text support from LDS scriptures” (p. 325).

As I have demonstrated, the Ostlings make much use of former Mormons, cultural Mormons, and dissidents in building their case against the church, although they actually share far less with them theologically than they do with the vast bulk of the Saints. Thus when they encounter a literature that actually sets forth what is found in the Latter-day Saint scriptures, they note that it sounds “very similar to the language of Protestant Evangelicals and other traditional Christians” (p. 325). And well it might, since it is also the language of the Bible (though it is, of course, read differently), is supplemented by further revelation, and is not burdened with the incrustations of

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 66.
creeds, confessions, and speculations of uninspired theologians. The Ostlings make a serious mistake by assuming that some of the quirky stuff they find in the pages of *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* or publications of Signature Books, provided by someone on the margins of the Latter-day Saint academic community (I have in mind White's book), either represents the faith of the Saints or constitutes a viable belief option among them. If I were to attempt to describe the range of evangelical theological stances and were to include within this spectrum liberal Protestants, including the Jesus Seminar, would not the Ostlings and other evangelicals have every right to complain that I simply had not understood what I was seeking to describe? I think they would. But fundamentalist countercultists and even much more reasonable and responsible evangelicals do not seem to see that trotting out those they describe as "liberal Mormons" makes exactly this kind of unfortunate mistake.

But the Ostlings are fond of those who describe themselves as increasingly marginalized in both a social and intellectual sense from their original Latter-day Saint faith; they love their "liberal Mormons," although they grant that these folks also "like to point out the beliefs and spiritual insights they hold in common with non-Mormons." According to the Ostlings, they admit that "the LDS Church cannot simply blend into the ecumenical landscape and, presumably, never will." Why? According to the Ostlings, one reason is that "the LDS scriptures simply do not allow Mormons to view the others as legitimate churches" (p. 323). But if something like this is so, why mention the bizarre speculation of White? He ignores the Latter-day Saint scriptures as he invents a Mormonism, much of which has never existed. The Saints have always seen themselves as members of the Church of Jesus Christ and not as a social group celebrating life-affirming optimism in which there is no need for an atonement from sin and death.

What the Ostlings do not say is that some of these same "liberal Mormons" may "hold in common with [at least some] non-Mormons" a fondness for the most radical forms of feminist ideology, homosexual hedonism, or other currently fashionable oddities that evangeli-
cal's tend to abhor. I assume that the Ostlings would be bemused, and perhaps even a bit annoyed, if someone did this same sort of thing when attempting to describe the theological controversies currently taking place within the evangelical movement. The Ostlings are on more solid ground when they recognize that the Saints simply cannot, without giving up their history and scriptures—that is, their identity—blend into the evangelical world.

We have no interest in being numbered among those who have come to dominate conservative Protestantism in the United States since World War II. They misread our justifiable annoyance at their claim that we are not Christians. This does not signal that we are eager to be included in their club. We have from the beginning seen our faith as *sui generis*, though Christian as we understand that label. If they want a genuine interfaith dialogue with us, they must cease attacking our beliefs. The point of such a conversation is to better understand each other and not to destroy the other party.

Despite whatever illusions they may entertain, evangelicals are not for us the keepers of the gate to Christian respectability and orthodoxy. Our evangelical and fundamentalist critics do not control our way of understanding ourselves. Evangelicals do not have a kind of Good Housekeeping Seal of Christian Approval that we seek from them. And those among them who imagine that they might be able to negotiate our surrender and our eventual entrance into their religious world simply have not grasped who and what we are. Evangelicals are living in a make-believe world if they imagine that the pressure they put on the Saints by their efforts to demonstrate problems in our history, beliefs, or practices or by their attacks on the Book of Mormon will eventually lead to our surrender to their rather recent, highly unbiblical brand of conservative Protestantism. The editors of *The New Mormon Challenge*, who have indicated that they see *Mormon America* as “an excellent companion” to their own endeavors, make this mistake. From our perspective, we are not losing the battle over the truth of the Book of Mormon. On the contrary,

we are encouraged to see its critics reach out for more subtle and sophisticated arguments to buttress their unfaith as the old ones fall by the wayside. And our past is not such that our faith can be toppled by carping about this or that incident, as the Ostlings do, or by celebrating some recent revisionist history, and certainly not by turning a former Mormon historian into a stick with which to beat the church.