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Sophic Box and Mantic Vista: A Review of *Deconstructing Mormonism*

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SOPHIC BOX AND MANTIC VISTA: A REVIEW OF *DECONSTRUCTING MORMONISM*

Kevin Christensen

A review of *Deconstructing Mormonism: An Analysis and Assessment of the Mormon Faith* (Cranford, N.J., American Atheist Press: 2011) by Thomas Riskas and of *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion* (New York, Harper & Row: 1974) by Ian J. Barbour.

Abstract: Riskas's Deconstructing Mormonism claims that believers are trapped in a box for which the instructions for how to get out are written on the outside of the box. He challenges believers submit to an outsider test for faith. But how well does Riskas describe the insider test? And is his outsider test, which turns out to be positivism, just a different box with the instructions for how to get out written on its outside? Ian Barbour's Myths Models and Paradigms provides instructions on how to get out of the positivistic box that Riskas offers, and at the same time provides an alternate outsider test that Mormon readers can use to assess what Alma refers to as "cause to believe."

The important thing, however, is that we are dealing here not with the old donnybrook between science and religion but with the ancient confrontation of Sophic and Mantic. The Sophic is simply the art of solving problems without the aid of any superhuman agency, which the Mantic, on the other hand, is willing to solicit or accept.¹

1 Hugh Nibley, "Paths that Stray: Some Notes on the Sophic and Mantic" in Stephen Ricks, ed., *The Ancient State, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 10 (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 380--381.

This started as a review of *Deconstructing Mormonism* but soon changed into a double review, since reading Riskas reminded me just how good a book Ian Barbour's *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* is. Riskas claims that believers are trapped in a box for which the instructions on how to get out are on the outside. He challenges believers to submit to an "outside test for faith." But how well has he described the insider test? Are the instructions for how to get out really hidden from those on the inside? Is there anything important that an insider test considers that his outsider test overlooks? Is his outsider test, which turns out to be off-the-rack positivism, valid? Is his outsider test just a different box with the instructions for how to get out written on *its* outside? And what happens if we submit his outsider test to another test outside of that? Riskas provides no clue as to where a person might go to find a test of his outsider test. Happily, Ian Barbour's brilliant little book provides just that: clear instructions on how to get out of the box that Riskas asks believers to climb into, and at the same time it presents a different outsider test that Mormon readers can use to reexamine their own "cause to believe."

The introduction to Riskas's thick, densely written book is provided by one Kai Nielson, a professor of philosophy who assures us that what is to come "is both impartial and religiously sensitive." Further it is "balanced, firmly argued, clearly articulated and fair minded."²

Is it any of these things? And if it is not, why bother? Impartial?

At a more specific and personal level, my reasons for challenging and criticizing the Mormons in particular (as well as my reactive attitude to them and other theistic believers) are rooted, it would seem, in the affront that they are (in virtue of what they stand for,

2 Kai Nielson, Foreword to *Deconstructing Mormonism*, xi.

espouse, and aspire to be) to my basic humanity. They are painful reminders, through their own adherence to their faith, of the systematic, institutionally and theologically administered shame inflicted upon me, and experienced over many years as a practicing Mormon. To these two personal reasons, I would add a third: at a general, collective level, there is the very real danger their beliefs pose to society, and the damage and indignities their beliefs and attitudes so often inflict on the minds, body, and intellect of believers, unsuspecting investigators, and more importantly, innocent and defenseless children.³

The impartiality displayed here was preceded by this statement of personal experience:

The Mormons and other mostly Christian believers I have known over the years, have, for the most part, been pleasant enough people (at least socially), and have done not intentional harm to me personally that I know of.⁴

How do such pleasant people become an affront to humanity? Riskas refers to “programs and methods of authoritarian conditioning” and “*the shaming discipline of the inherent moralistic core of their faith; a discipline that requires them to abide by the oppressive, life-negating rules of their faith’s implicit code of patriarchy and to never give head-room to real doubt concerning their fundamental religious beliefs.*”⁵

Is this how a philosopher defines “impartial”? If so, how many people entering the legal system would, or should, trust

3 Riskas, 385.

4 Riskas, 384.

5 Riskas, xix—xx

their cases to this kind of impartiality when displayed by the prosecution?

Religiously sensitive? Here is a sample of Riskas's religious sensitivity in describing how LDS children are taught:

Such brainwashing for Mormon children, as we shall explore in more depth in the *Personal Postscript*, continues in earnest with the use of religious language in the home and teaching of faith in a factually unintelligible, supernatural being (or Heavenly Father), and continues through the teaching and encouraged superstitious practice of prayer as actual, two-way communication with this invisible, incomprehensible, and factually non-existent being...

As Mormon children approach the age of eight years, they are then encouraged by their parents to superstitiously participate in religious "ordinances" which somehow magically bless them and enable them to be saved and return to Heavenly Father and live together as a family forever.⁶

The use of such emotionally laden and rhetorically loaded language, such as "brainwashing," "unintelligible," "superstitious," "magically," and "factually non-existent being" strike me as something other than "religiously sensitive." But Riskas extends the same degree of (in)sensitivity to people of all faiths:

To be sure, *all* theistic religions are, in my view, an affront to man's rationality and intellect as incoherent belief systems built on superstition and metaphysical nonsense. *All* theistic religions are also an affront to man's humanity. Because of the irrational faith they

6 Riskas, lxxii.

require and the inhuman, performatory and behavioral demands they make, they shamefully and shamelessly exhibit a disguised disdain for human reason, human nature, and human dignity through various forms of abusive boundary violations, including mind-control, and moralistic intrusion into the personal lives and choices of its adherents in the name of love and concern for their temporal and eternal welfare.... Such, in part, is the personal price believers pay for their stupidity and *ersatz* or illusory happiness.⁷

Balanced? How about Riskas as balanced?

In his personal introduction, Thomas Riskas refers to his two decades in Mormonism as providing his personal warrant to comment with authority, and observes that “Most [Mormons] have likely only a superficial knowledge of Mormon theology as taught in our scriptures or by the more renowned Church theologians and General Authorities of the Mormon Church, such as Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Orson and Parley P. Pratt, John A. Widtsoe, James E. Talmage, Brigham H. Roberts, Joseph Fielding Smith, to name a notable few.”⁸

This is true enough. Later however, he claims that “I was, by any standard within the church dedicated and theologically well informed through my extensive and continuous study of all the Standard Works (scriptures) of the Mormon church, as well as the scriptural commentaries, doctrinal teachings, writings, and official discourses...”⁹

His “by any standard” may be correct with respect to his personal dedication while a member, but it strikes me as naïve and as a bit of wishful thinking with respect to his being

7 Riskas, 382

8 Riskas, xvii. He could better explain that “renowned Church theologians” and “General Authorities” are not necessarily the same category. A person can be, one or the other, or both, or neither.

9 Riskas, lxv.

theologically well informed. To me it is clear from his personal accounts in *Deconstructing Mormonism* and the content of his bibliography that Riskas spent most of his Mormon years as one whose knowledge was rather superficial. And it remains so despite his adding a handful of contemporary LDS thinkers, such as Robert Millet, Dallin Oaks, and Blake Ostler to those he mentions before. He makes statements about fundamental LDS claims that strike me as wrong in the way that people who never bother to think or read seriously on those issues tend to get them wrong. (I'll get to a few of these later.) In his introduction, he lays down a spread of Robert D. Anderson, Fawn Brodie, Dan Vogel, and Grant Palmer as four Aces, an unbeatable hand that demonstrates "very serious historical problems concerning the claim that Joseph Smith was who he said he was and is who he is believed to be by faithful Mormon believers."¹⁰ It is permissible for Riskas to bring these books and others like them to a discussion. But if you want to claim subsequently that the discussion is "balanced," I should expect an honest, fearless, well-informed critic to mention that these books have been critically reviewed by people who strike me as being far more informed than Riskas.¹¹ And I would expect a mention of important books by Richard Bushman, Richard L. Anderson, Larry Morris, John Sorenson, John Welch, Terryl Givens, and Hugh Nibley, among others, in the name of honesty and fairness. It is easy to walk up to a balance scale, drop some weights on one side, and smile with pleasure at the

10 Riskas, xlvii. He is referring to Robert D. Anderson; Anderson's *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography* and the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999); Fawn M. Brodie's, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945); Dan Vogel's, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004); and Palmer's *Grant Palmer, An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).

11 You can find reviews of all four here: http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/?reviewed_books&vol=14&num=1&id=410

“clunk” sound produced as the unopposed weight dramatically tilts the scale. But you have to be quite naïve to expect that any wide-awake person would conclude that what they have seen in such a one-sided display has anything to do with balance.

The imbalance that Riskas displays in passing here continues through the book and into the bibliography. In reading through Riskas’s lengthy bibliography, I notice a great many books on psychology and militant atheism, a sampling of prominent anti-LDS books, a light smattering of conventional though mostly dated LDS texts, but no real balance. We see Brodie but no Bushman, Southerton but no Sorenson, Palmer but no Ashurst-McGee. His LDS books, for the most part, do not come from those I would consider as the prime representatives of contemporary LDS intelligentsia. He offers some Blake Ostler, *Mormon Doctrine* (and only that) from Bruce R. McConkie, one book by Robert Millett, some Widtsoe, one essay by Truman Madsen on B. H. Roberts’s “The Way the Truth and the Life,” and one book from Sterling McMurrin. We get the expected titles from Signature Books, that is, the most negative ones in the recent catalogue. He lists nothing from Nibley, Welch, Peterson, Gardner, Bushman, Givens, Paulson, Falconer, Goff, Roper, Morris, etc. We do get a list of the reports of the Mormon Alliance, a recommendation of the Tanners’ work, directions to the IRR website, and a range of stock anti-LDS sources of the kind that Mosser and Owen described as characteristically neglecting current LDS scholarship.¹² Where Riskas’s bibliography demonstrates overwhelming bias, it is actually more balanced than his Appendix B, “To Those Who Are Investigating “Mormonism,” provided by Richard Packham, which demonstrates total bias. “By proving

12 Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, “Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing it? *Trinity Journal* n.s. 19 (Fall 1998): 179-205.

contraries,” Joseph Smith said, “truth is made manifest.” By suppressing contraries, ideology is made manifest.¹³

Firmly Argued? Let’s look at Riskas’s method.

How does he go about deconstructing Mormonism? Not the way Jacques Derrida would. (Derrida is not listed in the bibliography, a fact that may matter only to those with enough background with the term to wonder about the significance of a title promising to “deconstruct” something.)

Riskas builds on a metaphor, taken from M. Scott Peck, of believers “being trapped inside a box, and the instructions on how to get out of the box are written on the outside of the box.” Riskas says that “this dilemma pertains, of course to all believers—of all religions—who suppress or deny their doubts and refuse, for whatever reasons to seek after the best justified knowledge they can acquire.”¹⁴

In the *World and the Prophets*, Hugh Nibley quotes Payne:

There is always danger of a metaphor once adopted becoming the master instead of the servant¹⁵

Approaching the issue of deconstruction from the perspective of an English major and as an LDS believer, I have to offer dissent over the controlling generality that Riskas gives to the metaphor of the box with instructions on the outside. As a believing LDS, I’ve never been as isolated from inside controversies and issues, outside perspectives, and alternative views regarding faith as the Riskas “box” metaphor implies. Even as a teenager growing up in a Utah suburb during the ’60s, I easily found and considered a whole range of detailed instructions on how to get outside of the box of LDS faith.

13 *History of the Church*, 6:428.

14 Riskas, xxxi–xxxii.

15 E. A. Payne, cited in Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol 4 (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1987), 194, note 2.

Though involved in LDS culture, I was not boxed in to the exclusion of books, films, radio, music, school, textbooks, TV, newspapers, and magazines as well as non-LDS people and views on a daily basis. While inside the box of LDS culture, I have been exposed to a wide range of alternative cultures and belief systems. In my twenties and thirties, I got more and more interested in the notion of testing belief systems, and I sought to understand why different people came to such different conclusions while looking at the same things. Indeed, I've read several of the books that Riskas recommends as particularly destructive for LDS faith. For my part, I found them wanting, largely because of my readings in sources that do not appear in his bibliography. I've lived not so much in an isolating box but in among overlapping cultures and societies, each offering competing sets of values, and many of them eagerly pressing into my hands just the kind of instructions that the box metaphor suggests are totally unavailable to me as a consequence of my participation in LDS society.

How well does Riskas actually describe the LDS insider test for faith? Not well. He writes that "revelation is considered true if it is sought with a 'sincere heart, and with real intent, having faith in Christ,'" citing Moroni 10:4.¹⁶ The actual text refers to sincerity, real intent, and faith as *conditions* for a manifestation by the power of the Holy Ghost (Mor. 10:4-5), *not as the validation* of revelation. The "if-then" structure should make that clear. He then cites a few of the more commonly known verses, including D&C 9, on the burning of the bosom, feeling that it is right, and the stupor of thought. He mentions D&C 121:33 on "pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul." The D&C 121 passage does not talk about revelation but the means by which priesthood holders can have any power or influence, that is, by obtaining and applying "pure knowledge,"

16 Riskas, 169.

which characteristically “enlarges the soul without hypocrisy and without guile.” By implication, the passage does raise the question of what kind of influence impure knowledge has, by implication—a contraction of the soul, and the presence of both hypocrisy and guile. (Let’s not go there now.)

Riskas briefly mentions Alma 32 but does not comprehend what is happening in that chapter.¹⁷ I’ve several times compared it to the epistemology for paradigm choice developed in Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹⁸ Though Riskas uses the term “paradigm” here and there, he does not cite Kuhn. I’ve compiled a detailed list of LDS scriptures that describe the different ways that prayers are answered, dividing them into those that address thinking and those that address feeling, which work through the mind and heart.¹⁹ Riskas doesn’t work that hard, sticking to a few commonplace verses and trying to reduce it all to a subjective over-reliance on feeling.²⁰

Before talking about the Mormon concept of revelation, he says, “Since there are no reliable objective and generally accepted human criteria for validating claimed revelations, the claims that ‘true revelation exists’ and that ‘Revelation is the Ultimate Source and arbiter of God’s truth are both incoherent.’”²¹ He does not seem to notice the positivism at work here, something that is not a generally accepted human criterion due to the self-referential nature of its workings. As Kuhn observes, “When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its

17 Riskas, 170.

18 Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Crossed” in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/2 (1995) 144-218.

19 Kevin Christensen, “A Model of Mormon Spiritual Experience,” Appendix A, http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/model_of_experience.pdf.

20 Riskas, 153.

21 Riskas, 167.

own paradigm in that paradigm's defense."²² Riskas defends his positivism via positivism, blind to the circularity of his own position.

"Further," Riskas says, "if the concept of 'God' and the use of the term 'God' are in fact incoherent, unintelligible, and factually or cognitively meaningless, then it logically follows, that the very concept of revelation is incoherent—even without the need for validation."²³ Why bother? Sterling McMurrin was more succinct than Riskas when he famously told Blake Ostler that he had concluded "at a very early age, earlier than I can remember, that you don't get books from angels and translate them by miracles; it is just that simple."²⁴ But without a reading of the book, this is trial by ideology, not by investigation. Joseph Smith provided the book, and McMurrin never bothered to read it. Should the book be tried by ideological dismissal or serious investigation? As Kuhn says, "There are also, however, values to be used in judging whole theories: they must, first and foremost, permit, puzzle formulation and solution."²⁵ Think of the contrast to McMurrin in Margaret Barker's approach to the Book of Mormon: "What I offer can only be the reactions of an Old Testament scholar: Are the revelations to Joseph Smith consistent with the situation in Jerusalem in 600 BCE?"²⁶ Whereas McMurrin dismissed the problem, Barker formulated a puzzle based on her expert knowledge, grounded in study and sources unavailable to Joseph Smith, and offered her solution.

Are there significant pieces of evidence that the insider test explores which Riskas's outsider test might completely overlook?

22 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 94.

23 Riskas, 167–168.

24 Sterling McMurrin, "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin," interview by Blake Ostler, *Dialogue* 17/1 (1984): 25.

25 Kuhn, 185.

26 Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Religion," *BYU Studies* 44/4 (2005), 69.

Kuhn reports that “led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions, scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before.”²⁷ The implication for Riskas is that the outside the box and inside the box approaches may be considering very different sets of information. One of the things that my reading of Riskas provides for me is a look at his view from inside of his box. From that vantage, I see that a great many things which I think are important do not show up there. Kuhn comments that “particularly persuasive arguments can be developed if the new paradigm permits the prediction of phenomena that had been entirely unsuspected while the old one prevailed.”²⁸ That is, a reader of Riskas’s book and bibliography might not suspect that LDS scholars (or anyone else) have come up with any cause to believe or that they had responded in detail to books that Riskas uses to pave his way. He mentions FARMS once, in a footnote discussion of the Roberts Study, reporting that John Welch had argued that B. H. Roberts had not lost his faith.²⁹ But he does not trouble to specify exactly what Welch had written, where, or what sources he had employed.³⁰ More importantly, Riskas does not mention that Welch had written a detailed essay called “Answering B. H. Roberts Questions and an ‘Unparallel.’” There is a pattern of ideological selectivity throughout *Deconstructing Mormonism*. Riskas cites Quinn

27 Kuhn, 111.

28 Kuhn, 154.

29 Riskas, 112, after Reviewer’s notes, in the continuation of a long footnote quoting Joel Groat of IRR on Brigham D. Madsen and B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). He does not mention the existence of John Welch’s detailed paper, “Answering B. H. Roberts Questions and an Unparallel” (Provo: FARMS Preliminary Report, 1984).

30 See John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS: 1992) 83–91; and John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon* (Provo: FARMS, 1999), 289–292.

when it suits him to challenge traditional LDS histories but ignores his defense of the First Vision narratives.³¹ He cites John Bradshaw on “toxic shame” but ignores him when it comes to the efficacy of prayer and the value of spirituality.³²

Does a Mormon insider test for faith exclude consideration of the results or methods of outsider tests? Joseph Smith thought not. “By proving contraries,” he wrote to Daniel Rupp, “truth is made manifest.” Riskas argues for the necessity of relying on an “outside test for faith,” though not so much on how to go about testing his outside test for faith. Given a choice of different outsider tests for faith, which ones apply best to any theistic or LDS truth claims? Is the positivistic approach that Riskas offers the only outsider test to consider?

Much of Riskas’s argument stands on his use of this metaphor of believers being trapped inside a box. One of the most important things I learned about the process of literary deconstruction is to pay close attention to the metaphors a person uses. No matter how much a person claims to depend entirely on reason and rationality, much of the person’s reason, data selection, and valuing operate within the constraints of his or her metaphors. These metaphors, in a powerful way, reveal any writer’s boxes and the accompanying set of instructions that operate to keep a person inside. Riskas’s own box is obviously positivism, and he seems unaware of the existence of instructions that describe the way out of that box, let alone that positivism as a box has come in for a great deal of criticism over the past seventy years. It is not only a well-known box but an obsolescent one at that. I’ll say more about positivism as we go.

31 D. Michael Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820,” *Dialogue Paperless*, E-Paper 3, Expanded Version (Definitive), 20 December 2006, online at <http://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/QuinnPaperless.pdf>.

32 Frequent reference to “toxic shame” in Riskas derives from John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, (Dearfield Beach: Health Communications, Inc., 1988).

A useful text I got while working on my English degree was Madan Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Post Modernism*. He has this to say about Derrida and deconstruction:

Derrida has provided a method of “close-reading” a “text” very similar to psychoanalytic approaches to neurotic symptoms. Deconstructive “close reading,” having “interrogated” the text breaks through its defenses and shows that a set of binary oppositions can be found “inscribed” within it. In each of the pairs, private/public, masculine/feminine, same/other, rational/irrational, true/false, central/peripheral, etc. the first term is privileged. Deconstructors show that the “privileged” term depends for its identity on excluding the other, and demonstrate that primacy really belongs to the subordinate term instead.³³

Sarup explains how Derrida strives to locate “a moment that genuinely threatens to collapse that system.”

One of the ruling illusions of Western metaphysics is that reason can somehow grasp the world without close attention to language and arrive at a pure, self-authenticating truth or method. Derrida’s work draws attention to the ways in which language deflects the philosopher’s project. He does this by focusing on metaphors and other figurative devices in the texts of philosophy...

His method consists of showing how the privileged term is held in place by the force of the dominant

33 Madad Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Post Modernism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 50.

metaphor, and not, as it might seem, by any conclusive logic.³⁴

Riskas privileges his positivism by means of the closed box metaphor as applied to believers not by means of any conclusive logic or consideration of any outside tests of positivism.

In Appendix A, Riskas reports that he was raised in a “patriarchal family culture by a loving but strict Greek mother and a loving but authoritarian, superstitious (‘God-fearing’), and at times abusive Greek father. I was conditioned from childhood to feel at home in the familiar, superstitious Mormon patriarchal culture.... And underneath the God of my parents were my ‘parent-gods’; the unconscious, idealized (i.e., ‘god-like,’ or powerful, magical, loving, nurturing, protecting and favoring) parent images internalized as a young, pre-verbal infant and child unknowingly projected onto all the fictitious gods I admired and followed throughout my life.”³⁵ Before his LDS conversion, he reports a period of late-sixties rebellion in response to “the suppressive authoritarian control imposed by my parents, particularly, my father.”³⁶

Just over one hundred years earlier, Brigham Young had commented to a Mormon audience on the effects of such a repressive parenting style:

For example, we will take a strict, religious, holy, down country, eastern Yankee, who would whip a beer barrel for working on Sunday, and never suffer a child to go into company of his age, never suffer him to have any associates, or permit him to do anything or know anything, only what the deacon, priests, or missionaries bring to the house; when that child attains to mature age, say eighteen or twenty years, he is very

34 Sarup, 51–52.

35 Riskas, 408

36 Riskas, 408.

apt to steal away from his father and mother; and when he has broken his bands, you would think all hell was let loose, and that he would compass the world at once.

Now understand it, when parents whip their children for reading novels, and never let them go to the theatre, or to any place of recreation and amusement, but bind them to the moral law, until duty becomes loathsome to them; when they are freed by age from the rigorous training of their parents, they are more fit for companions to devils, than to be the children of such religious parents.³⁷

Here is another point where Derridian deconstruction comes in. Despite his chronic complaints about the toxic effects that such authoritarian parenting and religious instruction can cause, Riskas asks why God does not “use his putative power to more *directly*, *efficiently*, and *tellingly* to accomplish his alleged purposes and promote the required and necessary knowledge of his existence as theologically conceived?”³⁸ And why, he asks “the absence of divine intervention by notably and consistently stopping or even significantly reducing or eliminating and/or at least explaining, through personal revelation, this god’s specific reasons for allowing such human and natural evil.”³⁹ “Later he asks rhetorically, “Wouldn’t he unquestionably and irrefutably, beyond all doubt, establish up front – through demonstration, coherent explanation, and facilitated understanding, – god’s

37 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 2:34, cited in Ben Spackman, “Brigham Young, Studying Evil, Living in a Bubble” at Patheos, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/oneeternalround/2010/08/brigham-young-studying-evil-and-living-in-a-bubble/>.

38 Riskas, 133.

39 Riskas, 336–337.

and his [Christ's] existence and divinity, god's gospel, and god's mind and will and word once and for all to all mankind?"⁴⁰

Why, Riskas seems to be asking – without realizing either the fact or the implications – why does God not behave like a suppressive, authoritarian, controlling parent of the sort that he himself rebelled against during the 1960s? A parent, a society, or a religion that behaves that way, Riskas says, is toxic, and a God who does not behave that way somehow demonstrates non-existence. Imagine living in a universe, or for that matter with a parent, for whom efficiency and not love was the first and great value upon which all else stands, before which every other concern must be compromised. In a conflict of values, freedom and love bow to efficiency. Does that sound like paradise? From my perspective, his system deconstructs.

But Riskas does not consider Derrida. Riskas's method involves accepting an uncritical adoption of positivism and being hypercritical from that stance.⁴¹ Mote-eye considerations (Matthew 7:3-5) don't enter in before making judgments. He demands absolute precision in language, absolute verification for any assertion, potential falsification for any belief;⁴² and he behaves as though his rhetorical questions and blanket assertions provide irrefutable falsification. He also demands that wide social consensus should uphold any interpretation, as though anything that is not popularly believed could be true (think Great and Spacious Building). He spends a chapter on a Socratic dialogue with himself in which he interrogates a sock-puppet Mormon on the notion of God, demanding that the believer be required to unambiguously define God in terms that are precise and testable according to positivist notions of verification and falsification.⁴³ One might as well

40 Riskas, 337.

41 Riskas, 24–25.

42 Riskas, 115.

43 Riskas, 24.

ask a philosophy student in a cafeteria to specify why the food that she claims had once been visible on her lunch tray is nourishing, claiming that if she cannot on the spot explain via pure logic the full detail of the Krebs cycle, she can conclude that nutrition is an incoherent illusion. If she responds that the food tasted good and made her feel better and gives her energy, it's easy to dismiss "tastes good" as subjective, "feel better" as emotional, and "gives energy" as incoherent rationalization.

Clearly articulated? Here is Riskas's own description of his mode of articulation:

The style of the analytical parts of this book is, for the most part, more formal and scholarly, with at times extensive footnoting and quotations and, in places, the use of elaborate sentences and redundancy. This is so both deliberately, and necessarily, given the nature of and implications of the arguments made, the conclusions reached, and their importance to the overall purpose of this book. More specifically in this regard, the nature of this work is necessarily complex, and the central argument made is sophisticated and, in certain aspects, nuanced, even counterintuitive. These facts required a necessary level of detail, and again, redundancy, not only to offer as clear and unambiguous an explication as I could economically provide, but also to anticipate and forestall, as best I could, inappropriate generalizations and irrelevant counter arguments. In taking this approach I realize that I have taken the very different risk of perhaps losing a certain group of readers who either do not enjoy such writing, or who might find this style of writing too cumbersome, difficult, or demanding, given the level

of interest, or perhaps, given their need for an excuse not to engage the necessary work required.⁴⁴

Forgive me, but I find this bit of writing both hilarious and accurate, especially with regard to redundancy, the tendency to being “difficult, and cumbersome” and “again, redundancy.” In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye says, “We may observe that much of the *difficulty* in a philosophical style is rhetorical in origin, resulting from a feeling that it is necessary to detach and isolate the intellect from the emotions.”⁴⁵ When I was working on my English degree many years ago, I chanced upon a book called *Simple and Direct* by Jacques Barzun. No one who reads Riskas would conclude that he had read Barzun. I also read *Language in Thought and Action* by S. I. Hayakawa, who observed that much academic, legal, and philosophical writing is dreadfully dull and difficult because it tends to get stuck at single levels of abstraction, rather than moving from general concepts, down to increasingly to specific details, and back up again to general principles. Reading Riskas reminded me again how I am grateful for what I learned from Hayakawa.

Fair minded?

Riskas reports that Mormonism “multiplies both actual and potential harm, abuse, and danger”⁴⁶ in several ways, the first being through its “*meta-belief* that it *alone* is the *only* truth faith, that *all* other faiths, because of an alleged Great Apostasy, are false, and ‘an abomination before God’... This meta-belief

44 Riskas, lxi.

45 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 330.

46 Riskas, 383. The reference to “potential harm” reminds me of Nibley’s discussion of the “unfulfilled condition” as a useful rhetorical technique. See Hugh Nibley, *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 11: Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 501. “Rule 19: Use the unfulfilled condition to make out a case against Mormons where there is neither evidence, nor absence of evidence, i.e., where nothing at all has happened” (501).

is what I regard as the first multiplier of negative effects. It is this meta-belief of *exclusive*, *absolute*, and *actual* Truth because of, and in virtue of *apostasy*, and *restoration* through divine *revelation*.⁴⁷

Thomas Kuhn explains that

Anomaly appears only against the background provided by the paradigm. The more precise and far-reaching that paradigm is, the more sensitive an indicator it provides for of anomaly, and hence, an occasion for paradigm change.⁴⁸

The more precise and far reaching Riskas can make LDS claims appear, the easier it is to generate anomaly and thereby leverage. An insistence on perfection, for example, has the effect of making any imperfection, and only imperfection, decisive. But is his rigid and brittle paradigm of LDS belief accurate and fairly representative? Has Riskas here unknowingly misused a “multiplier of negative effects?” Is Mormonism the “only true faith”? Are all other faiths “an abomination before God”? Are LDS truth claims exclusive of all other truth? Do Mormons possess absolute and actual truth? By this I presume he means utterly static and changeless doctrines and histories. Are these a valid set of expectations against which a fair-minded investigator should view the LDS church?

The first section of the Doctrine and Covenants was received in Hiram, Ohio on November 1, 1831, as a formal statement of “mine authority, and the authority of my servants.” (v 6). The leading verses describe how people have “strayed from mine ordinances and have broken mine everlasting covenant.” Verse 17 describes the calling of Joseph Smith in response, and verse 18 describes how God also gave commandments to unspecified

47 Riskas, 383.

48 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 65.

“others.” Later, God explains that “I the Lord am willing to make these things known unto all flesh; for I am no respecter of persons.” (v 34-35). Truth and revelation here are important for LDS claims, but both are expressly non-exclusive.

Speaking of the LDS leaders against the notion of absolute and actual truth as static and unchanging, see verses 24-28:

These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.

And inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known;

And inasmuch as they sought wisdom they might be instructed;

And inasmuch as they sinned, they might be chastened that they might repent;

And inasmuch as they were made humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time.

The truth the LDS possess is here explicitly imperfect and incomplete rather than absolute and final. Because the formal claims made for LDS authorities include incompleteness and imperfection, the presence of such should not diminish their authority any more than the imperfections and incompleteness of science diminishes the authority of science. By formal definition, both societies offer not static absolute truths but self-correcting processes.

My reading of verse 30, regarding the distinction of the church, suggests that the word “only” applies to the phrase “with which I, the Lord am well pleased.” (Consider a sentence about the “only blue and idling car upon the face of the whole parking

lot, with which I, the attendant, am well pleased.” That is not just a florid and emphatic way to say “only blue car” but provides a very different thought.) The “well-pleased” designation in D&C 1 applies to the church and is relative to what “true and living” means as descriptive qualities for church. It happens that the Biblical occurrences of *true* and *living* cast light on the meaning: “true vine,” “true treasure,” “truth and life,” “tree of life,” “living bread,” “living waters,” “new and living way through the veil” (Hebrews 10:20); and “true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:22). The Bible imagery of “true and living” has to do with the voice of warning (Jeremiah 10:10, and D&C 1:2), priesthood (true vine, John 15:1-5), living bread and living waters (sacrament and baptism, Holy Spirit inspiration, scripture; that is, ordinances and covenants and revelation), and finally, tree of life and “living way through the veil,” which both point to the temple and Christ’s role as the Melchizedek High Priest who enters the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement⁴⁹. The themes that go with Biblical “true and living” imagery parallel the themes of D&C 1 point for point, verse for verse. Collectively all of these Bible images based on “true and/or living” center on the ongoing revelation and the distinctive priesthood ordinances and covenants, scriptures and temple worship that do, in actual fact and practice, distinguish the LDS from other faiths. But the designation is expressly non-exclusive and incomplete relative to truth, revelation, and human virtue. Riskas refers to “‘the only true Church’ on the face of the earth today,” but he has not considered the fact of his misquotation⁵⁰ and consequent inaccuracy of thought, and therefore he has not considered the implications of his own misreading as a “multiplier of negative

49 See Margaret Barker, “The Great High Priest” *BYU Studies* 42/3&4 (2003): 64–84.

50 Riskas, 174. Contrast D&C 1:30.

effects.”⁵¹ My point is that the expectations that I get from a close reading of D&C 1 are far more tolerant and robust than the expectations that Riskas uses to test LDS truth claims. I can matter-of-factly expect many of the same things that he sees as decisive anomalies. My assumptions make a different set of predictions for Mormonism. Different predictions direct me to different methods, problem fields, and standards of solution.

Of course, it's easy to object that many LDS think and behave as though D&C 1 says exactly what it does not say. There happens to be a very good reason for the common misreading that goes beyond repetition and commonplace thinking. Brigham Young commented that “there is one principle I wish to urge upon the Saints in a way that it may remain with them—that is to understand men and women as they are, and not understand them as you are.”⁵² One of the ways that has helped me better understand “men and women as they are” has been the Perry Scheme for Cognitive and Ethical Growth. The Perry Scheme is based on a study of the way students develop during their college years in moving from provincial communities to a diverse university environment.⁵³ Here are *Positions 1* and *2* of 9:

Position 1 - Basic Duality. (Garden of Eden Position:
All will be well.)

The person perceives meaning divided into two realms—Good/Bad, Right/wrong, We/They, Success/Failure, etc. They believe that knowledge and goodness are quantitative, that there are absolute answers for every problem and authorities know them and will

51 Riskas, 383.

52 *Journal of Discourses* 8:37.

53 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_G._Perry#Perry.27s_scheme

teach them to those who will work hard and memorize them.

Position 2 - Multiplicity Prelegitimate. (Resisting snake)

Now the person moves to accept that there is diversity, but they still think there are *true* authorities who are right, that the others are confused by complexities or are just frauds. They think they are with the true authorities and are right while all others are wrong. They accept that their good authorities present problems so they can learn to reach right answers independently.⁵⁴

The point here is that the attitude toward a group's authorities that Riskas sees as a distinctive Mormon claim applies to a position of human development that everyone faces regardless of their cultural background. Because Mormons are human, these positions will always be found among Mormons. But it is not a binding Mormon doctrine, simply an expected expression of human attitude toward their chosen society at a particular level of personal growth. As I have shown, D&C 1 expressly contradicts the assumptions of these initial positions and thereby encourages further growth. Later, I'll return to the Perry Scheme and show how Joseph Smith compares to the later positions, demonstrating cognitive and ethical growth in the prophet that Riskas, who is clearly stuck at *Position 2*, does not show. Riskas has merely exchanged the locations of

54 I was introduced to the Perry Scheme by this emailed summary from Veda Hale. <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/Perry%20Scheme.pdf>. She had written a study of Levi Peterson's Canyons of Grace, using the Perry Scheme as a framework to understand the character arcs. I prefer the Perry Scheme to Fowler's Stages of Faith, since Fowler's model is concerned more with the conclusions a person comes to, whereas the Perry Scheme deals more with how a person processes information.

his labels for those who he sees as TRUE authorities and those who are confused and are frauds.

Though Riskas puts quotation marks around “an abomination before God” as a Mormon attitude about all other faiths, he does not provide a source. Joseph Smith famously did use a different phrase in the 1838 account of his first vision. His actual statement is of a declaration that “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight” (Joseph Smith, *History*, 19). Having misread the evidence, and therefore, missed the crucial clue, Riskas does not seek out Joseph Smith’s clear explanation of the problem with creeds even though he does list in his bibliography the source where I first read it, *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. Joseph Smith opposed creeds, not because they are false teachings (“all of them have some truth”), but because “creeds set up stakes, and say, ‘Hitherto thou shalt come, and no further’; which I cannot subscribe to.”⁵⁵ Joseph Smith also explained that “the most prominent difference in sentiment between the Latter-day Saints and sectarians was that the latter were all circumscribed by some particular creed, which deprived its members of the privilege of believing anything not contained therein, whereas the Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time.”⁵⁶ The real problem with creeds is not their content⁵⁷ but their function. When in place, creeds place a person and a society beyond repentance, beyond change. Creeds box a person in and throw away the keys to further light and knowledge. If that is not abominable, what is?

55 Joseph F. Smith, ed. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 327.

56 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:215.

57 “I want the liberty of believing as I please, it feels so good not to be trammelled. It doesn’t prove that a man is not a good man because he believes false doctrine.” Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center Monograph, 1980), 183–84, spelling modernized.

Joseph Smith's Mormonism celebrates the notion that if we come across new information or new ideas that don't fit with our preconceptions, we have the option to change rather than shatter. When the word sprouts, grows and swells our souls, as Alma 32:34 says, our understanding can be enlightened, and our minds can expand. If our leaders have been wrong about something, that is no big deal. D&C 1 matter-of-factly declares, "Inasmuch as they have erred, it shall be made manifest." If no one asks the right questions, why expect the answers?⁵⁸ When we do ask questions we have not asked before, why not be open to the new information and understandings that result?

Riskas further attempts to shore up his brittle background expectations when he quotes the infamous 1945 Home Teaching Message that reads, "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done."⁵⁹ He does not report the letter from President George Albert Smith that stated, "I am pleased to assure you that you are right in your attitude that the passage quoted does not express the true position of the Church.

58 See, for example, 3 Nephi 15:14–22.

59 Riskas, 300. He cites a source which claims that "the message has never been rescinded in any official way" (fn 169). Since it is contradicted by D&C 1 which officially declares "the authority of servants," why would it need to be? And of course there is President George Albert Smith's direct rebuttal. That Riskas qualifies his remarks as referring to "any official way," it suggests to me that he knows about President Smith's letter, and prefers to suppress the information. Incidentally, official statements like this won't be truly 'heard' by those at a *Position 2* understanding of LDS authorities because comprehension and acceptance of such statements is contingent on developing an advanced understanding of human authorities. The transition cannot be forced by statements from authorities. As President Smith's full letter and D&C 1 shows, such statements have been made by the highest LDS authorities on several occasions. One might think that those who most depend on authority figures for guidance would have noticed, but the issue is not the thoughts expressed, but the thinking about authority that filters perception and guides thinking at those positions. The best we can do is to nurture those in transition, and the best way to nurture individuals through transitions is to understand the individual types and developmental positions for what they are. It also helps to look up "sustain" in a good dictionary.

Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church, which is that every individual must obtain for himself a testimony of the truth of the Gospel, must, through the redemption of Jesus Christ, work out his own salvation, and is personally responsible to His Maker for his individual acts. The Lord Himself does not attempt coercion in His desire and effort to give peace and salvation to His children. He gives the principles of life and true progress, but leaves every person free to choose or to reject His teachings.”⁶⁰

Riskas reports that the Mormon view of truth as “knowledge of things as they [really] are, as they [really] were, as they are to come,” based on D&C 93:24 and Jacob 4:13,⁶¹ which is correct. But then he goes on to assert that we must hold that “fundamental religious truths are considered or believed to be objective literal realities which are both ‘absolute and eternal,’” for which he cites D&C 1:39 and D&C 88:66, which *do not contain the words* he puts in quotes. These absolute and eternal truths, Riskas says “can be known with certainty by faith,” and he cites Mormon 10:3-5, which *does not mention absolute and eternal truths*. Truth is simply “what is real.” Can we know what is real with an absolute perfect knowledge? Or can a Mormon read and take seriously the distinction that Alma 32:18–19 makes between those who yearn to “know” with final certainty,⁶² and those who simply have enough “cause to believe” to support ongoing faith that falls short of perfect knowledge? Riskas does not seem interested in or even aware of the concept of “cause to believe” in support of faith as a preferable alternative to perfect and final “knowing.”

60 See <http://www.fairlds.org/authors/misc/when-the-prophet-speaks-is-the-thinking-done> and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19:1 (Spring 1986), 35-39.

61 Riskas, 48.

62 Riskas, 115

His program of deconstruction of absolute certainty directs attention in a very different way than would an attempt to seek increased understanding in support of an open-ended “cause to believe.” His misreading of fundamental claims functions as a “multiplier of negative effects.”⁶³

When I was a small child, my dad drove us to the Cleveland Lloyd dinosaur quarry in Central Utah. There, out in the desert, under a hot sun, in the dusty wind, I saw bones in the rocks. As a child, I knew those bones were real. Nothing I have learned since then has changed that. But a great deal of what I have learned about those bones has changed over the past fifty-five years. Such changes in science, some not just incremental but revolutionary, have done nothing to undermine the authority of science because science is a process, not a static body of knowledge. And D&C 1 expressly describes LDS community knowledge as being in process, just as Alma 32 describes a process for individuals. Just because I do not know everything at once or know perfectly at all does not mean that nothing I know is real. It is my knowledge of reality that changes, my knowledge of truth, not the reality itself, not truth. As long as I fall short of omniscience, I have room to learn. My faith is based on dynamic “cause to believe” based on the contents of a wine skin, not the temporary skins I use at different times to keep it in. What Riskas wrestles with at length is not a fundamental LDS truth claim, as formally stated in D&C 1, but an unreasonable demand for absolute certainty as the only viable grounds for faith. Measured against the Perry Scheme, a relevant outsider test, it reflects *Position 2* thinking. There is something wonderfully ironic about someone who says, in effect, “How can I have faith in God without Absolute certainty?” And of course, he also declares, without any awareness of the irony, absolute certainty with respect to his disbelief.

63 Riskas, 383.

Kuhn talks about a moment when “the issue is which paradigm should in the future guide research on problems many of which neither competitor can yet claim to resolve completely. A decision between alternate ways of practicing science is called for, and in the circumstances that decision must be based less on past achievement than future promise. The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often so do in defiance of the evidence provided by problem solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the old paradigm has failed with a few. A decision of that kind can only be made on faith.”⁶⁴

Many of the problems that Riskas finds insoluble for LDS derive not from the facts and statements that he wrestles with but the unreasonable expectations against which he attempts to process them and his obvious selectivity. Jesus explains, in the parable of the sower, how the same seed can yield a completely different harvest, depending on the soil and nurture given.⁶⁵ “Know ye not this parable?” he asks. “How then will ye know all parables?” (Mark 4:13) I find that the value of a seed is most evidenced in the work of those who have demonstrated the most impressive yields. Riskas offers one thick book claiming that the Word yields exactly “nothing,” whereas the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, to cite one author missing from his bibliography, offers nineteen volumes of exuberance as the barest glimpse of the potential harvest. Comparison with those who claim different yields from the same seed always demonstrates obvious differences in the soil, patience, expectations, interests, and nurture.

64 Kuhn, *Structure*, 158.

65 Mark 4:3–20.

Riskas and His Outsider Test for Faith

One obvious feature of the Outsider test for faith which Riskas offers is that it amounts to positivism.

This is worth repeating again and again: an *actual* fact is what an actually true statement states...For a statement to *be justified*, it must be *justifiable*. For a statement to be justifiable, it must be minimally intelligible and coherent conceptually. It must have truth conditions that can be possibly empirically confirmed or disconfirmed. That which is not factual cannot possibly be empirically known or considered as knowledge of objective reality. In other words, that which cannot be empirically known is a *non-reality*.⁶⁶

Riskas frequently refers to the need for empirical verification and the potential for falsification behind all statements. He refers to *spiritual* experience as “subjectively interpreted, unverifiable, and unfalsifiable in principle and can be justifiably and more economically explained naturalistically.”⁶⁷ The frequency with which he makes the standard claims demonstrates how fully enmeshed he is in positivistic thinking. He seems unaware of the social history, the potent criticism of positivism made during the past 60 plus years nor of the predictable implications for his own patterns of thought and behavior in adopting such thinking. Writing in 1974 Ian Barbour paints a vivid picture of what it might mean to build one’s case on positivism.

To rehearse the inadequacies of positivism now would be whipping a dead horse, but some of the reasons

⁶⁶ Riskas, 115, note 80.

⁶⁷ Riskas, 225.

for the rejection of the idea of verification in science should be mentioned.⁶⁸

Here is some social history from Ian Barbour's wonderful book, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*. Comparison with Barbour's observations makes it clear that Riskas's thought straddles a positivist mount that is not in the best of health.

During the 1930's and 1940's the positivists had taken science as the norm for all meaningful discourse. Religious language was considered neither true nor false, but meaningless. The positivists had declared the famous Verification Principle, which states that, apart from tautologies and definitions, statements are meaningful only if they can be verified by sense data.⁶⁹ Accepting an oversimplified view of science as the prototype for all genuine knowledge, they dismissed religion as "purely emotive."

During the 1950's positivism came under increasing attack, but many of its assumptions were perpetuated in the empiricism which came to replace it as the dominant interpretation of science. Among the empiricist claims were the following. (1) Science starts from publicly observable data which can be described in a pure observation-language independent of any theoretical assumptions. (2) Theories can be verified or falsified by comparison with this fixed experimental data. (3) The choice between theories is rational,

68 Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 98. The chapter is conveniently online here: <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2238&C=2079>

69 Compare Riskas, 115.

objective and in accordance with specifiable criteria. Philosophers under the sway of such empiricism continued to say that religion can legitimately make no cognitive claims.⁷⁰

Riskas talks like the empiricist philosophers that Barbour discusses here, in part because Riskas has missed out on the more recent developments. Barbour observes that:

These ideas came under increasing attack in the late 1950's and early 1960's, and three counter-claims were advanced. (1) *All data are theory-laden*; there is no neutral observation-language. (2) *Theories are not verified or falsified*; when data conflict with an accepted theory, they are usually set to one side as anomalies, or else auxiliary assumptions are modified. (3) *There are no criteria for choice between rival theories* of great generality, for the criteria are themselves theory-dependent.

The attack on empiricism was carried a step further in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn held that the thought and action of a scientific community are dominated by its *paradigms*, defined as 'standard examples of scientific work which embody a set of conceptual, methodological and metaphysical assumptions'. He maintained that observational data and criteria for assessing theories are paradigm-dependent.⁷¹

All of this raises several issues for the positivism that Riskas holds up as a presumably unbiased outsider test. Think about his repeated calls for empirical verification. Barbour explains:

70 Barbour, 3.

71 Barbour, 93

Let us look next at the debate as to whether or not theories can be verified or falsified. To the positivists, *verification* had seemed a clear-cut and straight-forward process. It was assumed that theories are verified by their agreement with experimental data. Knowledge, it was said, consists of proven propositions established by the hard facts. The famous ‘Verification Principle’ went on to assert that, apart from formal definitions, the only meaningful statements are empirical propositions verifiable by sense-experience...

No scientific theory can be *verified*. One cannot prove that a theory is true by showing that conclusions deduced from it agree with experiment, since (1) future experiments may conflict with the theory, and (2) another theory may be equally compatible with present evidence. From a finite set of particular observations one cannot derive a universal generalization with certainty (the much debated logic of induction can provide no inferential grounds for making assertions about *all* cases when only a particular group of cases has been examined).⁷²

Riskas’s book shows me that he has (1) neglected a great many important experiments, and (2) he has neglected many important theories. And the fact that his bibliography is selective and limited shows that his universal generalizations and certainty lack complete support.

Riskas can’t get very far in his book without repeating his call for falsifying conditions. Barbour has this to say:

Cannot theories at least be *falsified*, then? Even if many instances of agreement with experiment do not

72 Barbour, 98.

prove that a theory is true, it would seem that even a single counterinstance of data which disagrees with theory should conclusively prove it false. Karl Popper, acknowledging that scientific theories are never verifiable, contended that they must be in principle falsifiable. Science advances by bold conjectures and stern attempts to refute them. Popper dwelt on the importance of “crucial experiments” through which an hypothesis is definitively eliminated. Intellectual honesty, he said, requires the scientist to specify in advance experiments whose results could disprove his theory. Statements which are in principle unfalsifiable have no place in science.

But Popper’s view has in turn received considerable criticism. Discordant data *do not always falsify a theory*. One can never test an individual hypothesis conclusively in a “crucial experiment”; for if a deduction is not confirmed experimentally, one cannot be sure which one, from among the many assumptions on which the deduction was based, was in error. A network of theories and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.⁷³

Riskas doesn’t see that his network of theories and observations can be questioned on many issues that control his background expectations. He demands absolute perfection, absolute consistency from Mormonism and absolute certainty for himself. His assumptions about the rigidity of LDS claims underlie his conditions for verification and falsification. Change those assumptions, and ask for evidence of real inspiration rather than perfect, publicly repeatable and verifiable inspiration, and

73 Barbour, 99.

that makes differences that ripple through the entire network of assumptions. My own very different expectations provide me with a different set of predictions and direct my attention to a different set of observations, which I measure against Alma's tentative and open "cause to believe" (Alma 32: 18) rather than a demand for absolute and final "knowing." Riskas lives in a thought-world in which the critique of verification and falsification has not so much as knocked at the door, let alone completely undermined the foundations.

Barbour discusses the way that the debates about verification and falsification spill over into debates about science and religion.

My complaint ... is that they treat "falsifiability" and "unfalsifiability" as absolute and mutually exclusive categories. I have urged that even within science there are degrees of resistance to falsification, with paradigms and metaphysical assumptions most resistant but by no means totally invulnerable in the long run to cumulative empirical evidence. I would assign scientific paradigms a position near the middle of the "falsifiability" spectrum—not at the extreme of "objectivity" or "falsifiability." ... Religious paradigms I would assign towards the "subjective" or "unfalsifiable" end of the spectrum, because of the influence of interpretation on experience—but not at the extreme of 'subjectivity' (in the sense of immunity to evidence).... Thus in comparing science and religion on a spectrum of degrees of resistance to falsification, I can point to *both* similarities and contrasts—whereas those who use only two boxes, labeled "falsifiable" and "unfalsifiable," have no option but to view science and religion either as *similar* (assigned to the same box, whichever it is), or *contrasting* (assigned to different

boxes). I believe that recent work in the philosophy of science here casts significant light on the protracted debate about falsifiability in religion.⁷⁴

Riskas claims that “*The open-minded person follows where the evidence leads*,”⁷⁵ which also assumes that you have not misread or overlooked the evidence in front of you. Alan Goff observes that “Naturalism is a circular position, for it will accept as evidence only historical claims that can be verified in naturalistic ways; when the researcher talks about those verificationist methods of validation, he or she then turns into a positivist.”⁷⁶ Kuhn points out that “paradigms provide not only a map, but some of the directions for map making.”⁷⁷

It’s the ideology that tells a person what counts as evidence. Against a demand for perfection, only imperfection is decisive. Against a demand for absolute certainty, any open question is decisive. I take a different ideology to the problem. Asking whether Joseph Smith’s inspiration is real calls for an entirely different method, problem field, and standard solution, than asking whether it is perfect. For example, I’ve tested the Book of Mormon account of Alma’s conversion against contemporary near-death experience research. I’ve tested the Book of Mormon against Margaret Barker’s reconstruction of First Temple theology. I’ve tested B. H. Roberts’s questions against subsequent research by John Welch, John Sorenson, and many others. My paradigm leads me into countless fruitful lines of inquiry that leave no trace of existence, let alone nurture and experiment, in the thought world that Riskas offers. As Kuhn observes, “Particularly persuasive arguments can be developed

74 Barbour, 132–133.

75 Riskas, 74.

76 Alan Goff, “Dan Vogel’s Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family Allegory,” *FARMS Review of Books* 17/2 (2005): 329.

77 Kuhn, *Structure*, 109.

if the new paradigm permits the prediction of phenomena that had been entirely unsuspected while the old one prevailed.”⁷⁸

Look at the way Riskas approaches the evidence in the Doctrine and Covenants and Alma 32 as part of his “Deconstruction of the Mormon Concept of Revelation.” He emphasizes the D&C 9 passage that Oliver would “feel that it is right,” and in Alma 32, how a planted seed will “swell within the breast” of the recipient of the word, and by such a swelling sensation, a person shall then “feel” and thereby know the word is good. He focuses on the overtly metaphoric description in verse 28 rather than the more prosaic verses 34–35. He mentions “enlarge my soul” without pausing to explain what that means. (Enos demonstrates the process during his conversion, in his expanding circles of human concern. It follows that contracted souls do the opposite, a phenomenon most clearly seen under the influence of propaganda.) Riskas neglects his own mention of Alma’s “enlighten my understanding” to conclude, “Many other instances of revelation and conversion by revelation are in the Book of Mormon, all of which emphasize the primary role of *affect* (or feelings and emotion) in revelatory experience.”⁷⁹

Having become interested in how prayers are answered in the LDS scriptures, I determined to go past the commonplace references, and examine all the evidence. The results led me to conclude that “mind and heart” (D&C 8:2) are equally involved.⁸⁰ Further, in considering Bible passages describing what person must do to find truth, it became evident that those actions and attitudes have the effect of putting at risk what a person thinks and requires that each person be willing to risk what they most desire.⁸¹ The direct consequence of not taking

78 Kuhn, 154.

79 Riskas, 153.

80 See Kevin Christensen, “A Model of Mormon Spiritual Experience,” 19–21, http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/model_of_experience.pdf.

81 See Kevin Christensen, “Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets.” http://en.fairmormon.org/Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets/Seeing_the_truth

these actions means that arguments against biblical prophets by biblical peoples always reduce to their saying, in effect, “it’s not what I think” and/or, “it’s not what I want.”⁸²

In a discussion of naturalism, Alan Goff says that “the positivist has to intervene to deny the claims the historical actor provides in order to supply ones that accord with his own epistemology and ontology. The religious language has to be replaced with a naturalistic one, and that translation is done under the aegis of a metaphysical conception of reality.”⁸³ Riskas displays this process in his appendix as he reinterprets his LDS conversion in positivistic terms.⁸⁴ Goff goes on to say:

The primary function of an ideology is to conceal from the person who adheres to it the fact that he or she is operating under the influence of that ideology. The creed works, in other words, by convincing the subject that he or she knows how the real world works and that the others who disagree are apologists or are otherwise operating under a false set of beliefs.⁸⁵

Riskas claims to follow the evidence with an open mind, but he looks for evidence only of the kind and from the sources that his ideology allows. That is why he overlooks Nibley, Sorenson, Welch, Gardner and Peterson, Givens, and countless others. It’s not just a matter of being open-minded and following the evidence as though any random bit of evidence anthropomorphically knows not only where it should go, but why he or I should follow it there. What questions do you ask? What procedures do you follow to resolve them? Where do you look? What methods, problem field and standard of solution

82 See Christensen, http://en.fairmormon.org/Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets/Rejecting_true_prophets

83 Goff, 335.

84 Riskas, 394–396

85 Goff, 335.

does a person hold in defining what counts as evidence? Are you willing to risk what you currently think and desire, to offer as a sacrifice a broken heart and a contrite spirit?

What Riskas's choice of paradigm provides is neatly predicted in Nibley's "Notes on the Sophic and Mantic."⁸⁶ For example:

Proposition 2. The foundation of Sophic thinking was *the elimination of the supernatural or superhuman, i.e., anything that could not be weighed, measured, or sensed objectively from a description of the real world.*⁸⁷

From start to finish, Riskas marches to the tune of this ancient drum beat.

Proposition 3. Having dismissed the Mantic, the Sophic becomes impatient of its lingering survival, which it views with *uncompromising hostility.*⁸⁸

"Uncompromising hostility" is a far better description of Riskas's attitude than "balanced" "religiously sensitive," and "fair-minded."

Proposition 4. *Claiming magisterial authority, the Sophic acknowledges no possibility of defeat or rivalry. In principle it can never be wrong. Its confidence is absolute.*⁸⁹

As an example of his own open-mindedness, Riskas says, "It would seem that the honest answer to the question of what

86 Hugh Nibley, *The Ancient State*, 380–478.

87 Nibley, 383

88 Nibley, 388

89 Nibley, 391

would convince me that there is a god (or to return to a god) could be reduced to a one word answer: ‘Nothing.’”⁹⁰

Proposition 9. The world without the Mantic offers the best test of the Sophic. It is marked by (A) piteous disappointment, (B) a puzzling deadness of spirit, and (C) a world plagued by doubt, insecurity, cynicism, and despair.⁹¹

Riskas sees believers as striving to avoid “the clear cosmic meaningless and ultimate extinction that weighs on them despite their adamant denials and claimed beliefs and attestations to the contrary.”⁹²

Riskas includes a section that weighs on the “Problem of Evil”⁹³ and repeats the stock protests and claims throughout his book. He starts by stating, “The classic, perennial problem of evil entails the apparent incoherence of the claimed existence of a god who is a sufficiently-to-all-knowing, powerful, loving, and morally perfect being, given the extent of nonsensical and extreme human and animal suffering and premature death in the world that can be attributed to both *natural* and *immoral human* causes.”⁹⁴ After sixteen pages of quoting some LDS sources and scriptures, he winds down by declaring that “the existence of evil is a real, vexing, and I think, irresolvable problem—philosophically, empirically, and experimentally.”⁹⁵

Overall, Riskas strikes me as tone deaf to the quality of the LDS answers in comparison to philosophical issues. Ian Barbour has a concise and enlightening chapter on various models of God.

90 Riskas, 338.

91 Nibley, 431.

92 Riskas, xxxi.

93 Riskas, 241.

94 Riskas, 241.

95 Riskas, 257.

Four models of God's relation to the world have been mentioned, patterned respectively after an absolute monarch and his kingdom, a clockmaker and a clock, a dialogue between two persons, and an agent and his actions. In the process thought of Alfred North Whitehead, a fifth model is presented: a society of which one member is pre-eminent but not absolute. The universe is pictured as a community of interacting beings, rather than as a monarchy, a machine, an interpersonal dialogue or a cosmic organism.⁹⁶

Process thought provides distinctive analyses of the problems of *freedom* and *evil*. The ways in which freedom is built into process metaphysics from the outset have already been indicated. If the classical ideas of omnipotence and predestination are given up, God is exonerated of responsibility for natural evil. If no event is the product of God's agency alone, he works with a world, given to him in every moment, which never fully embodies his will. The creatures, and above all man, are free to reject the higher vision. Suffering is inevitable in a world of beings with conflicting goals. Pain is part of the price of consciousness and intensity of feeling. In an evolutionary world, struggle is integral to the realization of greater value. As Teilhard de Chardin maintained, evil is intrinsic to an evolving cosmos as it would not be to an instantaneous creation. Suffering and death are not punishments for sin but structural concomitants of what he called "the immense travail" of a world in birth.⁹⁷

96 Barbour, 161.

97 Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 168–169.

From my LDS perspective, I find this picture of process thought resonates beautifully not only with the description of the council in Abraham 3, but also with emerging scholarship on the importance of the council in the ancient world.⁹⁸ I'm also very impressed by the way that Joseph Smith anticipated Whitehead's Process Model.⁹⁹ And Hugh Nibley has pointed out how much can change when we consider this life as though the middle act of a three-act play.¹⁰⁰ Even if we do not fully grasp the meaning of much of what happens, the notion that life extends beyond this life means that many issues that seem troubling from one perspective might be resolved in the next. For Riskas, the moment of death is the final answer and end of meaning.

Riskas complains about the "very existence of different faiths, each with different and conflicting concepts of gods and revelations from them."¹⁰¹ Alma realizes that his own wish to speak with a voice of thunder and resolve everything by forceful demonstration is wrong and that "the Lord doth grant unto all nations of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, all that he seeth fit that they should have" (Alma 29:8). Nephi remarks that God "speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Nephi 31:3), which explains how "he remembereth the heathen, and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:33), how "all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world unto man are the typifying of him," (2 Nephi 11:4), and

98 For example, David Bokovoy, "Ye Really Are Gods': A Response to Michael Heiser Concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John," *FARMS Review of Books* 17/1 (2005): 267–313.

99 Floyd Ross, "Process Philosophy and Mormon Thought" *Sunstone* 7/1 (January-February 1982): 17–25, with a reply by Sterling McMurrin, 25–27.

100 Hugh Nibley, "Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic" in *The Ancient State*, 370–371.

101 Riskas, 260.

how there are “divers ways that he did manifest things unto the children of men which were good” (Moroni 7:24).

Riskas complains about prayer’s “*incoherence, non-necessity, and unreliability*”¹⁰² in ways that all derive primarily from his positivistic stance and his demand for absolute certainty. If you expect God to behave as predictably as an Omniscient Vending Machine that provides for you on request without your even needing to ask, since He should know already, you may frame the issues, test, and conclude as Riskas does. But if you view God as an Agent operating under wide range of other considerations besides the need to pander to the whims of skeptical philosophers, the different expectations can lead to a different method, problem field, and standard of solution, and a very different interpretation of experience. I can be very impressed by the a few personal examples of answer to prayer, and have a context in which to consider seeming silences.

Riskas includes a postscript that describes his de-conversion experience during his crisis of faith: prayer brought a thought “just like all the others that came merely, and *exclusively* from my brain.”¹⁰³ Consider how Riskas would or could describe how his own statement could be verified or falsified with absolute, final, popularly accepted certainty. Take your time.

In considering the interpretation of experience, Ian Barbour observes:

There is, in short, no *uninterpreted* experience of the sort which the positivist posits. We don’t simply see; we “see as.” In the act of perception, the irreducible “data” are not isolated patches of colour or fragmentary sensations, but total patterns in which interpretation has already entered. Our experience is organized in the light of particular interests. Language itself also

102 Riskas, 264.

103 Riskas, 395.

structures our experience in specific ways. Conceptual presuppositions are transmitted by culturally-provided words which give form to experience. What we count as “given” depends on our conceptual framework and the interests which it serves. The positivist’s quest for the certainty of an incorrigible foundation for knowledge cannot be satisfied.¹⁰⁴

In *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye comments that “to defend the right of criticism to exist at all, therefore is to assume that criticism is a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right with some measure of independence from the art it deals with.”¹⁰⁵ He’s talking about literature, but the point applies to any criticism. For instance, the omnipresent term “politically correct” comes from Marxist thought, and its use presupposes a dependence on the Marxist thought through which it deals with everything. He’s talking about the need for a way for a critic to provide independent criticism, remembering here that *discernment* is another word for *criticism*, and that discernment is listed as one of the spiritual gifts.¹⁰⁶ “Not politically correct” originally meant “not Marxist.” It is a dependent form of criticism. It functions in the same way that “not orthodox” does in any society. It means “not us,” and it is dependent on the originating society. It is one thing to test Mormonism by an outside ideology, as Riskas does, and as all of the sources in his Appendix B do, but quite another thing to test Mormonism in an independent way by religiously sensitive criteria that are not ideologically dependent. It is also one thing to try to validate Mormonism by an inside approach, as our own pedagogical texts tend to

104 Barbour, 120. Also <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2238&C=2080>.

105 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 5.

106 D&C 46:23.

do, or to criticize outside faiths in terms of being “not us.” That sort of criticism has no independence. It works at *Position 2* of the Perry Scheme. We need to find a mode of criticism (that is, discernment) that answers the question, “Why us?”

Frye argues that a critic should “let his critical principles shape themselves out his knowledge of that field.”¹⁰⁷ That is just the sort of thing that Barbour does in his discussion of religion. Barbour provides an alternate Outsider Test that has a measure of independence because it takes its critical principles from a survey of the field of religion, rather than by adopting a ready-made ideology outside of religion, as Riskas does, or inside a specific religion, as most people tend to do. Barbour proposes to evaluate religions by means of criteria that are not paradigm dependent. He offers a Mantic approach, rather than a Sophic one.

How does he manage? Ian Barbour offers a position that I accept and endorse, which he calls *critical realism*.

To summarize: the scheme I have outlined accepts the three “subjective” theses that (1) all data are theory-laden, (2) comprehensive theories are highly resistant to falsification, and (3) there are no rules for choice between research programmes. It also preserves Kuhn’s most distinctive contributions concerning paradigms: the importance of exemplars in the transmission of a scientific tradition, and the strategic value of commitment to a research programme. At the same time I have made three assertions which seem to me essential for the objectivity of science: (1) rival theories are not incommensurable, (2) observation exerts some control over theories, and (3) there are criteria

107 Frye, 6–7.

of assessment independent of particular research programmes.¹⁰⁸

In order to permit a meaningful degree of communication between rival paradigms, Barbour argues for the need to retreat to issues where the basic observations are not in as much dispute because they are less paradigm-dependent.

I would conclude that *interpretive beliefs* are brought to religious experience as much as they are derived from it. There is a greater influence in religion than in science “from the top down”: from paradigms, through interpretive models and beliefs, to experience. But the influence “from the bottom up,” starting from experience, is not totally absent in religion. Although there is no neutral descriptive language, there are degrees of interpretation. Therefore religious beliefs, and even paradigms, are not totally incommensurable. There can be significant communication between paradigm communities. One cannot prove one’s most fundamental beliefs, but one can try to show how they function in the interpretation of experience.¹⁰⁹

If the kinds of basic experience that underlie religious belief can be approached without reference to any particular doctrinal interpretation, Ian Barbour suggests that such experiences can serve as a common ground for discussion, a place of solid footing, a point of little disputed reference from which to examine the varied interpretations and traditions. Those that I see as most interesting (generally following Barbour¹¹⁰) can be seen as generally framing a movement:

108 Barbour, 118. Also here: <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2238&C=2079>.

109 Barbour, 124.

110 Barbour, 53–55.

(a) From responses to external impressions regarding:

- *Order and creativity* in the world
- The *common mythic symbols and patterns* underlying most religious traditions¹¹¹
- *Key historical events* that define separate traditions and bind individuals

(b) Through the innermost experiences of the individual:

- *Numinous* awe and reverence
- *Mystical* union
- *Moral obligation*
- *Reorientation and Reconciliation* with respect to personal sin, guilt, and weakness, the existence of evil, suffering, and death, and tensions between science and faith.

(c) Then returning to the external world as human action:

- *Interpersonal dialogue*, in which you begin interpret external events as God speaking to you, and you answer through your own actions.
- *Social and Ritual* behavior

111 Though Barbour has useful observations on myth (21–22), he does not include the patterns among his basic evidences. I think it belongs and brings a complementary symmetry to “key historical events.” That is, we should appreciate both the temporal and the spiritual.

These matters cannot objectively prove the existence of a God (whether personal or impersonal), but, as I hope to demonstrate, they do constitute the core of religious experience for believers of all faiths. They provide the ground of experience on which reasoned and feeling assessments of the validity and worth of faith are based. They encompass the ways in which spirituality is manifest in history and symbol. They are the wine—and doctrine the wine-bottles. To argue and contend about doctrine rather than these kinds of experience is to emphasize the wine skin over the wine. In Alma's terms, it is to emphasize what you think you "know" over what ultimately gives "cause to believe" (Alma 32:18).

If we have a body of observations upon which disputants can agree to at least begin discussion, the next issue involves the recourse to criteria for judgments that are not paradigm dependent. Barbour says, "As outlined earlier, the most important criteria are simplicity, coherence, and the extent and variety of supporting experimental evidence (including precise predictions and the anticipation of the discovery of novel types of phenomena). But there are no rules, no specific instructions, that is, for the unambiguous application of the criteria; there is, in Kuhn's words, 'no systematic decision procedure which must lead each individual in the group to the same decision.' Yet the criteria provide what Kuhn calls 'shared values' and 'good reasons' for choice; they are 'important determinants of group behaviour, even though the members of the group do not apply them in the same way.'"¹¹² That is, we do not have recourse to a set of objective rules that coerce everyone to the same conclusion, but we can turn to a set of constraints that can give weight to our judgments. As Kuhn says, "It makes a great deal of sense to ask which of two actual and competing theories fit the facts better."¹¹³

¹¹²Barbour, 115.

¹¹³Kuhn, 147.

As Barbour explains:

I am not claiming that moral and religious experience or particular historical events can constitute a proof for the existence of a personal God. I am only saying that it is reasonable to interpret them theistically and that it makes a difference whether one does so or not. It makes a difference not only in one's attitudes and behaviour but in the way one sees the world. One may notice and value features of individual and corporate life which one otherwise might have overlooked.¹¹⁴

When I look through the LDS culture for evidence of these kinds of experience, I can find all of them. For instance, in the 1832 account of Joseph Smith's vision we find this account of his response to Order and Creativity in the world:

For I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their majesty through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the strength and beauty whose power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exeding great and marvilous even in the likeness of him who created them and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said it is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power a being that makith Laws and decreeeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who

114 Barbour, 55–56. <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2238&C=2077>.

fillet Eternity who was and is and will be from All Eternity to Eternity.¹¹⁵

The vision itself is a key historical event for us as are the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon, and the pioneer exodus. We share appreciation of other key historical events, such as the life of Jesus, with Christianity as a whole.

Barbour's comments on myths have obvious relevance to LDS temple worship. For instance:

Myths offer ways of ordering experience. Myths provide a world-view, a vision of the basic structure of reality. Most myths are set at the time of creation, or in a primordial time, or at the time of key historical events—times in which the forms of existence were established, modified or disclosed. The present is interpreted in the light of the formative events narrated in the myth, as Mireca Eliade has shown.¹¹⁶

We can also look at Joseph's vision and the vision of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price and see distinctive numinous qualities. Barbour summarizes the numinous as "a sense of mystery and wonder, holiness and sacredness, in a variety of contexts. Rudolf Otto's classic study finds in numinous experience a combination of fascination and dread. Often there seems to be a sense of otherness, confrontation and encounter, or of being grasped and laid hold of. Correspondingly, man is aware of his own dependence, finitude, limitation and contingency."¹¹⁷

Mark Koltko's insightful essay, "Mysticism and Mormonism," explores parallels between various Mormon

115 Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 6; cf. Alma 30:44 and D&C 88:42–50.

116 Barbour, 20.

117 Barbour, 53–54.

scriptures and certain characteristics of mystical experience.¹¹⁸ Koltko's "eight central qualities of the mystical or transcendent experience" are the "ego quality" (cf. D&C 88:6; Moses 7:41); the "unifying quality" (cf. D&C 88:41); the "inner and subjective quality" (cf. Moses 7:48); the "temporal/spatial quality" (cf. Moses 1:27–29); the "noetic quality" (D&C 38:1–2), the "ineffable quality" (3 Nephi 19:19); "the positive emotion quality" (2 Nephi 4:21); the "sacred quality" (3 Nephi 11:15; Moses 1:11).

According to Ninian Smart, the numinous and mystic poles of experience influence patterns of doctrine.

If you stress the numinous, you stress that our salvation or liberation (our becoming holy) must flow from God the Other. It is he who brings it to us through his grace. You also stress the supreme power and dynamism of God as creator of the cosmos. If, on the other hand, you stress the mystical and non-dual, you tend to stress how we attain salvation and liberation through our own effort at mediation, not by the intervention of the Other.... If we combine the two, but accent the numinous, we see mystical union as a kind of close embrace with the other—like human love, where the two are one and yet the two-ness remains. If the accent is on the mystical rather than the numinous, then God tends to be seen as a being whom we worship, but in such a way that we get beyond duality.¹¹⁹

Here, I believe, is an essential distinguishing characteristic of Mormonism—the blend of the numinous and the mystic. This explains the Orthodox discomfort with the Mormon idea

118 Mark E. Koltko, "Mysticism and Mormonism: An LDS Perspective on Transcendence and Higher Consciousness," *Sunstone* 13/2 (April 1989): 14–19.

119 Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Cross Cultural Explorations of Human Belief* (New York, Charles Scribners: 1983), 71–72.

of deification (something quite unthinkable to one caught up in a purely numinous tradition), as well as the Eastern discomfort with our literalism and personal God (again, something quite unthinkable to one caught up by the emptiness of pure mysticism). For the same reason, the blend in Mormonism explains Nephi's insistence on combining grace and works—"By grace we are saved after all we can do."¹²⁰ Our need for grace offends the self-reliant mystic, and our effort toward perfection offends those who depend on pure grace. By pointing out the experiential roots behind such doctrinal disagreements, I feel that we have much to gain. Against the background of comparative world religion, Mormonism appears as the more comprehensive and inclusive faith.

For one thing, it becomes apparent that by treating numinous and mystic experience as contraries, we can solve various problems that come up in other traditions because one or the other aspect of the sacred has been excluded. Benjamin deliberately strives to awaken in his people a sense of their nothingness (Mosiah 2:25, 4:5), in contrast to the numinous majesty of the Almighty. But when that necessary awareness has done its work, he describes his people as "the children of Christ" (Mosiah 5:7).¹²¹ The danger in a strictly numinous tradition is that humankind tends to be seen as depraved and contingent. For example, Barbour comments on how "Luther's outlook, with its undue respect for power and authority, and its sense of the complete sinfulness and evil in the human being when left alone"¹²² can be seen as unhealthy to the human psyche. On the other hand, a mystic like Emerson can

120 2 Nephi 25:23.

121 A similar shift occurs in the account in Moses 1:10, 18 as he reports his sense of nothingness, and then asserts "I am a son of God, in the similitude of his Only Begotten;... and I have other things to inquire of him."

122 Smart, *Worldviews*, 76.

preach an admirable “Self Reliance.”¹²³ But even the memory of an experience of unity with an impersonal Oversoul turns out to be altogether inadequate when he had to confront the terribly personal implications of the death of his son, Waldo.¹²⁴ Mormonism provides the strength gained from the union of complementary experiences.¹²⁵

One example of moral obligation deserves mention here because of its unusual complexity and intensity, as well as its vivid presence in the Book of Mormon. Sociologist Terrence Des Pres made a study of the experiences of individuals who have survived extreme horrors created by fellow humans.¹²⁶ A striking type of survival behavior that emerged from Nazi and Soviet death camps came as certain persons developed a will to “survive as witness” and to create a specific genre of survival literature. These Survivor-Witnesses can be described as follows:¹²⁷

1. The will to remember and record anchors the survivor in the moral purpose of bearing witness, thus maintaining his own integrity in conscious

123 See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance” in Carl Bode and Malcom Cowley, *The Portable Emerson* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 138–164.

124 See *The Portable Emerson*, 269, and “Threnody,” 656–664.

125 Smart’s examples of the blend of the numinous and mystic in *Worldviews* come from Hinduism, which, compared to Mormonism, lacks a balancing historical orientation (something distinct from a historical tradition) to complement its rich exploration of symbolism.

126 Lisa Bolin Hawkins and Gordon Thomasson, “I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee: Survivor-Witness in the Book of Mormon,” FARMS Preliminary Report, 1984. Their paper is based on Terrence Des Pres, “Survivors and the Will to Bear Witness,” *Social Research* 40 (1973): 668–69, and Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

127 I am quoting the summary in the Hawkins–Thomasson paper, “I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee,” and am parenthetically adding references to appropriate passages from the experiences of the key figures of the final chapters of the Book of Mormon.

contradiction of the savagery around him (Mormon 3:11–16; Moroni 9:6–25).

2. Witnessing of his experience is viewed as a duty, even a sacred task (Mormon 4:16; 8:14; 9:31).
3. It is instinctively felt, an involuntary outburst of feeling, born out of the horror that no one will be left (Mormon 6:17–22; 8:1–3).
4. The task is often carried out despite great risks; often in secret or by depositing the record in a secret archive (Mormon 6:6; 8:14).
5. Survivors do not witness to inflict guilt or to rationalize their own survival. Their mission transcends guilt and their irrepressible urge to witness arises before any thought of guilt surfaces and at the initial stages of adjustment to extremity (Mormon 9:30–31; Moroni 9:3–6).
6. They speak simply to tell, to describe out of a common care for life and for the future, realizing that we all live in a realm of mutual sacrifice (Mormon 4:17–22; 8:37–40; Moroni 7:45–48).
7. Survival in this sense is a collective act; the survivor has pledged to see that the story is told (Mormon 4:16).
8. The survivors speak to the whole world, as a firsthand eyewitness, one whose words cannot be ignored (Mormon 4:16–22; 9:30).

9. The view themselves as a necessary connection between the past and the future (Mormon 4:17–22; 5:12; 7:1–10; 9:30).
10. They perceive that “out of horror... the truth will emerge and be made secure,” that “good and evil are only clear in retrospect,” for wisdom only comes at a terrible price. Thus their mission is to display the “objective conditions of evil” (Mormon 5:8–9; 9:31; Moroni 9–10).

In discussing reorientation and reconciliation, Barbour observes that “In individual life, acknowledgment of guilt and repentance may be followed by the experience of forgiveness. Persons unable to accept themselves are somehow enabled to do so. Such reorientation may lead to a new freedom from anxiety, an openness to new possibilities in one’s life, a greater sensitivity to other persons. Grace is experienced in the healing power of love at work in our midst when reconciliation overcomes estrangement.”¹²⁸

The account of Alma’s conversion (Alma 36) is a remarkable description of reorientation and reconciliation with respect to sin. Reorientation is a change of thinking. And reconciliation is a change of feeling. This is why it is important to recognize that answer to prayer in LDS scriptures balance thinking and feeling processes and why the search for truth must involve a willingness to risk preconceptions, and a willingness to put aside personal desires.

Barbour explains Interpersonal Dialogue in these terms:

The interaction between two persons is sometimes characterized by directness, immediacy, mutuality and genuine dialogue. In an “I-Thou” relationship,

128 Barbour, 54.

as Martin Buber describes it, there is availability, sensitivity, openness, responsibility, freedom to respond; one is totally involved as a whole person. Buber suggests that one can interpret the neighbour's need as a divine summons. Encounter with the human Thou is a form of encounter with the eternal Thou. One understands oneself to be addressed through events. "The sound of which the speech consists are the events of personal every-day life." A person replies through the speech of his life; he answers with his actions. Events in daily life can be interpreted as dialogue with God.¹²⁹

Richard Bushman provides an account that illustrates this kind of experience in an LDS context:

I had been a branch president and Bishop, and was then president of the Boston Stake. Those offices required me to give blessings in the name of God and to seek solutions to difficult problems nearly every day. I usually felt entirely inadequate to the demands placed upon me and could not function at all without some measure of inspiration. What I did, the way I acted, my inner thoughts, were all intermingled with this effort to speak and act righteously for God. I could no longer entertain the possibility that God did not exist because I felt His power working through me Only when I thought of God as a person interested in me and asked for help as a member of Christ's kingdom did idea and reality fit properly. Only that language properly honored the experiences I had day after day in my callings.¹³⁰

129 Barbour, 54–55, as Interpersonal Dialogue.

130 Richard Bushman, "My Belief," in *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*, ed. Philip L. Barlow (Centerville, UT: Cannon, 1986), 24.

Barbour had commented that while such experiences do not constitute coercive proof, theistic interpretation is reasonable, and given that interpretation, “one may notice and value features of individual and corporate life which one otherwise might have overlooked.”¹³¹ Riskas deals with nothing of what I have discussed here. When he describes his own LDS spiritual experiences, he devalues them as nothing but the workings of his own mind. Many of Riskas conclusions and methods have been predicted and undermined by both Nibley and Barbour. Yet nothing whatsoever in Riskas’s book predicts any of the notions and evidences that I have just briefly touched upon.

An evaluation of competing accounts of these kinds of religious experience based on criteria that are not paradigm dependent means we should look to the values that Barbour summarized as “simplicity, coherence, and the extent and variety of supporting experimental evidence (including precise predictions and the anticipation of the discovery of novel types of phenomena).” I’ve compared these things with Alma 32’s reference to “delicious,” an effect of “enlightening the understanding” of demonstrable growth in response to experiment, and “expansion of the mind.”

Another interesting effect of Barbour’s approach in considering the LDS experience in this way is that we have a wide range of experiences to consider that combine as strands in a rope, rather than links in a logical chain. No one strand holds all of the weight. The presence of one strand does not require the presence or absence of another. But the presence of many strands means greater strength. The significance of this reality should not be lost when we consider the significance of key historical events. Barbour observes that “every community celebrates and re-enacts particular historical events which are crucial to its corporate identity and its vision of reality.”¹³²

131 Barbour, 56.

132 Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 55.

“What distinguished Mormonism,” writes Richard Bushman, “was not so much the Gospel Mormons taught, which in many respects resembled other Christians’ teachings, but what they believed had happened—to Joseph Smith, to Book of Mormon characters, and to Moses and Enoch [and later to the pioneers, during their archetypal Exodus to the west]. . . . The core of Mormon belief was a conviction about actual events. . . . Mormonism was history, not philosophy.”¹³³

It is these key historical events that define our community, but even if these events did not exist, the other strands may remain independently of them. We all too often fall into a pattern of all or nothing rhetoric and thinking that overlooks the full range of experience that exists. While it is dramatic, I don’t think it is necessary because those under the spell of such thinking run the risk of unnecessarily ending up with nothing. If many strands of different kinds of experience exist in support of personal faith, any individual strand might be expendable. If the number and quality of strands tends to increase over time, then one possesses a stronger “cause to believe.”

In contrast to Riskas’s claims to have offered a definitive falsification of Mormonism, Barbour says, “Though no decisive falsification is possible in religion, I have argued that the cumulative weight of evidence does count for or against religious beliefs. Religious paradigms, like scientific ones, are not falsified by data, but are replaced by promising alternatives. Commitment to a paradigm allows its potentialities to be systematically explored, but it does not exclude reflective evaluation.”¹³⁴

Given these kinds of resources, Barbour can say this:

133 Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 187–88.

134 Barbour, 172.

I would submit that religious commitment can indeed be combined with *critical reflection*. Commitment alone without enquiry tends to become fanaticism or narrow dogmatism; reflection alone without commitment tends to become trivial speculation unrelated to real life. Perhaps personal involvement must alternate with reflection on that involvement, since worship and critical enquiry at their most significant levels do not occur simultaneously. It is by no means easy to hold beliefs for which you would be willing to die, and yet to remain open to new insights; but it is precisely such a combination of commitment and enquiry that constitutes religious maturity.

If *faith* were simply the acceptance of revealed propositions or assent to propositions, it would be incompatible with *doubt*. But if faith means trust and commitment, it is compatible with considerable doubt about particular interpretations. Faith does not automatically turn uncertainties into certainties. What it does is take us beyond the detached speculative outlook which prevents the most significant sorts of experience; it enables us to live and act amid the uncertainties of life without pretensions of intellectual or moral infallibility.¹³⁵

Riskas, it seems to me, offers his text with just such pretensions. I've mentioned the Perry Scheme and how Riskas displays *Position 2* thinking, something that, truth be told, everyone displays at some point. And this brings in the opportunity to take this outside test a bit further. Where do Ian Barbour and Joseph Smith end up as measured by the Perry

135 Barbour, 136.

Scheme? And what might that imply as to the value of their work?

Originally, the Perry scheme was meant to be descriptive, but the possibility is that it can be pedagogical, that if students and teachers become more self-aware about their own thinking processes, they might be able to move through the nine positions more easily. Alma 32 puts forward the idea of a final, static “knowing” versus an open ended “cause to believe.” Alma clearly favors an orientation towards “cause to believe” in a which a person is fully aware that their knowledge is “not perfect”, and that they are engaged in an ongoing process of learning, in which experiment is ongoing, knowledge and understanding expanding, and yet in which they can have faith. “Is this not real?” even though your knowledge is not perfect.

If a person can move along through to *Position 6: Commitment Foreseen*, they come to this point:

He starts to see how he must be embracing and transcending of: certainty/doubt, focus/breadth, idealism/realism, tolerance/contempt, stability/flexibility. He senses need for affirmation and incorporation of existential or logical polarities. He senses need to hold polarities in tension in the interest of Truth.¹³⁶

This puts me in mind of 2 Nephi 2 on opposition in all things, the temple, and Joseph Smith’s comment that “by proving contraries, truth is made manifest,” remembering that “truth is knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24).

He begins to maintain meaning, coherence, and value while conscious of their partial, limited, and contradictable nature. He begins to understand

136 Veda Hale, email to Kevin Christensen on the Perry Scheme, Position 6.

symbol as symbols and acknowledges the time-place relativity of them. He begins to affirm and hold absolutes in symbols while still acknowledging them to be relativistic.¹³⁷

This puts me in mind of Nephi's comment that we cannot understand the Jewish prophets without knowing the cultural context (2 Nephi 25:1-5). It's why I continue to find enlightenment from learning more about other cultures. It goes back to my discovery that what the English meant by "biscuit" is much like what I thought of as a cookie, and was different than what I might make from a box of Bisquick. "Cookie" as a word is merely a social convention relative to a specific time and place that points to something else, but that something is not merely figurative but real. I should know, because I bake them regularly. That someone from Liverpool might call them biscuits does not make them less real.

He begins to embrace viewpoints in conflict with his own.¹³⁸

Think of Alma 29, where Alma says that even though he might want to speak with a voice of thunder and coerce everyone into repentance, yet he knows that is a sin, and that God gives unto men all that he sees fit for them to have. This does not mean that Alma takes his vision as merely symbolic, merely figurative. It's real and binding, but not the same thing as instant omniscience, and not binding on anyone else. It does not give the right to coerce or judge, though it does drive his need to testify. He knows he has room to grow. Joseph Smith is the same. He's not a fanatic, saying "Submit or die!" but says, "If I cannot convince you that my way is better," we'll work with your way.

137 Veda Hale. Position 6.

138 Veda Hale, Perry Scheme summary. Position 7.

Perry's *Position 7*: Commitments in Relativism developed, includes this:

He senses need to be: wholehearted—but tentative, to be able to fight for his own values—yet respect others.¹³⁹

Joseph Smith's later discourses are full of this attitude.¹⁴⁰ He doesn't condemn other people for not having had his experiences, yet he accepts his own experience as binding on him, and worth offering to others.

Now the person has a field-independent learning style, has learned to scan for information, accepts that hierarchical and analytic notes are evidence of sharpening of cognition. He is willing to take risks, is flexible, perceptive, broad, strategy-minded, and analytical.¹⁴¹

Here I think of the passages about seeking out of the best books words of wisdom (D&C 88:118), preparing our minds to understand more tomorrow (3 Nephi 17:1-3), of searching the scriptures, of recognizing the need to study others and cultures and times to understand as they understood (2 Nephi 25:1-5), and not presume it's just a matter of memorizing our favorite proof-texts, ignoring context, and calling that "scripture mastery."

Perry's *Position 9*: Commitments in Relativism further developed, has this:

The person now has a developed sense of irony and can more easily embrace other's viewpoints. He can accept life as just that "life," just the way *it* is! Now he holds the commitments he makes in a condition of Provisional

139 Veda Hale, Perry Scheme summary, Position 7.

140 For example, *TPJS*, 313.

141 Hale, Position 7.

Ultimacy, meaning that for him what he chooses to be truth IS his truth, and he acts as if it is ultimate truth, but there is still a “provision” for change. He has no illusions about having “arrived” permanently on top of some heap, he is ready and knows he will have to retrace his journey over and over, but he has hope that he will do it each time more wisely. He is aware that he is developing his Identity through Commitment. He can affirm the inseparable nature of the knower and the known—meaning he knows he as knower contributes to what he calls known.¹⁴² He helps weld a community by sharing realization of aloneness and gains strength and intimacy through this shared vulnerability. He has discarded obedience in favor of his own agency, and he continues to select, judge, and build.

Compare this from Joseph Smith:

The great designs of God in relation to the salvation of the human family, are very little understood by the professedly wise and intelligent generation in which we live. Various and conflicting are the opinions of men concerning the plan of salvation, the requisitions of the Almighty, the necessary preparations for heaven, the state and condition of departed spirits, and the happiness or misery that is consequent upon the practice of righteousness and iniquity according to their several notions of virtue and vice.

But while one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great

142 Think of Joseph Smith’s remarkably post-modern statement that “the different teachers of religion understood the same passages so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible” (Joseph Smith–*History*, 1:12).

Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of man, causes "His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, "according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil," or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, or India. He will judge them, "not according to what they have not, but according to what they have," those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law. We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family; and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess that the Judge of all the earth has done right.¹⁴³

Joseph Smith, it seems to me, operates here at *Position 9* of Perry's Scheme of Cognitive and Ethical Growth, whereas Riskas is stuck at *Position 2*. Who should I take as a guide on issues of cognitive and ethical growth, based on this outside test?

143 History of the Church 4:595.

Well, Riskas has argued at length with a few Mormon philosophers and claims that he has deconstructed the basis of our faith. Back in 2001, Daniel Peterson addressed a gathering of philosophers and made this comment:

I love philosophy. But philosophy is not a primary mode of religious reflection for Latter-day Saints. Nor is systematic theology. Not even a secondary mode. Nor a tertiary one.

We tell stories.¹⁴⁴

Here is Blake Ostler telling a story from an essay that Riskas lists in his bibliography.

Now, I want to talk a bit about this experience. At that point in my life I was merely a spiritual neophyte like we all begin... I was going into the gymnasium and a girl that I barely knew came and sat down by me. She was a Senior and I was a Sophomore, and she was pretty and I was intimidated. Now normally I would have never said anything to her because to speak to a pretty Senior girl when you're a lowly Sophomore is just simply *verboten*. But there was nothing I could do to stop from saying, "I know this is going to sound really strange, but I have a message to you from our Heavenly Father. He wants you to stop thinking about suicide." And her eyes got real big and her jaw dropped and she said, "How did you know?" And I told her as honestly as I could, mustering all the courage I had, "I don't know; I simply know." And she explained to me that she had laid out on her bed stand a whole bottle of pills that she was going to go home and take right after

144 Daniel Peterson, "Historical Concreteness or Speculative Abstraction?" *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1-2 (2002): xii.

that assembly. In fact, the next day she came and told me that I'd literally saved her life. And it dawned on me at that moment in my life, "What if I hadn't listened?" What if, instead, I had gone to my head and thought it through? What if I had relied on my own noggin? Well, the answer's very simple, she would be dead. She's not, she's a mother and she's doing well.¹⁴⁵

Riskas refers to this essay but says nothing about this particular story in his text.¹⁴⁶ The recurrence of that kind of nothing in Riskas says everything to me. Ian Barbour observes that

Participation in a religious tradition also demands a more total *personal involvement* than occurs in science. Religious questions are of ultimate concern, since the meaning of one's existence is at stake. Religion asks about the final objects of a person's devotion and loyalty, for which he will sacrifice other interests if necessary. Too detached an attitude may cut a person off from the very kinds of experience which are religiously most significant. Reorientation and reconciliation are transformations of life-pattern affecting all aspects of personality, not intellect alone. Religious writings use the language of actors, not the language of spectators. Religious commitment, then, is a self-involving personal response, a serious decision implicating one's whole life, a willingness to act and suffer for what one believes in.¹⁴⁷

145 Blake Ostler, "Spiritual Experiences as the Basis for Belief and Commitment" at <http://www.fairlds.org/fair-conferences/2007-fair-conference/2007-spiritual-experiences-as-the-basis-for-belief-and-commitment>. This is listed in his bibliography and is the only mention of FAIR in Riskas's book.

146 Riskas, 158.

147 Barbour, 135–136.

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