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HOW THINGS LOOK FROM HERE

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Do defenders of the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ see themselves as fighting a desperate rearguard battle against the evidence, hoping to save at least a faint shred of credibility for its claims? Hardly. But, at the same time, we don't pretend to be able to prove those claims beyond any possibility of doubt. Such a prospect, we think, was never God's intent. "For now we see through a glass, darkly," as the prophet and apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12. "Now [we] know in part." That is an important part of the plan. There is abundant evidence to justify discipleship, but there can also be plausible-seeming grounds, if one prefers, for rejecting it.*

Every once in a while, I read hostile statements online about the mindset of Latter-day Saint apologists. Some critics claim, for instance, that we're in it for the money, perhaps even drawing highly lucrative personal incomes for our apologetics from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That allegation is scarcely worthy of response, since it's offered without so much as a nod in the direction of genuine supporting data and since it is, in fact, flatly contradicted by the evidence. My wife and I, for example, are (admittedly rather insignificant) donors to The Interpreter Foundation, and the leaders and authors for *Interpreter*, along with almost everybody else who makes the organization function, are unpaid volunteers.

What I'll discuss here, though, is the assertion that the self-conceived task of Latter-day Saint apologists is to persuade members of the Church to hold on and, most importantly, to continue paying tithing, in the face of overwhelming proof that Joseph Smith's prophetic ministry was transparently fraudulent. Our mission, as we ourselves supposedly view it when we're being candid, is to convince gullible followers a slight chance may still exist that, despite all the evidence, the claims of the Restoration might nevertheless possibly, perhaps, maybe not be false.

Whenever I come across this supposed bit of mindreading, I find myself thinking of a brief but famous scene from the 1994 movie *Dumb and Dumber*. In it, Jim Carrey plays “Lloyd Christmas” and “Mary Swanson” is portrayed by Lauren Holly:

Lloyd Christmas: “I want to ask you a question, straight out, flat out, and I want you to give me the honest answer. What do you think the chances are of a guy like you and a girl like me ending up together?”

Mary Swanson: “Well, Lloyd, that’s difficult to say. We really don’t…”

Lloyd Christmas: “Hit me with it! Just give it to me straight! I came a long way just to see you, Mary, just ... The least you can do is level with me. What are my chances?”

Mary Swanson: “Not good.”

[*The background soundtrack music suddenly stops.*]

Lloyd Christmas: [*He gulps, his mouth twitching.*] “You mean, not good like one out of a hundred?”

Mary Swanson: “I’d say more like one out of a million.”

Lloyd Christmas: [*Long pause while he processes what he’s heard.*] “So you’re telling me there’s a chance. *Yeah!*”

Lloyd Christmas is a laughable dimwit who is only loosely connected to reality, and I suspect that the critics to whom I’ve referred above think of Latter-day Saint apologists in rather the same way — at least when they’re feeling charitable. (Unlike us, though, Lloyd is well-meaning and likeable, and not flatly mendacious.) And his enthusiasm for odds of 0.0001% that his wooing of Mary Swanson will succeed is obviously offered up as ridiculous. Which it absolutely is.

But I can say with certainty when speaking for myself, and with considerable confidence when speaking for my friends and associates, that we don’t view the likelihood of the Gospel’s being true as merely one in a hundred, let alone as one in a million. This isn’t even remotely the way we see the “state of the question.”

From here on, I’ll speak in the first-person singular, representing my own opinion. But I will regard myself as speaking for most if not all of us, as a group. Of course, we *aren’t* actually a group- or hive-mind, and there are, as I personally know, many different viewpoints and approaches among us. On this specific issue, though, on the insinuation

that we're desperate, beleaguered, and backed up against a wall, and that we regard the truth-claims of the Restoration as hanging dubiously and precariously by a thread, I don't think that I'm taking much of a risk in presuming to speak for other members of my apologetic tribe.

As I see it, there are no decisive proofs for the claims of the Restoration and, pending at least the Savior's Second Coming, there *will* be none. This is, I think, as it was intended and as it was planned to be. "For we walk by faith" in this life, "not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). That is the nature of this mortal probation and the intended result of the veil. If decisive, intellectually coercive proof were available to us in this life — if the existence, nature, acts, and expectations of God were demonstrable with the same certainty as, say, propositions in geometry — no intellectual autonomy would remain, and the divine purpose of this life would be obviated.

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so ... righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility.

Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of its creation. Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God ...

And to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, and the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and in fine, all things which are created, it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter.

Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other. (2 Nephi 2:11–12, 15–16)

I like the notion of "epistemic distance" as it was articulated by the late Anglo-American philosopher John Hick (1922–2012) in such

books as *Evil and the God of Love* (first edition, 1966) and *Philosophy of Religion* (first edition, 1970). Hick argued that the universe was created as a kind of “neutral sphere” in which we mortal humans are granted a degree of autonomy that is sufficient for us to be able to enter into a freely chosen relationship with God, rather than a relationship that is essentially coerced. God maintains a “certain distance from us, a certain margin of creaturely independence which is adequate for our existence as responsible persons.”¹ Commenting upon Hick’s view, Victorino Raymundo T. Lualhati observes that

This distance is epistemic rather than spatial, hence, the term, epistemic distance. Simply put, epistemic distance can be taken to mean as a distance in knowledge or awareness. In this religious hypothesis, the world would remain “religiously ambiguous,” that is, there is no conclusive evidence for or against the existence of God. People are left with a choice. It is possible for us to see and explain the world in purely naturalistic terms or to see the world as created and sustained by God. We have the freedom to decide for ourselves which position to take.²

If God were to reveal himself fully and with unmistakable, irresistible clarity, that revelation would overwhelm and destroy our freedom to choose. In his *Philosophical Fragments*, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard used a parable about a king and a peasant maiden to make this point: How could the king reveal his love to a woman of humble parentage — given the huge disparity of rank, status and wealth between them — without coercing and crushing her?³

“Not to reveal oneself,” he wrote, “is the death of love, to reveal oneself is the death of the beloved.”⁴ The only real choice open to the king in the parable was to court his beloved indirectly, by descending

1. John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pearson, 1989), 37.

2. Victorino Raymundo T. Lualhati, “On Epistemic Distance and Faith” (paper presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2018, De La Salle University, Manila, PHL, 20–22 June 2018), <https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/pdf/conferences/research-congress-proceedings/2018/tph-16.pdf>.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, “Chapter 2: The God as Teacher and Saviour: An Essay of the Imagination,” in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-2-the-god-as-teacher-and-saviour-an-essay-of-the-imagination/>.

4. Ibid.

to her station, by taking on the character of a servant. So he disguised himself.

God, Kierkegaard said, wants us to love him freely because we come to know him as lovable, not because he's powerful, terrifying, overwhelming, or simply unavoidable. In a similar way, although he wants us to develop faith or trust in him, he doesn't seek a compelled belief. He doesn't desire an assent that has been forced upon us because we had no rational alternative or escape. Such coerced assent would have little or no value for him. It would not help to create the persons that he wants us to be.

But to say that there is no intellectually coercive *proof* for God and the things of God is not at *all* to say that there is no *evidence* for them. As the remarkable Singaporean physician, philosopher, and Christian theologian Andrew Loke puts it,

It may be the case that God exists but He does not provide a necessary proof because He wants to give humans the space to make free choice with regards to faith, but this does not imply that He did not leave behind any evidence to let people know about His revelation in history.⁵

And the American Evangelical philosopher J. P. Moreland agrees:

God maintains a delicate balance between keeping his existence sufficiently evident so people will know he's there and yet hiding his presence enough so that people who want to choose to ignore him can do it. This way, their choice of destiny is really free.⁶

In his famous *Pensées* the great French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) had some wise words to say on this subject:

All the principles of sceptics, stoics, atheists, etc., are true. But their conclusions are false, because the opposite principles are also true. ... We have an incapacity of proof, insurmountable by all dogmatism. We have an idea of truth, invincible to all scepticism.⁷

5. Andrew Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ: A New Transdisciplinary Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 5.

6. J. P. Moreland, "The Circumstantial Evidence," in Lee Strobel, ed., *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 263.

7. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Anthony Uyl, trans. W.F. Trotter (Woodstock, ON: Devoted Publishing, 2018), 394–95, <https://books.google.com/>

The Australian priest and theologian Gerald O'Collins, for decades a member of the faculty and a leader at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, put it this way:

The factor of relative concealment allows cognitive freedom to persist . . . we have enough light to make us responsible but not enough to take away our freedom.⁸

My own position is simply this: There is enough secular evidence for the claims of the Restoration to justify commitment to its principles and to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which teaches them and which offers the requisite ordinances. (*More* than enough, in my honest judgment.) But there is also enough secular evidence, if one prefers, to justify doubts and reservations. There is sufficient light, but the light is not overwhelming. We must choose; the choice is unavoidable. Happily, this is where the Holy Ghost can help us. I think here of the word of the Lord to Oliver Cowdery, where both divine guidance *and* studious reflection are recommended:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong. (D&C 9:7–9)

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books?id=z5ViDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA68.

8. Gerald O'Collins, *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 44.

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