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## READERS FORUM

### JOSEPH'S BUSTED FLUSH

THE FLAW IN Karl Sandberg's "Pascal's Wager on the Mormon Roulette Wheel," is to presume that the rational proof of God is in any way similar to the proof for the claims of the Book of Mormon. Pascal's wager is valid because the game is being played, as Sandberg says, "at an indefinitely far distance in the cosmos."

The Book of Mormon makes historical claims on *this* planet, within historical time frames.

One is justified in concluding that God's existence is a matter of faith. Sandberg correctly asserts, "it is the heart that perceives God, not the intellect." But the existence of a huge population of Hebrew-descended "Nephites" who had pre-Columbian horses, wheat, silk, glass and iron (steel yet!), and who observed elephants but no buffalo, is another matter. One might as well side with the members of the flat-earth society.

The Smithsonian Institute and the National Geographic Society routinely issue form letters which aver that the Book of Mormon is of no archaeological significance. The basis for Pascal's wager is the "unknowableness" of God. We surely wouldn't resort to it to determine whether or not Paris is really a city in France, just because some prophet said it was not. Neither should we decide subjectively on Joseph Smith's assertion that "tall Quakers" live on the moon—because we've been there!

Sandberg suggests that we submit Joseph Smith's esoteric claims, the Book of Mormon, and Mormonism itself, to the Great Wager test, but that is convoluted logic. He is asking us to use a technique which is acceptable to probe the transcendence of God, but unacceptable to certify narrow, sectarian views. He concludes that we should simply take a leap of faith into the handiest sect if the aims of the group are "basically good" (anti-murder, bigotry and theft).

But, in Joseph Smith, we are not searching for the Prime Mover, we are asking if a farm boy had real gold plates and was baptized in a real river by post-existent beings. No amount of intellectual posturing can avoid the essential element of historicity. If Jesus didn't resurrect a real *corpus*, the apostle Paul says we are fools. If Joseph Smith's gold plates were not real gold, if they were not inscribed with a real steel tool,

if they were only seen (as Oliver Cowdery finally said) "with eyes of faith," then Joseph's story is foolishness.

Convoluted logic leads to ludicrous and unwarranted leaps of faith. Like the Mormon engineer who said, "I know that NASA has been to the moon and did not find Joseph Smith's 'tall Quakers,' but it's possible that they dwell *under the surface of the moon!*"

As B.H. Roberts said of the inadequate defense the Brethren made for the Book of Mormon in the face of his 141 page essay "Book of Mormon Difficulties, A Study" "[it might] satisfy people who don't think, but [it was] a very inadequate answer for a thinking man."

Betting on the existence of God is a sensible wager, centering our faith on unproven (and suspect) historical fact is not.

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#### Karl Sandberg replies

In the Pascal article I supposed that in figuring the odds on the Book of Mormon, some would find them exceedingly slim, while others would find them preponderant. The response of Reverend Spencer, in which he places himself solidly in the former category, gives a chance to reflect further on Pascal's wager and its relation to the Book of Mormon.

In the *Thoughts of Pascal*, God is a paradox. He is the hidden God, *Deus absconditus*, out of the reach of reason to prove or disprove. It is in this sense that the game of heads or tails—the existence or non-existence of God as demonstrated by reason—is being played at an indefinitely far distance in the cosmos. But on the other hand, God is immediately present in the world, perceived by the heart (as seen in the religious experience of Pascal recorded in the *Memorial*) and not by reason. God is thus hidden and present. The wager is a rhetorical device intended to persuade the (non-believing) reader that in the shortfall of reason to prove or disprove the existence of God, it is not unreasonable to bet one's life, i.e. one's thoughts, desires, and acts, on the existence of God, to "act as if" God existed. Thus making oneself open to the experience by which the presence of God is encountered in the world. The metaphor of the wager is thus applicable whenever a decision is unavoidable, the con-

sequences momentous, and the basis for decision uncertain.

Are we in these terms with the Book of Mormon? Until the arguments of Reverend Spencer prevail upon the apologists of the Book of Mormon, or until their arguments overcome his, it seems to indicate that no one has as yet cast the last stone. No one has reduced the uncertainty to zero.

Reverend Spencer pushes hard on the importance of historicity in judging the Book of Mormon. The point is well made, but seems to prove too little and too much. It proves too much in that the arguments he makes against the Book of Mormon are precisely the same kind that Pascal's libertine friends (and the 18th century philosophers) made against the Bible. The exclusive emphasis on history will unhinge any religion claiming God's intervention.

But historical arguments also prove too little because they miss the mark. Neither New Testament Christianity nor Mormonism grew because they gave a correct view of history, but because people continued to find spiritual power in them. Neither the author of Mark mistaking epilepsy for demonic possession nor the Nephites seeing elephants where they should have seen buffaloes will change that very much. It is not my conclusion that we

"should simply take a leap into the handiest sect" but that everyone at bottom does make a choice about betting his or her life and that that choice is autonomous.

## TAX SHELTERS FOR TITHING?

**M**AYBE SISTER WINGATE'S confusion on calculating one's tithing comes because she thinks all upper middle-class and upper class are self-employed. I wish to assure her that is not so. Most such Church members who pay tithing on taxable income are salaried corporate executives. Some of them may also have investment income or tax-sheltered investments (which few wage-earners have). Between their itemized deductions (such as paying mortgage interest on their huge homes and interest on the purchase loans for their expensive cars), their tax-sheltered investments, and their tax "losses" (such as depreciation on their rental homes), these well-paid executives are able to reduce their taxable income far below their *real* income.

The following situation is not untypical: I know a man who as a bishop and corporate executive earned a substantial six-figure salary,

lived in a large home in one of the fanciest neighborhoods in the metropolitan area and traveled regularly around the world for pleasure (the Holy Land was one of his favorite destinations). But he paid less annual tithing than if he had paid tithing on gross annual wages totaling \$18,000.

I should add that Sister Wingate had some excellent comments about the problems of calculating tithing for the self-employed. Unfortunately, she failed to note that many self-employed deduct many personal expenses on their tax returns as if they were business expenses. If tithing is based on such taxable income, the tithe-payer has not only cheated the government but also the Lord.

Anthony H. Woller  
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