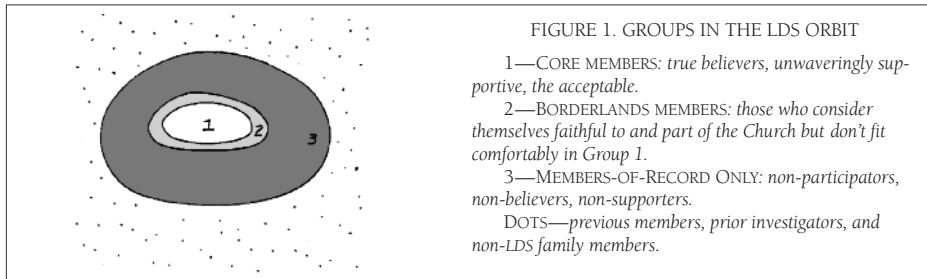


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

MORMONISM FOR
BORDERLANDERS

A USER'S GUIDE

by D. Jeff Burton



ON 23 MAY 2012, Alain de Botton joined Doug Fabrizio on KUER's RadioWest program for an exploration of de Botton's new book, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*.¹ Despite the title's reference to atheists, this book can be useful to any person trying to incorporate religion into daily life. Indeed, I found some good ideas for Borderlanders² along with suggestions of possible shortcomings in today's Mormonism as practiced at the local level.

Doug Fabrizio opened his radio show with this statement:

Is any religion "true?" The popular British philosopher Alain de Botton opens his latest book by declaring this question the most boring and unproductive question a person can ask. De Botton is himself a non-believer, but by setting the "true or not?" debate aside, he says we can look at the good ideas religions offer—for example, about how to live and how to arrange society.

Toward the end of show, I called in to ask a question, and though de Botton didn't respond directly to it, he did give interesting insights into related questions. (I wasn't able to follow up; the call was termi-

nated as soon as I asked my question.) Our exchange, including some minor editing for clarity, is shown below.

JEFF BURTON: What do you suggest for a non-believer who wants to stay with his or her religious community for the family, for the job, for the good, and for the knowledge that can be gained from that participation? How does a non-believer deal with the issue of honesty—being up front and open with rest of the community? In our local Mormon communities, for example, we have a lot of closet doubters who want to stay for whatever reason—and there are a lot of good reasons for staying with Mormonism. But they have issues about how to be honest and up front with believers who are threatened by their doubts."

ALAIN DE BOTTON: [As for being in the closet] I think it is never a good situation when a community creates incentives to lie. I think the community should have room within itself to admit to difficult truths and to awkward truths which don't require people to lie. So, in other words, if there is somebody lying about things in the community, the whole community needs to look inside itself and ask, "Why are we forcing people—quite nice people, and quite good people—to lie? That can't be right." So I think it is an issue

for the *whole* community.

I think the anxiety around doubters can be misplaced because [believers] sometimes don't understand what it means to have a doubter [in the community]. Some may imagine a doubter as someone who hates the religion, who wants to smash it all apart, who has no time for anything, who wants continually to leave. But, look, there are still ways for nonbelievers to be a friend to a religion. Being a friend doesn't mean you agree with everything, but it means that you are tolerant and interested and ready to put in the necessary effort. So, it is perhaps the *image* of the doubter that is causing some of the difficulty here.

I thought it interesting that de Botton suggested that the community should take part of the responsibility (blame?) for the lack of honesty as much as the Borderlander should. De Botton probably doesn't fully understand our situation here in centralized-authority Mormonism, probably assuming that our local wards are mostly as independent as other Christian congregations are.

In the case of Mormonism, we are members of two distinct communities: the official Church and the ward we live in. The Church sets the policies, boundaries, rules, and behaviors that are "acceptable" while the ward *applies* the policies and rules. Many Borderlanders may have friends and neighbors in the ward they feel they can be honest with, but the Church's unwritten rule is for Borderlanders to keep their disbelief and unorthodox beliefs and knowledge to themselves, thus fostering a level of dishonesty that many of us feel uncomfortable with. We've seen many recent examples of people being warned against sharing individual beliefs, outside teachings, and secular histories and ideas that are not "in the manual." (See, for example, the last chapter in Philip Lindholm's *Latter-day Dissent* where Donald B. Jessee, former public relations officer for the Church says, "You can believe whatever you want as long as you keep it to yourself.")

INTERESTINGLY, about a hundred years ago, things seem to have been quite different. President Joseph F. Smith testified before the Congress of the United States³ that Latter-day Saints were

given the largest possible latitude of their convictions, and if a man rejects a message that I may give to him but is still moral and be-

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lieves in the main principles of the gospel and desires to continue in his membership in the Church, he is permitted to remain.”

In the same setting, he observed that

Members of the Mormon church are not all united on every principle. Every man is entitled to his own opinion and his own views and his own conceptions of right and wrong so long as they do not come in conflict with the standard principles of the Church. If a man assumes to deny God and to become an infidel, we withdraw fellowship from him. But so long as a man believes in God and has a little faith in the Church organization, we nurture and aid that person to continue faithfully as a member of the Church though he may not believe all that is revealed.

President Smith’s testimony suggests that, in those earlier days, the Church was making accommodations for Borderland-type members. Although the approach described by President Smith may or may not have been completely translated down to the ward community in every case, it provides an excellent blueprint for how things could be improved today. If today’s Church (on both the Church and ward level) were to allow everyone to openly “own his own opinion and his own views and his own conceptions of right and wrong so long as they do not come in conflict with the standard principles of the Church,” we Borderlanders could fit right in. If the Church adopted the approach of “nurturing and aiding that person to continue faithfully as a member of the Church, so long as a man believes in God and has a little faith in the Church organization,” the problems and issues confronting the active and open Borderland member would largely disappear. And it might help in curtailing the mass exodus from activity we see today.⁴

But how do we encourage such changes? As I have stated in the past, we can write our bishops, our stake presidents, and our general leaders asking them to change policies that currently do not allow us the freedom to be honest with others. And you may find out that you have more freedom to be open and honest in your ward than you think. To you, I say, find the

courage to “come out of the closet” to the extent you can.

As for de Botton’s second point about believers’ fear of doubters, it is important to note that doubt in today’s modern, science-influenced usage, means to be *unsettled* in belief or opinion—to be uncertain or undecided. It means to not have sufficient information or evidence upon which to reach a “significant” conclusion about a claim or proposition. Suppose a scientist administers a particular dose of a promising heart medication to sixty rats with heart disease, and watches them all die. The scientist will conclude that there is not enough evidence to justify belief that the medicine at that dosage is effective as a heart disease cure. She will have doubt. Additional trials (e.g.,

“worthiness.” It is assumed by some members that being a doubter, or expressing doubts, is somehow linked to sin or an unwillingness to believe, or that God, for some good reason, is withholding the blessings of “knowledge” because the doubter is not worthy to receive them.

This fear of doubt is something we can work on by coming up with suitable alternate words for doubt so that we Borderlanders don’t unwittingly upset or alienate members of our ward community. De Botton uses “non-believer” to identify doubters, but I think that term will likely be unsettling to our ward friends as well. Plus, the real issues are not resolved by simply switching to calling ourselves “closet non-believers.” We need to be able



with other dosages, other modes of administration, etc.) may be necessary before that doubt can be dispelled. This is the kind of doubt most Borderlanders have.

Older, biblical, and religious meanings for doubt are to *distrust* and to *reject*. We are commanded to “doubt not,” with the meaning of, “do not distrust, but have faith.” In a religious sense, doubt has been associated with the absence of trust in God and the rejection of his existence and goodness. Little wonder that doubt still has a strong negative connotation among Mormons even today when skepticism and questioning are highly desirable consumer skills.⁵

Finally, and somewhat unique to Mormon views of doubting, is the issue of

to come out of our closets, be our true selves, and express our reservations without offending and without severing important ties to our family members and ward community.

Consider these verbal approaches, used alone or in combination with others reassurances (e.g., “. . . but I’m fully supportive of [the Church, the ward]”; “. . . but I love being part of [the Church, the ward]”; “. . . but I’m faithful to my covenants,” and so forth.):

I’m testimony-challenged.

I’m belief-challenged.

I’m still building my testimony.

I have intellectual doubts and questions.

I’m not yet a total believer in everything.

I'm skeptical on an intellectual level about everything in life.

I wonder about a lot of things.

I'm not a non-believer but I do have some serious questions and puzzlements.

I'm a natural born free thinker.

I'm undecided about [some part of Mormonism].

I haven't made up my mind completely on that issue.

My belief/testimony is an asymptotic function.

I don't think that I can have any absolute beliefs about anything in life.

I've been a natural skeptic since I was a kid.

I come from the "show me" state.

Readers: Please give us some feedback and your suggestions. I'll pass them along.

ALAIN de Botton suggests that even if we are left cold by some of the doctrines, history, and practices of our religion, we can safely take advantage of the good things it promotes like morality and ethics, community, art and architecture, gratitude for nature, learning, and wisdom. Once we have found a way to overcome our resistance to the things that irritate us, we can begin to more fully enjoy the music, the rituals, the meals, the friendships, the service, and other positive things we find at church.

De Botton notes that some true believers may take offense at this seemingly selective consideration of religion. He writes that "religions are not buffets," but notes that the downfall of many religions has been their insistence that adherents eat everything on their plates. Nevertheless, he suggests that willing diners go ahead and eat only what they can swallow but in a way that doesn't offend the cooks.

COMMUNITY

Though politicians and religious leaders often hail the family as the "quintessential symbol of community," de Botton points out that, historically, Christianity has held that over-emphasizing loving attachments and commitments to family members may distract us from our connections to the rest of mankind, and may keep us from "loving both kith and kin." Thus, from its earliest days, Christianity has stressed the need and value of communities.

Being involved in a ward community can be full of benefits; it can give our children role models (beyond film stars and social media gurus) for the higher qualities of courage, friendship, patience, fidelity, gen-

erosity, skepticism, and wisdom (though we should definitely be on guard against the modeling of destructive qualities such as self-centeredness, intolerance, and dishonesty).

Most importantly, I think, De Botton states that if we want the community to accept us as we are, then we must accept the community mostly as it is: "If we participate in the feasts of love, we must also accept the feasts of fools."

EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

There are few things most Borderlanders cherish more than education and knowledge. It is often our studies and curiosity that pushed us into the Borderlands in the first place. But we need to remember that we and our children also need to gain other forms of knowledge such as emotional intelligence, ethics, and love of neighbor. Secular culture provides plenty of methods to teach us how to make a living, but it often skimps on teaching us how to live well. Religions, including Mormonism, concern themselves with the fact that none of us come into life knowing how to live, that we are by nature "fragile, capricious, un-empathetic, and beset by fantasies of omnipotence," according to de Botton. The goal of religion is to educate its adherents in these realms and, besides imparting information, change our lives for the better.

Religious education at its best allows us to apply both reason and emotion toward wrestling with the problems of life and death. Good religions free education from the classroom and combine it with activities, urging us to use our senses and to do things: reading, singing, talking, visiting friends, meditating, praying, serving, loving and sacrificing. Unfortunately, narrowness and certain non-creative restrictions have crept into Mormon education in recent years, but these are shortcomings we can try to expand.

De Botton credits religions for always believing that wisdom is teachable. Mormonism, too, presumes it has the tools to teach wisdom, love, and goodness. It

teaches us what is worth working for, how to use and apply our knowledge and experience, how to be happy, and how to live. And religions don't just teach us for a fixed term of years (eight semesters), or in a single space (the campus), or in one format (the lecture). Religious education is designed for a lifetime, in all places, and in many formats.

OBJECTS OF ADORATION AND WORSHIP

The book closes with the interesting conjecture that humans *want* to love, adore and worship things; they tend to seek perfection. Historically, these desires appear to have been channeled by religions toward gods and religious symbols. And for good reason: humans are full of faults and shortcomings. Worshiping *them* is simply not productive. Mormonism teaches that we can eventually achieve perfection, but that such a state will occur only in the far distant future. If we abandon our religion, de Botton argues, we may be tempted to seek (in vain) for perfection in our spouses, our children, and others, forgetting that humans are "comparatively humdrum and flawed creations" and in constant need of understanding, forgiveness, and patience. Religion has "the good sense to provide us with angels to worship and lovers to tolerate." ☺

NOTES

1. The URL for a free download of the RadioWest podcast is: <http://radiowest.kuer.org/post/religion-atheists>.

2. In my first column, I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life—a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria.

3. See the "Reed Smoot Hearings Record," US Congress, 1903–1907, pp 97–98.

4. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states that, worldwide, about 80% of baptized Mormons eventually fall into inactivity, are excommunicated, or ask to have their names removed from Church roles. These data are old (1980s) but certainly the picture has not improved during the internet age. On 3 June 2012, Radiowest aired a program on this subject which is also available for free download. The latest statistics show a marked increase in the loss of younger Mormons during the past decade when compared to earlier decades.

5. See my book, *For Those Who Wonder*, Chapter 2, for a more in-depth look at the issue. (Free download at www.forthosewhowonder.com.)

*Please send me your
experiences from life
in the Borderlands.*

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