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## Where's The Faith?

By Alex Stout

### Introduction

I grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah. Most Americans know Utah as a densely religious state, and they're not entirely wrong. The density has watered down over the last couple of decades, but the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints still remains the most popular religion in Utah by a considerable margin. According to the U.S. Religious Landscape survey of 2008, 58% of Utah's population is Mormon. And according to [www.utah.com](http://www.utah.com)'s "state facts," the Mormon population is around 70%. Either way, that's a large majority and it has a definite impact on our society.

I have gone to the LDS church at certain small intervals in my young life and was baptized late at the age of ten. My wife is (sort of) LDS and has a very LDS family. So I tried attending the church with her. Through agnostic eyes, I couldn't believe the stories and teachings. I decided the religion doesn't appeal to me. This only left me with more questions.

Fortunately, I was in a college humanities class at the time and we began discussing religion. I learned a lot about some of the major religions that have influenced our world. In my readings of the sacred texts of these religions, I decided that they relied too much on faith. The religions didn't seem to flow cohesively with their texts, their gospels, and their teachings. There seemed to be far too many inconsistencies.

I don't personally like the God portrayed in the Old Testament, I can't seem to pull myself to believe that man was created from dirt, and woman from man's rib. I can't conceive a truth in the stories of the burning bush, the talking snake, the great flood, a man walking on water and especially a physical god in the flesh living on a planet named "Kolob."

But the purpose of this paper isn't to bash religion. Rather, it's to find exactly what my personal beliefs are and where they come from.

Although I don't believe in any truth in the religions that have been brought forth thus far, it doesn't mean to me that everything isn't all part of an intelligent design. The universe is simply too complex for me to fully convince myself that everything is simply just a result of billions of years of chance. On the contrary, I can't convince myself that life *isn't* due to billions of years of chance.

So...this is where I am. In my quest to discover myself, I must understand what my beliefs are and I must understand where they come from. Why do I question religion? Who and what has influenced me to get to this point?

## Research

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The research I conducted for this report was very interesting. It consisted of interviewing family members to understand my own views, watching documentaries on religion, visiting religious and atheist websites, and finding local atheist or agnostic organizations.

In order to make my thesis more complete, I would have liked to research someone who has been religious their whole life (particularly of LDS faith) and someone who used to be atheist, but is now religious. But I couldn't find the right person of LDS faith that I would have liked to interview, and I didn't find anyone that used to be specifically atheist and now practices religion.

## Interviews

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My brother, Jake, is currently a history major at the University of Utah. Jake describes himself as a "militant atheist." He defines this as "not believing in a god" and he "feels it's his obligation to combat religion." Jake is what some philosophers would call an anti-theist.

I asked him to explain his path to atheism. He suggests that at he was "basically agnostic at age 7" and that he "doesn't recall ever believing in a god, per se." It's always "seemed like a fairy tale" and that church was just about "learning fun stories."

In my interview with my mom, she says that she is now "atheist" after at least "29 years [of being] LDS." She suggests that "health issues" have steered her away from the LDS faith.

My dad says that he "does not believe in any kind of organized religion," and that he is "LDS according to church records, but not by belief." He too says that "health" has steered him away from the church. He practiced what they preached and "never received an answer."

My grandmother is a retired mental health therapist and has a Bachelor's in English and Master's in Social Work under her belt. Her story is very intriguing seeing as she spent nearly 60 years in the church and recently decided that it was no longer somewhere she belonged. She says that "you have to separate religion and spirituality" suggesting that "spirituality is a personal thing," meaning its where one can choose and ponder their beliefs on their own without religion. "But as far as religion goes, I don't do that anymore."

## Pros of Organized Religion

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I asked everyone to tell me what they thought the pros were of organized religion. Here is the feedback:

– Jake:

- "I can't deny that there is some good in religion, and that's the only time you'll hear me say that."
- "Orphanages"
- "Churches *do* give to the poor"

– Mom:

- “It’s good socially. It’s a good social structure.”

– Dad:

- “Fellowship and friendship. The social aspect.”

– Grandma:

- “I think it’s good for communities.”
- “It’s somewhere you can raise your children with other people raising their children with the same ideals.”

So there’s a definite consensus that organized religion can be beneficial from a social standpoint.

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### *Cons of Organized Religion*

I also asked their opinions on the cons of organized religion. Here’s what they had to say:

– Jake:

- “War. But I don’t know if you can say *organized religion* is to blame for that.”
- “It’s mind numbing.”
- “It’s a waste of time and brainpower.”

– Mom:

- “The guilt it can put on people.”
- “I think religion is used more as a control mechanism than anything.”

– Dad:

- “[It has] a brainwashing effect.”
- “So many people believe in the same thing, they take everything else for granted.”
- “They don’t seek out other ideas.”

– Grandma:

- “There’s a dogma involved where everything has to be black or white, or this or that, and if it’s not, then you’re wrong.”

So, religion is mind numbing and it doesn’t allow for people to expand their thoughts and views; at least, that seems to be the overall idea from my interviewees. I must say that overall, I agree with them. Religion can be great for a community structure. From my perspective, people of LDS faith in Utah seem to have a political advantage—no, not government politics; business politics, school politics, athletic politics, all the way down to neighborhood politics. And especially in my college experience I have noticed a major lack of diversity in views and opinions. I suffer as a minority for my ‘liberal,’ secular views.

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*Community Without Religion*


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After hearing what some people of secular views see as pros and cons in religion, one must ask, “is it possible that there could be a structured community without religion?” So I conducted some quick online research. I found thousands of secular, atheist, and agnostic organizations nationally which was surely shocking. But what really caught me by surprise, was the amount of organizations here in my home town of Salt Lake. There are dozens! Here’s a short list of my favorites that meet here in the valley:

- SHAFT: Secular Humanist Atheist Free Thinkers
- SHIFT: Secular Humanism, Inquiry and Free Thought
- Salt City Skeptics
- Open On Sundays
- Secular Student Alliance
- Civil Brights
- Unified Atheists of Utah
- Utah Freethought Society
- Recovering Religionists
- Rising Above Religion: Ex Mormons and All Clear Thinkers

SHIFT is actually a group created up at the University of Utah. This gives me hope for my future there. Open On Sundays has a fun little purpose of simply meeting on Sundays at businesses around the valley that are—you guessed it—open on Sundays. Their goal is to make sure that religious views don’t interfere with the ideals of the minority secularists by simply making sure businesses still find it worth the money to run business on the sabbath day.

These organizations still don’t fit the ticket that I’ve imagined. I visualize a community that isn’t about religion bashing, it’s not about god; rather, it’s about community, being friendly with neighbors, being there for each other, having parties, doing things with the children, scout trips...everything organized religions do, just without God, prayer, scriptures, or tithing.

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*If Not The Pearly Gates, Then What?*


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Probably the most difficult thing for one of secular ideologies to answer is, what happens after death? Without religion to tell us, we are left to speculate amongst ourselves. So I asked my family to tell me what they think happens after death.

The thoughts range from “nothing” (*Dad*), to “you die” (*Jake*), to “a [soul-like] energy that goes [somewhere].” (*Grandma, Mom, Dad, Jake*). Everyone mentioned something about energies that could *possibly* possess a ‘conscience.’ But they all mentioned this as the hopeful part. Hoping that there actually *could* be something after death.

My parents, my grandmother, my brother and I all have doubts in what religions to this date have to offer. But we all think that there *may* be more to life than our physical existence here on Earth. So the time has come for me to lay out what I have concluded about my beliefs and where they come from. Even though this is research to understand my own identity, I would have to agree with one who would say the research was biased. My research—I'm sorry to say—thus far is incomplete. I could have possibly gotten some better answers if I understood why religious believers insist on believing. And if I understood why those who have gone their whole lives without religion still wind up believing in a god and participating in an organized religion.

It's natural for opinions to form from those of our family, but I really think that I have formulated opinions of my own. Before conducting my research, I didn't even know what my parents' beliefs were. I knew they didn't prefer the LDS church anymore, but I didn't know their actual beliefs.

I stopped believing in Santa Claus, ghosts, and God, probably all around the same time. Whenever we'd gather for prayer, it never felt like more than just words exchanged among people, nothing like a message to God. And when those of LDS faith say they "felt the spirit," I don't think that's anything more than feelings of emotion. But *if* it's something beyond that, then I don't understand it, and I've never felt it. Overall, everything has just sounded manmade and superficial.

With all the religions that I've learned about, I can't convince myself that they're anything more than man's creation for power and control, or financial prosperity, or even for the ethical purpose of peace throughout society. The closest any religion has come to my beliefs would have to be Buddhism (if you even classify it as a religion). Buddhism focuses on energy and oneness with the universe, which somewhat agrees with what I think *could* be possible.

Whether everything is part of an intelligent design, whether we have conscious souls, energies, or auras, or whether there's something more beyond life. I can't whole-heartedly convince myself either way. Rather, I choose to ponder it without the help of religion. Someday, I may choose that I *do* believe in some form of a higher power. But, to me, that higher power wouldn't require me to pray, pay tithing, or probably even live a wholesome life. If there *is* a higher power, I don't think it would watch over us. If we *do* have a so-called soul, I think it does nothing more than come to Earth to exist and gather experiences and then bring those experiences back when we die...that's it. All I believe is that maybe, just maybe there is more to life than a physical existence. If I were to give myself an actual title for my beliefs, it would have to be *Secular, Freethinking Agnostic*. All it is, is just another label.

So, for now, I just exist against extraordinary odds. I just am...or as the great George Carlin once put it "I think I am; therefore, I am...I think."

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