

With spotlight on Mormon faith, scholars gather to defend it

by [Peggy Fletcher Stack](#)

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(RNS) Mormon founder Joseph Smith may have declared all churches to be wrong, even apostate, but he also defined Mormonism as "an inclusivist faith that not only sees and appreciates goodness and truth in other religious traditions but is willing to acknowledge divine action in those other traditions."

That's according to Brigham Young University Islamic and Arabic scholar Daniel Peterson, who will offer his perspective in a speech this week at the annual conference of the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR).

"We don't ask any people to throw away any good they have got," Smith once said, according to Peterson. "We only ask them to come and get more."

That openness continues to the present, Peterson is expected to say in his speech, "Mormonism, Islam, and the Question of Other Religions."

Organizers see Peterson's expansive view of Mormonism as fitting neatly within FAIR's purpose, which is to defend the Utah-based faith against verbal and intellectual attacks.

Beginning in 1997 as an Internet conversation about how to best defend the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from its critics, FAIR has grown into a national nonprofit organization of Mormon apologists.

It started with just a handful of participants, each with expertise in different aspects of Mormonism, who found each other on message boards dealing with controversial aspects of LDS philosophy and history

such as polygamy, the role of women in the church, homosexuality, the exclusion of black men from the faith's all-male priesthood until 1978 and problems with the historicity of the Book of Mormon.

Those writers, located in various states, found themselves answering the same questions and criticisms over and over. So they pooled their respective research and thinking into one website, which became the nucleus of FAIR. The nonprofit now produces lengthy defenses of LDS issues and sponsors a yearly meeting.

FAIR is not sponsored by the LDS Church and takes full responsibility for its authors' positions and perspectives. However, it requires its writers to refrain from calling opponents names.

Fourteen speakers at this year's events will highlight important issues confronting Latter-day Saints including illegal immigration, a presidential campaign featuring two Mormon candidates, Joseph Smith's First Vision, the Book of Mormon and plural marriage.

In a particularly timely address, Newell G. Bringhurst, co-author of "The Mormon Quest for the Presidency: From Joseph Smith to Mitt Romney," will analyze the potential impact of the 2012 presidential campaign on Latter-day Saints.

Cynthia J. Lange, a partner in a Los Angeles-based firm specializing in immigration law, will discuss "The Immigration Fervor that Threatens to Divide Us."

Then there's Peterson, who will discuss Mormonism's inclusion of other faiths.

In 1855, for example, two Mormon apostles spoke favorably about "Mohammedanism" in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, Peterson says. Those speeches were printed in the official Journal of Discourses.

LDS apostle Orson F. Whitney continued that line of reasoning in a later speech, in which he said many figures outside Mormonism -- including "Confucius, the Chinese philosopher; Zoroaster, the Persian sage; Gautama or Buddha of the Hindus; Socrates and Plato of the Greeks"

-- were "sent by the Almighty into many nations to give them not the fullness of the Gospel, but that portion of truth that they were able to receive and wisely use."

Whitney's views were ratified by then-LDS Church President Heber J. Grant and Apostle George Q. Cannon, who added, "Other nations and races have not been forgotten by the Lord. They have had great truths taught to them; and, in many instances, they have profited by them. There have been millions of pagans whose lives have been as acceptable to the true God as the lives of the same number of so-called Christians."

The reason for this is plain, Peterson quotes Cannon as saying:

"They lived up to the light which God had given them, and this is all that He could require of them."