



Taking Rauch's Liberalism Seriously: A Response to Patterson

By [Ralph C. Hancock](#)

GOSPEL FARE

August 15, 2025

Do polite compromises secure faith's future in liberal democracy? They don't; doctrine must guide law and civic life.

I thank my colleague, Prof. Kelly Patterson, for his serious and challenging [response](#) to my recent critique of Jonathan Rauch's book [Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy](#). His engagement with my argument evinces a genuine and intelligent concern for his readers, both as citizens of a liberal democracy and as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. By addressing his concerns, I hope to contribute further to understanding what is at stake in the encounter between the Restored Gospel and contemporary liberalism. (For a fuller version of my argument, I recommend the [two-part](#) review in Public Discourse to which Patterson is responding,

and the more ample discussion I provide in my four-part series on Rauch at the Alive & Intelligent substack (1, 2, 3, 4).)

Rauch, a prominent journalist who is a self-declared atheist and advocate of homosexual “marriage,” has proposed a productive “alignment” between Christianity and contemporary liberalism, and has further proposed Latter-day Saint theology and the Church’s most recent political practice as a model for this alignment. Patterson is optimistic about this approach to the problem of religion and politics. He accepts Rauch’s “kind-hearted” invitation to an LDS-liberal collaboration at face value. And he rightly characterizes my response to Rauch as “pessimistic” regarding the internal coherence of such a collaboration and the benefits to Christians of such an alignment. My view, based upon a thorough reading of Rauch’s book with special attention to its philosophical premises, is that, however sincere Rauch’s intentions may be, his invitation to alignment effectively asks Latter-day Saints and other Christians to discard their fundamental moral and metaphysical beliefs and accept the terms of political engagement within a decidedly secular and even atheistic worldview. Accepting this offer would help consolidate the recent gains of secular liberalism (especially regarding the radical redefinition of marriage) and contribute to further social “progress” as understood within that framework.

The difference in political judgment between Patterson and me is grounded in a rather simple yet profound philosophical difference. Patterson acknowledges that there is a “chasm” between Rauch’s worldview (his understanding of ultimate reality and the meaning of human existence) and the most basic elements of a Latter-day Saint vision of reality. Rauch regards belief in God as utterly irrational, “a break in the universe.” He is content to regard the very existence of human beings, the chance evolution of a “clump of cells,” as a meaningless accident in a meaningless universe. Thus, he cannot believe that human law and morality can be guided in any way by natural or divine law. This resolute secularism is part and parcel of the very meaning of “liberalism” for Rauch. Given the radically secular foundations of Rauch’s worldview, his idea of “progress” has a very clear bias or

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directionality; it can only mean society's further movement away from the "superstitions" of religion and the needless norms and restraints of tradition.

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Rauch helpfully acknowledges that "America's secular culture has been adversarial to conservative Christian values ... [and] has been aggressive and successful in moving the Overton window in its direction, especially on cultural issues." He by no means urges secular liberals to show more respect for "conservative Christian values," but rather urges Christians to accept the displacement of the "Overton window" and to be open to its further movement in a "progressive" direction. The kind of Latter-day Saint he is hoping to align with politically is one who agrees with him that religion "works best when it adapts to meet the needs of real people." (This is the "shrewd observation" that he discovers in the Broadway musical, *The Book of Mormon*.) "Real people" are people whose needs are limited to those that Rauch's atheistic philosophy of materialist "freedom" can account for. Rauch's political theory is attuned to his understanding of "reality," and we deceive ourselves when we choose to ignore this linkage. Finally, Rauch's strategy is not very complicated: if only Christianity can be purged of any beliefs tainted by "conservatism" (finally, any beliefs resistant to his secular worldview), then liberals and Christians should be able to get along famously!

In a bold move that should not pass our straight-face test, Rauch even invites us to imagine that the Latter-day Saint theological understanding of "agency" can be aligned with his secular political project. But this tactic of appropriating the idea of agency and repurposing it as an argument for secular "progress" obviously strips agency of its moral and theological meaning, its role within a divine Plan of Salvation, and essentially equates it with the core radical-liberal idea of "freedom" understood as demanding the minimization of all natural or divine accountability. Professor Patterson never addresses this quite astounding theological proposal of Rauch's, leaving the reader to wonder if he is incapable of distinguishing eternal moral agency from its secular counterfeit.

To be clear, "liberalism" is an elastic term, and I would say that Rauch, Patterson, and I are all liberals insofar as we embrace the political principle of the equal right to freedom of human beings. Rauch is a radical liberal because he interprets this equal freedom in a radical sense, that is, as implying the liberation of the human will

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But Patterson proposes to proceed as if this philosophical and religious chasm between Rauch and us were practically irrelevant to our political deliberations. We should, he thinks, overcome our fear of opposing worldviews and accept Rauch's kind offer to consider all beliefs and principles as open to negotiation. It would be ungenerous, from this point of view, to decline Rauch's invitation to join the liberal discussion about the practical problems we face as democratic citizens.

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Color me fearful if you like, but I confess I do not trust this invitation. The question does not concern Rauch's personal motives or the authenticity of his friendly feeling for Latter-day Saints, or, for that matter, ours for him. The problem is that Rauch's openness to negotiation is manifestly partial and partisan. To read Rauch's *Cross Purposes* with any care is to see that he regards certain laws and policies as progressive gains that must heretofore be considered non-negotiable. Most obviously, the redefinition of marriage by a majority of the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Obergefell* decision must be considered a progressive landmark never to be questioned; any criticism of this redefinition can, from this point of view, be based only upon a regressive superstition. Rauch recognizes that Latter-day Saints continue to affirm a teaching on homosexuality that he regards as "repugnant and harmful," as well as a view of gender roles that is "discriminatory and archaic." Despite these confident and censorious judgments against core LDS teachings, he claims to find the Church's ideas about pluralism, as he understands them, "compelling." The question I am raising is really quite simple: should we Latter-day Saints adopt a political strategy of "pluralism" that leaves behind (or considers as politically irrelevant) our fundamental teachings on morality and the family?

It is not surprising that Patterson never addresses this question directly, because doing so reveals the difficulty with pluralism. I believe that embracing pluralism at the expense of fundamental beliefs would be a huge mistake. In light of both rational and revealed support for the critical function of the natural family in human personal and social existence, I believe the decision to reduce the man-woman bond to just one possible

option among many and thus to repudiate the authority of the laws of nature and nature's God was a disaster. I have no political or legal strategy in mind to reverse this reckless and disastrous decision; it seems, rather, that we will have to live with its negative consequences for many years to come. But I agree with [The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#) that ignoring the natural basis of the family cannot fail to yield ruinous consequences. Of course, we must engage civilly and reasonably in any number of public debates with those with whom we disagree on fundamentals. But we must not put the philosophical requirements of "pluralism" above our essential beliefs.

The question of marriage and family is the clearest marker of the chasm that exists between Rauch and me concerning the conditions of a good human life and a good society. He sees human beings as free from natural and divine authority, and I believe our political deliberations need to be open to the guidance of divine and natural law (however imperfect our understanding and application of these may be). How can this chasm in belief not have consequences for our understanding of a sound basis for liberal democracy and of desirable law and policy within this democracy? Patterson argues that "Rauch's visit [to BYU's Wheatley Institution] should inspire efforts to establish a distinct civic theology that uplifts people and supports the republic." After carefully considering his arguments, I do not find Rauch's atheistic recommendations to Christian theologians inspiring, and I do not believe anything built upon the beliefs he holds can either uplift individual citizens and Christians or support a sound representative democracy.

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Rauch believes liberal democracy effectively creates its own foundations according to whatever preferences and opinions may come to prevail through democratic negotiation under the authority of a materialist science. That is the essence of his radical or purely secular liberalism. I argue for a moderate liberalism that recognizes what one might call the conservative foundations—the traditional, moral, and religious foundations—of a wholesome and stable liberal democracy. Of course, we should listen to and be prepared to learn from those, like Rauch, with whom we differ, even on fundamentals. But defenders of compromise as the highest political principle almost irresistibly slip into a vocabulary of "fairness" and "respect" that all but explicitly concedes moral equivalence

to opinions fundamentally opposed to what we hold to be sacred truths. Of course, we respect all human beings as sons and daughters of a Heavenly Father, eternal beings with eternal potential. And since we respect them as persons, we are inclined a priori to respect their opinions and arguments enough to give them a fair hearing and judge them according to our best lights, and thus learn from them what we can. But the language of “respect” easily devolves into the incoherent notion that we should give equal respect to all ideas and opinions.

I have, in fact, respected Jonathan Rauch enough to listen to his arguments with all the care and discernment I could muster. I respect him enough also to respond frankly that I believe his vision of human beings, of society, and of the world is lacking in serious attention to certain important features of reality, and that I don’t believe Latter-day Saints would be wise to accept the terms of his offer of negotiation. Our interest in reasonable compromise and negotiation must not distract us from our accountability to reality, to the real sources of human happiness and the real conditions of a free and stable society. For example, if the metaphysical demand for human autonomy that underlies the radical redefinition of marriage is wrong, not aligned with reality, even evil, then it would be wrong to “respect” it, even when we must accommodate it politically. As Elder Christofferson has [taught](#), “a society ... in which individual consent is the only constraint on sexual activity is a society in decay.” If we must “negotiate” and “compromise” with secular liberalism, then we should do so in full awareness of the consequences of such decay.

One final point should be addressed. Patterson has understandably objected to my “psychologizing” attempt to explain the motives that lead so many Latter-day Saint intellectuals, academics, and other professionals to embrace Rauch’s appeal for an LDS alignment with secular liberalism. I agree with Patterson that it is generally better to consult a person’s stated reasons for adopting a position than to speculate about motives that may be hidden from the actors themselves as much as from anyone else. Yet I find myself confronted with widespread enthusiasm for a project riven with contradictions. Why are so few among our educators interested in scrutinizing Rauch’s liberalism and confronting its actual moral and

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religious implications? Why do so few in Church education and LDS media call attention to the confusion or collusion inherent in the liberal-Christian “alignment” that Rauch seeks, while so many hail his project as the obviously virtuous way forward? The most plausible answer I can suggest is that, as members of a highly educated class or sector of society, many LDS elites fear any association in the public mind with “conservative” or “right-wing” or “populist” sensibilities—the “sharp Christianity” that Rauch deplores—enough to overlook the chasm that in fact separates us from the more mainstream secular-liberal project that Rauch represents. This intimidation by the academic and intellectual mainstream is the “politics of fear” that a reasoned and discerning faith should help.

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In tracing some of the political history of American Christianity, Rauch cites an important book by poet and essayist Joseph Bottum: [An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America](#). Bottum describes how, in the mid-twentieth century, the Protestant elite became the Progressive elite, how a religious quest for purity and salvation was transformed into a secular political agenda:

This is the final remnant of the Christianity of their ancestors, the last enduring bit of their inheritance: a social gospel, without the gospel. For all of them, the sole proof of redemption is the holding of a proper sense of social ills. The only available confidence about their salvation, as something superadded to experience, is the self-esteem that comes with feeling that they oppose the social evils of bigotry and power and the groupthink of the mob. ...

Up in its thin air, such a social ethics touches only lightly on personal morality, and it does not reach down at all to the old, earthy stuff of life and death that religion once took as its deep concern. And that is precisely the problem.

I will leave it to the reader to judge whether Bottum’s explanation of the mainline Protestant abandonment of its religious essence has any relevance as a socio-psychological explanation of Latter-day Saint deference to secular liberalism today. From my experience in higher education, it seems clear that a suspicion of the alleged narrowness (non-“inclusiveness”) of traditional religion and a feeling of superiority to the moral views of simpler believers has become the very mainstay of a new academic religion.

Is LDS higher education immune to the social and psychological seductions of this new religion? Alas, the case of Patterson's enthusiasm for Rauch's secular liberalism is not reassuring on this score. He readily assents to Rauch's false proposition that a political and ethical perspective can be severed from any transcendent or metaphysical beliefs. Rather than associating himself with moral and religious ideas that are now considered unenlightened (the eternal difference and complementarity of male and female, the sacred restraints that rightly govern sexual expression, etc.), and rather than confronting the political implications of these ideas, Patterson prefers in effect to accept the decisive liberal premise that such fundamental beliefs, which contradict the radical freedom of the immanent self, have no place in democratic politics. Rather than confronting the real stakes of politics with courage and candor, Patterson distracts us—and, I must suppose, himself—with appealing but vague and elusive rhetoric such as his invitation to “engage the dynamic between Christian belief and questions of good government” or to “explore the borderlands between two powerful modes of thought and see whether a society composed of multiple moral claims can cohere.” I have tried here to provide just a little sample of what I think it means seriously and soberly to “engage the dynamic” and “explore the borderlands.”

It is probable that both Rauch and Patterson consider themselves to be moderate liberals. However, by refusing to acknowledge the necessary non-liberal moral foundations of a practically sound liberalism, they effectively espouse the radicalism underlying the pure theory of liberalism, the idea that all moral authority is a human construction. By proposing to separate political deliberation from deeper religious and philosophical questions, they effectively endorse the radical, anti-religious project of a purely secular liberalism. Rauch, certainly, invites Latter-day Saint believers to limit themselves to philosophical premises compatible with his secular and indeed atheistic perspective on society and human existence. It would be a mistake for Patterson and others to accept this invitation on the terms offered.

About the author

Ralph C. Hancock

Ralph Hancock is Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University, where he teaches political philosophy. He is the author of *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Saint Augustine's Press, 2011) as well as *The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), and the editor of several volumes. He has also

translated numerous books and articles from the French, including Pierre Manent's Natural Law and Human Rights, and has published many articles on the intersection of faith, reason and politics. Dr. Hancock is also co-founder of Fathom the Good Curriculum.