

“Coming Out” in the Interest of Authenticity
An Explicit Statement on Religion
Stephen L. Gibson
February 3rd, 2005

Dear Friends and Loved Ones,

It is with mixed emotions that I have prepared this communication for you, including the many friends and loved ones for whom I care so deeply, and who I believe care about me. The purpose is to clarify and share with you the news of my evolving views on religiosity and theism (God). Please know I have grappled for many months with whether or not some type of communication and “coming out” (if you will), is required. For at least a decade I have put truth and authenticity on a pedestal as my highest ideals. In the end I determined that, for me, it would be inauthentic to passively obscure my beliefs, just as it would for you to do so with yours. Hence, this document.

In one sense I am energized and excited because I have worked my way to a new belief set, through a few years of aggressive pondering, reading and study. This has largely been fueled by my *Truth-Driven Thinking* examination of mistaken beliefs and the human ability to get things so wrong based on totally unsupportable, emotion-driven needs, as opposed to reason, evidence, and truth. I wasn’t seeking this new destination, necessarily, but I simply could no longer avoid it. I guess that’s how these things go. But in it I am finding new joy, new discovery, and certainly some new questions.

On the other hand I am cognizant and aware that matters of faith are delicate matters. It is not my intent to offend you by impugning your beliefs, though this is a possible byproduct of articulating some very basic reasons for my departure from Christianity. I simply ask that you be patient with me and try to understand and read with an open mind.

Please just know that in the end, however, it is important to me that I be authentic and directly share this divergence (“conversion”) with you. I ask that you continue to love and support me, in the way that you would want to be loved and supported upon being “born again”, or having some other conversion to a theistic belief. I ask this despite the fact that mine is a journey away from religiosity.

I now consider myself an atheistic agnostic. Contrary to conventional definitions, agnosticism is a continuum (of the degree) of *unknowability*. In fact many scholars argue that many Christians, for instance, are actually agnostics because their arguments culminate in the insistence that these matters are issues of faith, and are *unknowable*. Therefore, they simply “believe”. This is *theistic agnosticism*, as is also the case with deism. *Theism*, on the other hand, is whether or not one believes in God. My beliefs are best described as follows: The supernatural is by its very definition outside all known and observable nature, and is thus *unknowable* (agnosticism); therefore, by default I choose not to believe (atheism) in that for which there is *no possible*, knowable evidence. (By definition, anything that becomes known or describable is no longer supernatural, but rather becomes part of the explainable, natural universe – including becoming subject to testing).

Again, in the interest of authenticity I wanted to be forthright and not passively obscure my beliefs, nor frankly did I wish to have multiple redundant conversations at inappropriate times (like has happened recently when people assume I still hold certain beliefs, and ask my opinion on some religious matter – say, at the supermarket). But because it is sincerely not my intent to offend anyone, I could certainly just end my communication here. Unfortunately, my intuition tells me there might be some additional rationale or background requested by some. I suppose that's why now I ask you to make a decision, as to whether or not it is necessary for you to continue. If you are sensitive about these matters, I'd prefer we leave the topic here.

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If you do, however, wish to wade deeper into touchier waters, my rationale and feelings on the topic of religiosity follow. Just please know that this not a whole, complete or scholarly articulation of my views, but rather a more flawed sharing of feelings and personal experience.

Faith, by definition, is firm belief in something for which there is no proof (Webster). Philosophers debate a related issue – *reason* versus *faith*. Can we gain knowledge solely through reason, or can we gain knowledge through belief *without cause* or rational foundation – through believing things that are *by definition* irrational? In fact I have come to believe that we *cannot* gain real knowledge about anything, by simply believing it, “just because.”

Funny thing about which I'll ask your indulgence, though. Since religious beliefs are almost always beliefs of faith, it seems we would be open and accepting of various options in this regard. In the real world, however, I acknowledge that many of us hold our “one true religions” to be the right and correct belief system when compared against others, and therefore we may intuitively react with something other than joy when someone expresses a belief apart from the system we declare to be the true ones.

In fact, we find it easy to laugh at the notions of other faith systems. The Mormons believe the visions of a truly colorful character, John Smith, whose conversations with God in the 1830's resulted in gold plates and miracles, visions and numerous other ideas that seem pretty wacky even by today's standards. After 911 we hear regular jokes about the Martyrs of Islam meeting their great reward of 72 virgins in heaven. We scoff.

We also scoff at the mythical religions of years gone by – Sirius, Dionysus, Mithras, Adonis, and others, several of which include virtually all of the main elements of the Christ story - miraculous births, raising of the dead, resurrections on the third day, and dozens of other elements that make these stories look like nearly exact copies of the Christ story. Interestingly, however, they occurred in the years before, and during, the times of Christ. Could these be real? “Of course not”, we laugh. But our religious dogma certainly *is* the truth.

The Jews and Christians believe that Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, on top of a mountain. The Jews of the Old Testament lived to ripe old ages, bore children at those ripe old ages, routinely made animal sacrifices to God (I'm sure he appreciated them, but a touch barbaric to the modern mind), and Abraham was even just moments from killing his own son for God (that would surely make CNN today). God flooded the world (a story that also almost exactly duplicates previous god stories) – then implied it was a mistake by saying he wouldn't do it again.

Better yet Christians believe in raising the dead, virgin births, people talking with extra-terrestrial beings, fire and brimstone, hell and heaven, and a HUMAN blood sacrifice - the victim of which literally re-forms in our mouths during Holy Communion (Catholicism).

As author Michael Shermer has commented, if an alien came to earth to study our supernatural beliefs, how would we go about defending Christianity as the correct faith, say over Islam, Judaism, or Greek mythology? (By faith I might presume.)

Of course it isn't just miracles and supernatural events (inconsistent with known science) that prompted my journey of change. At some point, a number of questions began nudging me to seek more information. Here are some examples:

1. Why am I a Christian? Isn't it primarily because of the continent onto which I was born, and the family and community into which I was born? If I were born in Saudi Arabia, isn't it much more likely I would passionately "know for certain" that another religion was the "one true religion"?

2. When each faith claims to be the only true path to God, doesn't that make all but one of them wrong? And if not, then the doctrines of each must be at least partially wrong, so to what degree is the rest of the doctrine wrong too? Isn't it supposed to be 100% right? Yet as it changed, at some point I had to ask myself if the new, liberal theology to which I subscribed, that was adapting to new scholarly views of biblical "reality" (and even to new science over the centuries), wasn't completely obliterating the religion. To what did we have left to cling? In other words, at what point do we stop changing a religion? How can you be a Christian and conveniently believe that everyone else can get to heaven too? Aren't we all just creating a bunch of man-made, new-age, mythical religions? Out of the remnants of man-made ancient religions that had less access to collective scientific knowledge?

3. Call me a whacko, but does it bother anyone other than me that world's major religions are virtually silent on the topic of animal souls? Is not the "breath of life" equally as magical in their world? Why didn't someone die on the cross for the animals and assure their eternal souls? Do they not think, breath, believe, befriend, and feel? (If this point is weak, just remember that Steve Martin once said you should always throw in one point that is so weird that you can plead insanity later). And isn't the evolution of all animals fascinating and "miraculous"? Isn't it possible that we conveniently dismiss them in mainstream religions because those religions are man-made constructs concerned only with our own unanswerable questions?

4. I've met a fair number of weird people in my brief tenure here on earth. Isn't it likely that there were whackos back in biblical times as well? Isn't it more likely that Moses drank too much or was just listening to his own emotions and thoughts? Is it really fair to call them whacko when they certainly didn't have the knowledge about how the world works that we have today? How many times have you had a dream that you swore was real, only to realize it was not? Ever thought you heard from God?

5. Isn't it most likely, if I really think about it, that Christ was not born of a virgin?

6. Is it possible that the Jewish scholars, who articulate their clear and compelling case that Christ was not the messiah, are right in saying that he didn't fit the bill?

7. Given the dozens of eerily similar myths during and before Christ (miraculous birth, born of a Deity, performed miracles, killed violently by those who didn't recognize him, raised from the dead on the third day, appeared to the masses) is it possible that the Christ story really was allegorical, or that those Christians who to this day worship a "mythical" Jesus are right in believing that Christ was not a real man?

(Significant numbers of scholars and theologians say the apostle Paul might well have not believed Christ to be a historical figure (Historical Jesus), but rather a mythical idea (Mythical Jesus). Translations of Hebrews 8:4 – If Christ "were" on earth, verses "was" on earth - and many other passages are debated by scholars, as are his works when judged in their entirety. Certainly it is fair to say that there is very little information about Christ in the three decades after his death, and even before the synoptic gospels some time later. And it is interesting that virtually nothing in what we do have in this period – namely all of Paul's letters - asserts or affirms any of the birth narratives, or even references physical existence at all? All of those assertions became literalized later. And while I do not fully accept this "mythical Jesus" argument, it is interesting. But alas, I digress.)

8. Isn't it most likely that we created a God in our own image – a man to whom we can project and ascribe thoughts, feelings, reactions to political events, anger, vengeance, regretful acts (Noah's flood) and answers to our many questions? Isn't God a man-made construct, or at least so heavily influenced by man's hands as to be unknowable?

9. Why do atheist nations like Japan, Scandinavia, and France and have lower rates of STD's, abortion, and violent crime, if the only true path to civic conduct and morality is a set of morals founded upon the rock of religion (specifically a Judeo-Christian belief)?

10. Why is "faith" the one discipline or area of life in which intellectual curiosity is inherently and systemically discouraged by doctrine, practitioners, and social norms (if not consciously - often with the threat of severe consequences – e.g. hell)?

Yes, study is encouraged, but isn't it encouraged only with the intent that you "deepen your faith" through discovery – a slightly intellectually dishonest type of encouragement (usually without conscious preference)?

11. Isn't it possible that we use religion as a crutch, and lack urgency in critical areas, such as the mistreatment of others, simply because we are comforted by the notion that there is a "higher purpose" and ultimate judgment that will make it all okay?

12. Isn't the omniscient and omni benevolent nature ascribed to god, the ultimate "catch 22"? Can you be all powerful, all knowing, and purely good, and allow evil in the world without being a willing participant in evil by way of allowing it?

As I mentioned, these are necessarily trite and probably poorly articulated questions, but from the heart these had been gnawing at me much of my adult life (except the last one – which I took on faith and never questioned until recently).

Does it feel funny to even read those questions? For me, my first exposures to natural philosophical arguments in opposition to religion made me feel very uncomfortable. I still occasionally joke that I'm going to hell for using my brain to ask questions. If you have a bad or uneasy feeling right now, at the very thought of asking such questions, isn't that evidence of the existence of powerful, learned resistance to asking the tough, yet intellectually honest questions?

In fact, history shows us that until very recently we simply were not afforded much leeway in freedom of thought. In fact many of our deist founding fathers were relatively quiet about their non-traditional beliefs: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen, James Madison, John Adams, and almost certainly Abraham Lincoln (demonstrates Christopher Hitchens). Actually come to mention it, it can still be pretty dangerous to dissent, even here in the freest nation on earth. (Though as recent violence over a cartoon depiction of Mohamed demonstrates, in the rest of the world it can be just plain lethal.)

I certainly felt those uneasy feelings at many times in my life. To use Daniel Dennett's idea, I believed in belief. I believed that one could believe, and admired those who did, but often struggled. I use Karl Barth's prayer, "I believe, help me in my unbelief." In fact, in my later years of belief, I prayed some last-minute prayers. They went something like this:

Dear God. You gave me a brain. You gave me curiosity. In fact, I've been reading some compelling works by Jewish scholars arguing against the divinity of Christ and the Holy Trinity. I've read works by Christian scholars who say the literal virgin birth and ascension to Heaven were never intended to be literal, but were in fact Jewish "midrash", meaning in essence they were artistic license used to make a point and to weave the Jesus story into the Jewish liturgical calendar of the day. Moses and other biblical figures demanded supernatural proof that you existed. You gave it to them. How about something for me?

I know I'm no Moses, Lord, but in all honestly I am near the end of my rope of belief. While historically pretty true, the elements of faith and religion from the Bible seem just as plausibly to have been made up in people's minds, out of their need to believe in something greater. Moses could have made up his conversations with you in his head, and the Ten Commandments too. Man has always created gods throughout history. If indeed you are the one and only, personal God of the New and Old Testaments, I need proof beyond something some old guys wrote down in a book 2,000 years ago – I need to see supernatural events with my own eyes – now! Not magic tricks that are actually quite worldly in their explanations, but cars floating in the sky, or your booming voice from Heaven as my friends have heard.

I didn't expect any response, really. Needless to say, because there is no god (certainly not that can act supernaturally in the world), it was a silly and frivolous exercise about which I chuckle at myself for having engaged.

Obviously my faith conversion is away from mystical, mythical, or theistic beliefs. Do I believe there is a God? I certainly don't profess to know. But after several years of continued study and learning, my current view is that all attempts thus far to understand the purpose of life, why we are here, where we go after this life (if anywhere), where we were before this life (if anywhere), why we live, and why we die – are profoundly strong, fatally flawed, emotion-driven attempts to answer questions that are probably unanswerable. Though logic and philosophical arguments seem to prove that that which cannot be defined, cannot be reasonably

assumed to exist, I will say that I'm not 100% able to concede that point just yet. Nonetheless, I think we have deluded ourselves since the dawn of consciousness – since we first had a couple of minutes of living without running from a predator or looking for food.

Certainly there could be other life in the universe. There certainly could be other dimensions, planes, or realms - even a creator! But for now the arguments of how many angels can sit on the head of a pin seem an unnecessary distraction from larger world issues. Further, one set of beliefs based entirely on faith (irrational belief without evidence “just because I believe”), can truly lead to accepting many worldly assumptions based upon the same notion – faith. And this can cause real harm (as outlined in my book). Taking action based upon untrue assumptions can have severe negative consequences.

As but one small example, I just heard an expert on the African AIDS epidemic quote statistics that appears to prove that failing to educate and promote condom usage in Africa, as a THIRD option to abstinence and committed monogamy, is costing many lives. This appeared incontrovertible, yet the Bush administration continues to tie all amounts of admittedly substantial foreign aid, to “abstinence only” education. (I won't even get into the lack of historical foundation for the anti-sexuality bent of Christianity in the last century or two, that would even suggest such a silly view on condoms). But the point is that LIVES are at stake!

Perhaps more importantly, notwithstanding all the positive benefits, our self-deluded, mystic beliefs have also created great pain and conflict here on earth. We laugh at the silly beliefs of others, but in many cases mistreat others because of our own beliefs.

On the other hand, to be honest I must point out that there is much about organized religion that I miss sorely, and that is good. Also, I want to point out that most (not all) of the very best, warmest, most truthful, honest and good people I know subscribe to one of the various major religions. In most cases that is Christianity.

There is so much I admire and appreciate about religion, and in my particular background, Christianity. I love gospel music, organ music, pomp and circumstance, time to clear my head while thinking about something beyond my petty problems.

In fact there are many great, life-changing positives that come from the dominant world religions.

- They teach us discipline and selflessness
- A true “church family” plays an important social role. It can put in place a vital support mechanism. When someone in my family dies, there is an instant mechanism of comfort and love put into place. The women plan and make food for a wake, others sit and comfort me, while still others run errands, bring food, and provide counsel.
- There are often facilities associated with places of worship that have multiple and important uses (Church, Synagogue, Mosque) – wonderful places to gather, say at the time of a sudden death.
- There is an emphasis and culture of selfless service to others
- Moral values are supported – including the ideals of honesty and truthfulness
- There are cultures that encourage a sense of appreciation for what we have – our “blessings”. This is so very important.

In fact, those who most dedicate their lives to their religions, are very often my heroes in life. This has always been true with me, and probably always will. One day Julie and I made a list of the people whose lives, in our feeble and humble judgment, are most meaningful to the universe (“God”) in our estimation. It sounds arrogant, but it was intended to be a positive and private acknowledgement of fully evolved, wonderful human potential.

There were pastors who quickly came to mind. What better role could one ask in life, than to invest your time, energy and effort in supporting, developing, counseling, and helping other humans. I believe that their lives have been spent doing some of the most important types of work that a human being could do – feeding souls positive messages, encouraging, loving, helping, teaching us to help, teaching us to live, and much more.

But further, the vast majority of people whose names came right to mind as most meaningful to us (by way of most meaningful to the universe), are people of faith. Truly these are enlightened people, interested in things beyond themselves. In fact, I believe that it is BECAUSE they are such good people who care and think about humans other than themselves, that they are drawn to traditional religions. Church, where we come from, is something good people simply DO. They just do it. Until recent years, this was really not even a question in my mind. In a way it was a sort of litmus test. If you are good – you therefore go to church (or at least synagogue or mosque).

Of course I have to point out that I often preach, “Correlation is not causation.” Isn’t it possible that high-achievers, who are good people who want to be recognized as good people, who do all the “right” things in life to better their bodies and minds – exercise and eat right, read, seek to help others, don’t do drugs – would obviously partake of established religion? It is the single most obvious vessel for participating in community, contemplating, and for helping others.

In other words does religion create “good people” and high achievers, or do good people who are high-achievers obviously seek out religion? I actually suspect that religion IS the cause of goodness and betterment in many cases – but I truly don’t know if that’s 10% or 80% of the time.

With all that said, supporting belief systems based on irrational belief (“just because” by definition of the word “faith”), has downsides. Many of these downsides have been widely documented and commented upon. With 9/11, terrorism, the Holocaust, the crusades, fundamentalist Mormon polygamists who systemically rape and abuse teens (NOT Latter-day Saints by the way), the televangelist thieves, and the countless mainstream examples of crazy things done in the name of religion, I cannot any longer be 100% sure that the “pluses” of religion outweigh the “minuses”. I think they do, but it becomes a tough question in the face of the many examples of such wackiness – and in the proclivity to believe just about anything based on feelings, emotion, and faith alone.

I will grapple with that issue going forward. That said, I will continue to love. I will continue to be happy for you when you are happy, and try to support you in your religion – with some caveats.

In Truth-Driven Thinking I explored my long-held curiosity about our abilities to believe in things that are demonstrated to be untrue. The primary danger of suspending science and the rules of

the world as we know it, rather routinely and carelessly, is that doing so can lead to very harmful actions. In fact, religion allows people to randomly “validate” any thought or emotional reaction, by declaring it to be “of God” – a claim against which there is no defense. Somehow we believe that the more “purely felt”, the more likely something is to be of God. But in the end, decision making based upon virgin births, raising dead, 24 virgins rewarding martyrdom, holy ghosts, devils, heaven and hell – tend to be of questionable long-term value because there is no limit to what can be claimed, or what unreal, emotion-driven action can be taken!

Most often in my study of emotion-driven thinking, it is needs for self-affirmation, recognition, and validation that our life has meaning – that motivate people most. I believe this is true even of religion. “I need this to be true. I have believed it forever therefore it has become a part of me. The thought of abandoning this belief is inconceivable, could have severe social consequences, and my life would have been without worth but for it”, our minds silently but persuasively argue below the conscious surface.

Certainly I could be entirely wrong. I admit that. As I weigh the positives and the negatives going forward, here are a few examples of lines that when crossed, I certainly cannot “wish the religion well” any further:

- **One Truth** - All major monotheistic religions claim to be the “one true religion”. If you say that you have a lock on truth, and that I am not allowed to believe what I believe, I have philosophical differences with you. But such beliefs go deeper than theological problems, and in fact can cause practical issues that can be significant. When Islam says “convert or die,” I can no longer say that I wish you well in your view of Islam. In fact, I wish that you lose by way of death if the pledge is that you will fight to the death to support your view.

- **Intellectual Freedom** – When your belief holds a cultish forbiddance against learning, science, dissention or discussion of alternative views, I also begin to withdraw my support and well wishes for you and your church (not that my doing so has any impact – of course – just making a point).

- **Physical Harm** – When your metaphysical beliefs cause you to harm yourself or others, in the face of today’s science (which can, *and will* change tomorrow with new information), I again withhold my cosmic support and goodwill for your practices. For example, if you fail to seek orthodox medical care because Allah will save you, or worse yet fail to treat your child and cause injury, disease or death, I’m not with you there.

- **Interfere with progress by failing to understand the world as we know it** – Now admittedly this is a tough and fuzzy one, open to interpretation. But essentially I’m saying that if you fail to support something like Social Security because of your view of what you think God thinks, but other data and real-world examples suggest it is the best way to ensure the greater good for all, then I may again not send you warm notes supporting you in your faith. That doesn’t mean you can’t have the opinions, and passionately be heard in expressing them, but it simply is one of the conditions I’m placing upon my support of religion. It also doesn’t mean I don’t love you and won’t help you in other ways – that’s not the point. The point is that with limited qualifications, I will continue to honor you and support you in your religious views.

▪ **Start Claiming God as an causal agent of observable phenomena** – When Pat Robertson declared that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s stroke was God’s retribution for withdrawing from Gaza, he declared that god was taking *causal* action in the natural world. As James Randi commented on his web site,

“So, according to Dr. Robertson, strokes are not caused by the brain of the victim being deprived of oxygen due to a clogged, narrowed, or ruptured artery, nor by bleeding within the brain. The old superstition that brain cells thus deprived of oxygen malfunction and die, resulting in loss of function in the part of the body controlled by these brain cells, is refuted by Dr. Robertson’s superior medical knowledge, I guess. No, God did it. That’s the vengeful, savage, jealous, angry deity that Pat accepts and fears.”

The problem with attributing and declaring god to have taken causal actions (tsunamis, hurricanes, healings) are numerous. Briefly, a) to claim god as a causal agent requires the suspension of all the laws of nature – the waves didn’t begin with a shift in the tectonic plate, the plate wasn’t moved by early causes in the center of the earth, but rather at some point the laws of physics were literally suspended – a reaction happened without a cause. Unfortunately we have never seen such a thing here on earth. Also b) once we allow this there is no end to what can be claimed yet not verified.

TRUTH:

People ask me about religion and truth fairly often. In fact, truth is a goal. Seeking truth speaks more to methodology for acquiring knowledge, than to a destination (truth-driven thinking). In my opinion truth does in fact exist somewhere, but we can never be certain of what is true. We can only make provisional assumptions, based on facts and proven scientific theories, until new data comes along. And we must constantly question the theories (with empirical data). When that new data contradicts our theories, we then achieve a higher level of knowledge. But what we “know”, can always change.

Therefore, for what it is worth I believe that the word “truth” should not be used in discussions of the metaphysical. Especially in this regard, truth is simply *unknowable* (there is that word again). While truth on the matter does exist, somewhere, anyone who claims to have mastery of truth as it relates to religion and/or a god – even in so far as to say that it is true that God exists – simply cannot substantiate the claim.

As it turns out, most discussions of religion or God simply wind up with someone saying, “Ultimately it comes down to faith.” True enough. Therefore, to call it “truth”, is in my view out of the question, and even somewhat arrogant (especially if claim is made with little study of the merits of other religions and atheism. The philosophical burden of proof is on the one who makes a positive statement that something exists and is real. One cannot prove a negative).

Some of you might even try to persuade me (or “save” me) from by breaking with Christianity. I appreciate that and accept your loving gesture. In fact, in case I’m wrong, I won’t even object if you pray for me☺. But in my mind if you want to “save me” by way of persuading me through discussion, I must ask that you familiarize yourself with other viewpoints. I’ve read many, many

books on faith and the bible over the years. I've listened to countless sermons and articulations of these concepts. So though I'm no biblical scholar, and I can't cite by memory but a few verses from the bible, I think I have a fairly good handle on the viewpoints of a believer and arguments for traditional faith. In short, if you set out to persuade me, I'll appreciate your efforts and attribute them more weight if you've availed yourself to opposing opinions, including some of the very few theological and philosophical sources I'll cite below.

Again, much thanks and love. Please forgive me for any appearance of attacking your beliefs by way of communicating the foundation for my changed beliefs. It was important to me to be authentic. I wish you much love, happiness, spiritual fulfillment, safety and health during your journey through this utterly fascinating and marvelous journey we call "life".

Love,

Steve Gibson

Just a few ideas for suggested reading:

- *Atheism: The Case Against God*, by George H. Smith
- *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*, by Sam Harris
- *The God Movie*, Brian Flemming, www.thegodmovie.com (available through Netflix too)
- *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus*, by David Klinghoffer
- *Liberating the Gospels*, and *The Sins of Scripture*, and *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, by Bishop John Shelby Spong (Ret.)
- *Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies, A First Look*. Gregory S. Paul, Journal of Religion & Society (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>)

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