



GABI CAMPBELL/UVU REVIEW

Groundbreaking research looks at spirituality's effect on the brain.

# This is your brain on faith

**A group of religiously active returned-missionaries will have their brain activity studied while they pray, read scriptures and view LDS church-released video clips**

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Researchers from the University of Utah are conducting a study called "The Religious Brain Project" to understand how the brain reacts during spiritual experiences. The

study is led by Jeffrey Anderson, Associate Professor of Neuroradiology and Bioengineering at the University of Utah.

He and fellow researchers Michael Ferguson and Jared Nielsen will evaluate study participants' brain activity while they experience spiritual stimuli. Specifically, the project will study the brain activity of returned missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

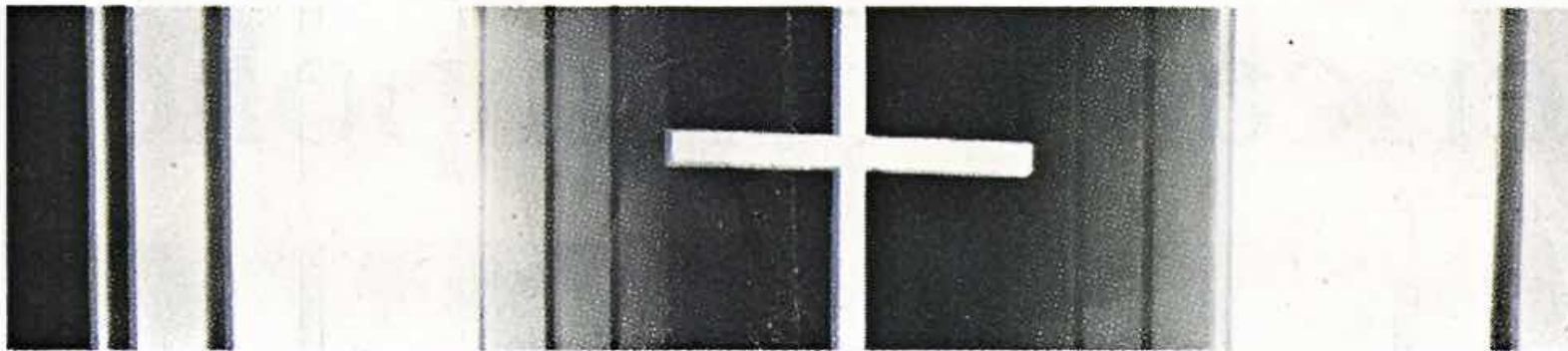
"These are people who have spent thousands of hours doing exactly what we're interested in for this study - being able to identify specific points of time when they can feel something spiritual," Anderson said. "We're excited to work with a group of people who have a

degree of practice in identifying those feelings, which is a major part in the tradition of the LDS mission experience."

The project involves a wide range of religious and scientific individuals from the University of Utah, Utah Valley University, Brigham Young University and Westminster College. Anderson hopes to see if regions in the 'social brain' are impacted in a way that might improve understanding of how spiritual practices influence social interactions.

25 volunteers ages 20-30 who are healthy, practicing members of the LDS faith will undergo an MRI scan while performing spiritual activ-





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Participants will be exposed to religious and spiritual stimuli while their brain is scanned for changes.

## **FAITH** from *AI* \_\_\_\_\_

ities. Volunteers will pray, read scriptures, or even watch church-sponsored movies projected through a mirror inside the machine.

The MRI will scan the individual's brain about once every second while researchers observe changes in brain activity. Participants will be able to push a button to let researchers know when they engage in a powerful spiritual experience.

"Religious and spiritual feelings are among the most profound influences to behavior, yet the neuroscience behind those feelings is almost completely unknown," Anderson said. "We may not be able to determine exactly

what somebody is feeling, but we can see if it activates brain areas that are associated with emotional responses," said Anderson.

Spiritual experiences are not objective, so they have to rely on reports from those involved in regarding identification of specific spiritual experiences. The researchers speculate the study could provide insight on whether or not spiritual experiences make a person more charitable, less likely to commit a crime or less apt to divorce.

"One of my personal goals is to increase dialogue between the scientific and religious community," Nielsen said. "The end goal for both communities is to acquire truth and understanding, but they come at it from different perspec-

tives and because of that they don't see eye to eye, which is unfortunate."

The Religious Brain Project is currently low on funding, but researchers are hopeful that they can raise the money necessary for the project to continue. If they are able to accrue more funding than required, they will then expand their study to include more faiths and demographics.

The study is expected to continue for one year, but could take longer depending on the data they collect. Because of the wide-ranging interest in this study, transparency is a priority and the researchers will publish their results in a peer-reviewed journal.

If you would like to know more about the project, visit [www.religiousbrainproject.com](http://www.religiousbrainproject.com).