**Are We Mormons a Cult?**

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When I was at graduate school in Princeton from 1990-1995, I worked summers as a temporary secretary at various big local businesses. In one of those situations, I talked to a coworker about my religion. She was a Baptist, and had some pretty strong opinions about Mormons. To be specific, she called Mormonism a cult and when I tried to talk her out of it, she dug in and insisted. I asked her for the reasons she thought Mormonism was a cult and tried to suggest that lots of religions she thought of as real religions rather than cults had similar traits. For instance, her argument that Mormons didn't believe in grace over works seemed similar to me to Catholicism.

I was pretty prickly about Mormons being called a cult at the time, but 25 later, I have begun to wonder if it might not be useful for Mormons to understand more clearly why so many people think of Mormonism as a cult. Are these reasons that are true and are things we embrace? Are they true and things we might want to change? Are they simply not true and things we need to correct people about?

Signs of a Cult :

1. A Charismatic Leader
2. Denial of Essential Christian Teachings (Trinity, Christ's Reality, the Second Coming)
3. Brainwashing/Systematic Programs of Indoctrinization
4. Psychological Abuse/Intimidation
5. Mass Suicide/Doomsday Expectations
6. Authoritarian Mind Control
7. Communal and Totalistic Organization
8. Aggressive Proselytizing
9. Social Humiliation and Punishment
10. Limitation of Information to Membership or Outright Deception

Joseph Smith was indeed a charismatic leader. The fact that Mormonism as a religion survived Smith's assassination in 1844 and has since continued to grow seems to indicate that it was not merely his personality that is Mormonism. However, when I was a child, we talked a lot more about Joseph Smith than we did about Jesus Christ. I think this is something that has changed dramatically in the church since then, and for good reason. It might be useful for us to think about the way in which we talk about current leaders, as well. Do we see them as men with flaws? Do we tend to elevate them to a status above mortal? Do we refuse to see Joseph Smith as a mortal with flaws? Would changing just a few words make it more clear that we worship Christ as the son of God and not our own prophets?

When Mitt Romney was a candidate for president, Mike Huckabee made a big fuss over a few Mormon beliefs that went outside the lines as far as most fundamental Christians were concerned, including the idea that Christ and Satan were brothers and that Mormons don't believe in the trinity. There are a number of Mormon beliefs that are variations on typical Christian beliefs, including universal resurrection, an emphasis on work rather than grace alone, and the belief that men can become gods. On the one hand, Mormonism is clearly a Christian religion, since we believe Christ was the literal son of God and we use the Bible as a scripture (though we believe the Book of Mormon is a more pure translation of Christ's word). Mormons do have some rather different views on Christianity than the mainstream. Some eras emphasize these views more than others in the history of our church. Do these different beliefs make us a cult? Does the Book of Mormon make us a cult? I don't think so, but I can see why other Christians do see us that way. I'm not interested in giving up the Book of Mormon, but I think we can work at making it clear how much we value the Bible and that we still believe in the trinity and almost every other Christian belief, but that we see it slightly differently. As for Christ and Satan being brothers, we believe everyone is a child of God, even Satan and his followers. Don't other Christians believe the same?

OK, onto brainwashing and indoctrination. I personally cringe when I hear about certain kinds of "youth camps" that some stakes in the Mormon church promote or even sponsor. Our Mormon "trek" re-enactments can sometimes have some of this flavor. So can EFY experiences. Anytime that food is denied someone in order to promote a spiritual experience, I personally twinge a bit. Fasting is something that Mormons believe is an important way to understand poverty and to come closer to God. However, combining that with a multi-day experience that includes hard labor and the pressure to bear testimony at the end to me begins to become akin to brainwashing. People telling me that "it works" when I object don't help, either. I know that Mormons who are parents want to keep their children in the church and they see the influence of the world as being bad. They feel these camp experiences are the way to counteract the time teens spend at school and with friends. But think carefully about the methods we use. We want authentic experiences in spirituality, not ones that are being manufactured or manipulated. And ones that seem forced are definitely out.

Is psychological abuse or intimidation ever used in Mormonism? It's easy to say that this simply never happens, at least not on an institutional level. The church doesn't send people around to the homes of others to get them to "fall in line." We don't threaten other members to get them to pay their tithing. We certainly don't demand that they vote in a certain way. We don't shout or yell at them in church meetings in order to get them to give up their cigarettes or alcohol. But . . .

I've heard people talk about using positive peer pressure to get the youth to make the "right" choices in terms of following the Word of Wisdom and remaining chaste before marriage. Is this intimidation? When the youth go behind closed doors to have interviews with the bishop on a regular basis, is this a loving moment to discuss spirituality or could it be seen as something else? I'm sure everyone intends to be loving, but we should be aware of how certain practices could be perceived and how much pressure we are putting on others. We want people to choose good freely, not because it was easier to do what they were told than to give thought to what they actually wanted. Our belief in Satan's plan as being the alternative to Christ's gift of free will to us, so that we can make mistakes and repent rather than being forced to do what was right so we all ended up in heaven, is clear. Let us make sure that we follow Christ's plan in everything we do.

Mass suicide or doomsday expectations may seem like something that we can dismiss out of hand as not part of Mormonism. I certainly did, until a non-Mormon friend of mine mentioned how uncomfortable he was with my gung-ho attitude toward food storage accumulation. He felt that the only reason to accumulate that much food was because I was expecting some kind of doomsday event in the future. Now, the Mormon church has gone to great lengths to assure people this isn't the only or even the most common use for food storage. Food storage is used for stocking up when things are cheap and for planning food, both of which can help stretch budgets. Food storage can also be a kind of savings plan for when unexpected life events happen, like a lost job. And emergency preparedness goes beyond food storage to 72 hour kits in case of flood, fire, or any kind of emergency, including terrorist attacks. It also means being aware of who to call and what to do, having a plan of where to meet, and so on. These are good things, things the government knows that Mormons do well. But take them too far, as some of us do, and we start to sound like we're planning for the apocalypse. Armageddon is part of our scripture, but I think we shouldn't be gleeful or casual in talking about how we're going to beat it.

Mormons have a semi-annual General conference in which the twelve apostles and the first presidency speak to the worldwide membership, as well as other authoritarian figures in the church heirarchy. Many Mormons enjoy conference weekend. All other church meetings are canceled and most of us now get to stay at home (in our pajamas) to listen to church leaders give us advice and counsel and sometimes simply offer comfort. But to those outside the church, it can seem as if we are being "programmed" and told what to do, instead of being encouraged to use our own minds to think things through. I fear that when we perpetuate the idea that the prophet would never tell us to do the wrong thing or say that even if he does, God will bless us for being obedient, we lean too far to the side of obedience and looking like Mormons are robots rather than free-thinkers. Just consider this when you talk about the church.

One of the things I love most about Mormonism is the community that we create. I love home teachers and visiting teachers. I love that the Elders Quorum and High Priests Group help people move in and out of the ward. I love that the Relief Society brings meals in to women who've had a baby and to families in need for any reason. But these services we provide to other members of our ward can seem cult-like to those not in the ward, and perhaps not for reasons we understand. Creating a community that thrives independent of the civic community can seem strange to those who are not part of it. It can feel like they are being excluded and that we do not pay attention to neighbors who are not Mormons. It can make us seem very isolated from the rest of the world. I think it is one thing to separate ourselves from behavior we do not approve of, and another thing to live so much in our communities that non-Mormons feel like we are aliens.

Aggressive Proselytizing? I am pretty sure we don't threaten people with physical violence if they don't join our church, but the way we talk about missionary work can sometimes be a little over the top. Young Mormon men are expected to serve a two year mission and while we don't ostracize those who don't, there are stigmas attached to not serving or coming home early. I think sometimes we imagine that these stigmas are a good thing because they encourage young men to serve who might not have otherwise, but I don't think it's true. And "every member a missionary" means that our proselytizing efforts aren't confined to missionaries alone. It is one thing to offer to explain Mormon things to the curious, but it's another to make every contact with a non-member about joining the church. And counting baptisms to prove anything? In my book, that's always wrong.

When I was a teenager, I heard of the way the Amish "shun" those who leave the flock and thought it was horrible. We Mormons never do anything like that, of course. Except that we do. It's not formal, but it happens. When people try to leave the Mormon church, we often make it difficult. In what we think is an expression of love, we continue to send visiting and home teachers. But this can feel like a way of keeping tabs on people who do not want to associate with us anymore. It can feel like we are refusing to let people go. Like a cult.

And when members are denied temple recommends for not toeing the line on Word of Wisdom issues or because of dissent against church leaders, it can feel to them like we are using temple recommends as a way to force people to do what leaders say. We don't hold people's homes or other financial means hostage, but we do tell them they can't go to their childrens' wedding if they don't comply. And the rash of excommunications that have happened in the last two years is another way of making people who might be inclined to disagree shut up instead. Is this what we want or mean to do? Of course, a church has a right to decide who is among its members, but I think we can be more careful in the way we make it clear that excommunication isn't meant to be publicly humiliating. We can work harder to show love to those who leave the church, without stalking them into returning.

As for controlling information that members receive, I think there is more to be done on this front, as well. The church has done a good job in recent years of publishing essays on Joseph Smith and polygamy, on blacks and the priesthood, on the church's stance on homosexuality, and on other troubling topics. But I think the organization of the church needs to do a better job of making it clear that these essays are official and disseminating the information to the local leadership, where it still seems a bit hit or miss. We should be open about the facts of our history. That doesn't mean we have to agree with the worst interpretation of those facts, but hiding facts because we think members aren't "ready" for them smacks of manipulation and frankly, cultism.

I don't think Mormonism is a cult. Even in my firmly atheist days, I continued to send my kids to church because I believed that Mormonism taught a lot of good ethics and was a great community to be involved in. But as someone who is moving back to full faith in God and in Mormonism, I would like to be able to talk about my church to my many non-member friends in a way that is devoid of cultist vocabulary. I want to able to deny absolutely that Mormonism has any hint of cultism in its practices or beliefs. And I think we as a group can do better in that effort. Here's my pledge that I will do my part.

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