

Being Mormon: An RLDS Response

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Asking whether being Mormon is what you believe or how you act is, I suspect, a typically Jesuit effort: designed in hope that at least one of the two options is correct. Let me respond in the same spirit.

When I was young, I was the sort of little boy that my mother did not want me to play with. And some, certainly my mother, would suggest that I am still growing up. Thus, for my own protection I suppose it would be best to argue that being Mormon — at least being RLDS — is more a matter of belief than of action, even though I must confess that my beliefs are not all that much better than my behavior.

Yet my youth was controlled by expectations of behavior, rather than beliefs. We operated on the assumption that the children of church officials — “nabobs” my father called them — automatically believed. Thus the real problem was to assure that their Sainthoodly behavior met the expectations of the critics. Much of my early action as a Mormon was restrained by the willingness of seeming strangers to stop me and inquire, “What would your father think?” As it turned out, I often heard what my father thought about my behavior. But in all honesty I do not remember much emphasis on what he believed. What was conveyed, was a hazy set of assumptions that justified — if not rationalized — the behavior I was supposed to assume.

The answer to the title question then is yes and no and neither. To be a Mormon — in the generic use of that term — is an attitude: an attitude of uniqueness — of peculiarity — which makes itself known in behavior, in beliefs, in relationships, in inquiries and, most of all, in religious expression.

What are they? First, I would suggest that Mormons are elitists. I do not mean that in any widely derogative sense but rather to suggest that they see themselves as set apart by either divinity or history. They view the world — as well as other claims of divine manifestations — as Platonic shadows; mere

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copies of the Real or the Ideal. Such a view fabricates a high point from which to survey, gets Mormons involved in a multiplicity of events and activities that most "religious" organizations would avoid, causes them to carry the burden of absolutes, and saturates their beliefs and their actions with the pressure of necessity.

I acquaint this with America's new fanaticism: jogging. I have always assumed the joy of running was rather like that of wearing a fur coat in mid-summer Georgia: the real joy comes in stopping. The jogger tends to regard running as its own end and elements of puritanical fanaticism easily insinuate themselves. Often Mormonism is such an attitude, one which is its own end.

Second, I feel the Mormon attitude assumes metaphysics as functional rather than essential. The role of theology, philosophy, and history are more to dress up the process of being a Mormon than they are sources of assumptions of Mormonism. Because of the immediacy of the venture, the explicitness of the message and the lack of any kind of identity distinctions between spiritual and material, the concern for systematics is of little or no use.

Conversely I detect an embodiment rationale: the individualization of what seems to be uniquely social conditions and the socialization of those things which are uniquely individual. In this attitude, events take on a concrete historical placement which is, in the main, unrelated to the condition of their birth. Perhaps this is best illustrated by the assumptions of the work *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* which, as Philip Slater has suggested, is a kind of Christian Science Dawn Patrol version of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. It confuses individualism with narcissism, community with containment, growth with compulsive striving, and spiritualism with schizoid alienation from the body. The assumptions of the Mormon community stand in stark contrast to their assumptions of agency; history in contrast to story; and, belonging in contrast to owning.

Fourth is the idea that authority stands apart from either dialectic or evolution. While not always seen in our execution, such an attitude respects finality and absolutes rather than emergence. It is a difficult idea within the limitations of our theology. Note, however, that Mormons express themselves by speaking with authority rather than in authority. The reality of our particular rationalizations is that we have authority, i.e. priesthood. But the attitude assumes that we are in authority. De Pillis suggests that Mormonism is probably best described as a quest for religious authority. I would add only that it was a quest for an explanation of an authority already assumed. For all intents and purposes, it is the process of allowing consent to be assent.

I tend to associate with this an attitude of a-intellectualism; not anti as much as apathetic. This may be too harsh and certainly will be misunderstood by someone. But I refer to the frame of mind that acquaints publicity handouts with creative literature — where the role of the intellect is foundationally suspect and kept within the parameters of providing evidence for the already believed. Generally we have assumed the attitude, if I may use a Talmudic phrase, of putting a fence around the law saying: "For purposes of this belief everything outside here is regarded as irrelevant, and everything inside here is regarded as relevant."

There is a Mormon attitude as well that sees itself as dynamic. I think this is probably true of the actions and beliefs of the RLDS and the LDS in different ways. But I would suggest that there is a common conception, a product larger than the total of its parts. This is an active pursuit of response to contemporary pressure. Or in other words, to order and organize the disorderly. After spending several hours recently in my liberal RLDS congregation with its inter-generational worship, its feminist convictions, its enforced informality, its reentry of wind instruments into worship, and its reek of compromise with the undecided, I longed for the peace and quiet of a more traditional congregation where neither form nor content interfered with my apathy.

But you see, I believe in what my congregation is doing and my behavior is reflective of this belief. I believe our Christian assumptions, but I am also aware they are frosting on my firm-if-bland-cake. I have only to give them order to make them mine.

And while we may look with awe at the time it takes us to adjust, we really have learned to do so fairly rapidly by comparison. It explains, I believe, why for the Mormon movement our dispersions — despite the liberal complaints — are generally very passionate and very fundamental.

Last, let me suggest an attitude of revolution. I know that such a word strikes fear in the hearts of some and makes other smile, if not laugh, for in practice we rarely seem revolutionary. What I see is an attitude of revolution concerning the sacred cows of our environment. It is a legitimate heritage from the religious malcontent who was our founder.

Note, this is not rebellion. We are not trying to motivate leaders or adjust the policies of the entire world, but rather to replace them with our own — to make the world truly whatever it is we think it is called to be. It assumes that we can save the movement and or revitalize our role by a reawakening, that by looking within the framework of our own movement we can return to the glories of the past and the promises of the future. We do not need to go outside for the keys to unlock the mysteries of our regeneration; they lie within the movement itself.

Externally our attitude has been one of quiet confrontation; being in but not of the world. This is seen in the interesting response to the recent charges of being un-Christian, leveled against Mormons of all variety. One of LDS Mormonism's greatest selling tools has been the fact that it does not fit into the confines of traditional Christianity. It is, if anything, more Christian. On the other hand, RLDS have spent 100 years trying to convince the world we "really are Christians after all" to fit into the mainstream of Protestant America. Now I discover there are those within our official family who, on the LDS side, are reaffirming their likeness within the Christian community as a whole—despite Jan Shipp's claim that Mormonism is a fourth and new religion in America — and on the RLDS side a suggestion of distinctiveness which, while obviously operating in the reflection of Jesus the Christ, is not really what Christians doctrinally call Christianity.

Despite these trends I suspect I find an attitude of other-than-this-brand of Christianity. This attitude is one of revolution, not rebellion against the traditional.

I heard Eugene England's delightful presentation "What It Means to Be a Mormon Christian." It was not only an informative paper but one of the best sermons — including exegesis — I have heard in years. I would suggest, however, that at stake is not the Mormon's right to be called a Christian. Certainly we have that right, for some of the best Christians I know are Mormon, or Jewish, or agnostic. (In fact, my wife and I decided years ago that if the Mormon idea of men becoming gods was correct, we wanted Leonard Arrington.) But it is a matter of description which asks whether Mormonism is best described in the way the word *Christian* describes beliefs and doctrines. I think not.

But back to the original question and what in particular would be an RLDS response. To suggest an answer I must say some things personal.

I am not sure what I remember of childhood other than some shared guilt rising from my mother's feministic view of the church combined with a displaced urgency born of my father's industrious demands. There is no heavier burden — Linus told me too late — than that of great potential. The unrest resulted in the feeling of exile, of being an outsider. It was my response to the church that led me to build on a lot of reflection, belief, and faith — as well as some borrowed courage — to make the shift from problem as life, to problem as the mystery of life, a shift that allowed me to see the possibility, the dawning potentials of other-directedness, and the light, as well as the lease, on life.

I was reluctant to burden this emergence into humanity with too many institutional attitudes for to do so was not just the obvious exploitation of one person by others. It was more: the loss of spontaneity which makes of our attitudes little more than role-playing where the sort of person one seems to be is more important than the sort of person one is.

Arising from this bias, and my experience, my inclination is to state that being LDS is about equal parts attitude and behavior and that being RLDS is primarily an attitude: an attitude in which the RLDS are more pleased with ideas and persons which are not too loyal. The proper attitude suggests that to find one's religious expression only within the framework of the church is suspect. This is not true I believe for the LDS.

Certainly, the behavior syndrome for us is reflective of the Italian, if not the Spanish, Inquisition; and nothing makes a better story for the telling than the transgressions of the Saints. But really, such behavior reflections are not the heart or the mind of the movement and, in the main, reflect the limited nature of our definable beliefs. In those rare doctrinal confrontations the encounters are passionate because — like academic battles — the outcomes are so unimportant. Lacking doctrinal necessities we are inclined to assume the violations of them. The RLDS awareness of belief resides around a parameter of faith held in place by an attitude of expectation — expectation of the nearness of clarity and of the rightness of the known but as yet undefined. Maybe I can illustrate the distinction of attitude I see between the LDS and RLDS by saying that the LDS community as a rule, genuinely believes that if their church were to be in command of all things, that the world would probably be in fairly good shape. The RLDS community, on the other hand, would be

very concerned if they thought their church would suddenly be in charge of anything.

My RLDS heritage is not the essential source of my hope nor of my convictions. Who and what I am is not "being RLDS" as much as it is the obvious reflection of that institution and its ideas upon my life. The church was, without question, the midwife of my conception, yet I fight the isolation that exists between what is called for and what can be given. Albert Camus reflects on the conflict that exists between a person's recognition of what is, and what ought to be, and sees it as the ground for our sense of absurdity. I do not maintain an attitude of convictions about very many things. What I have primarily is the attitude that there are convictions; and that the message of the church is significant because it is where I receive my messages. For I need — or perhaps just want — something real. I borrow Nietzsche's words: "Alone I confront a tremendous problem. It is a forest in which I lose myself, a virgin forest. I need help. I need disciplines. I need a master. To obey would be sweet. If I had lost myself on a mountain, I would obey the men who knew that mountain, and if I should meet a man capable of enlightening me on moral ideas, I would listen to him, I would follow him. But I find no one, no disciplines and fewer masters . . . I am alone."

I disagree with those who suggest that religion emerged from the need to face death. It is my belief that for most the significance of religion is found in helping us face life. Therein lies the recognition that within the church there is need either to end one's life and the uselessness of it or perhaps to find in the nature of the struggle something that gives life meaning and purpose.

My Mormonism suggests that the ritualization of divine experience has become a means of removing from us the burden of human relationships. There is an increasing effort, it appears, to conform to "tests of faith" on the one hand and "ritual performance" on the other. Tests of faith range from abstinence of coffee by millions of sleepy LDS to the RLDS businessman scrupulously avoiding champagne at a company reception. We take great pride in avoiding not only evil but its appearance.

In "rituals of performance" we pay our tithes (you more than me), we kneel during the blessing of the bread and wine, we seek temple recommends, we follow the correct ordinances for the right office, and so on. In this performance we are acutely aware that we are behaving as we ought. Yet it seems to me that our behavior often results from our human insistence on acting irrationally and illogically. This is not so much the failure to understand logic — for who really does or cares? — but the fact that neither empirical or quantitative knowledge is complete and that most of us have vastly undernourished views of humanity, of nature, and of God. And that this lack of nourishment is not due to limited information as much as ignorance of information available through other media, notably through sensuous knowledge. (For those confused at this point, I am not talking about the joys of sex but the sensation of awareness.)

The depression of a concerned and feeling people who are not sure that anything is happening is a result of their behavior orientation, not their beliefs.

The depression this produces is like the guest speaker at the banquet. It needs no introduction. But what we are not aware of, I suspect, is that the rebellion against the dehumanizing process of authoritarian devices will begin here.

When the loneliness of powerlessness is encountered, then such loneliness becomes a human resource. It is a force that responds to indifference, to unresponsiveness, to manipulation and meaningless communication. To admit our dependence, to grant helplessness and seek participation in the larger dream is our goal. It is at this point that the stars break through the clouds of our own self-pity and are seen as external sources of reinforcement.

Such rebellious persons need persons. But they rarely face this fact until they discover they are in a personless world. For persons need visions and dreams and hope, not just eschatological promises. Yet these lie at the end of a journey, a journey that never really begins in earnest at any point short of self-isolation. Whitehead has pointed out that when people say they are lost, what they really mean is they know where they are but not where everyone else is. Such is the RLDS isolation. The yellow-brick road may well begin, as it did with Dorothy, in the willingness to admit our human despair.

I believe persons who have not learned to make the great human and religious achievements their own — who do not know what it means to earn a novel, or carve a symphony, or to express a divine experience — are either enslaved to capriciousness or to other persons' testimonies of life. As long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of reflection everything is nostalgia. But with the initial movement of creation the world cracks and tumbles and opens as the cosmic egg, and an infinite number of shimmering fragments emerge, all of which offer understanding.

As the mind adjusts to the horizons enlarged, it must renounce the comfort of familiar narrowness. It is dazzled when it emerges from its dark prison, awed to find itself suddenly in confrontation with time and space.

In this sense, the church is not — should not — always be in the market for answers but for liberating questions that, in their own way, take us into the mysteries and respond to that void that resides within us. It is that urge to feel as well as to understand the awesomeness of the movement that gives us reason to search, to seek, to dream the impossible dream. It is too bad we are too often called to fight the unbeatable foes.

Not the least of my problems is that behavior is easy to watch, to decide the correctness of, and to mimic if one is in need of the characteristics of belonging. But beliefs are different. They are difficult and in the main they move like the traditional loop in a string — the loop ever there but composed at different times with different combinations of ideas, concepts, and assertions.

Certainly being Mormon is what you believe if one can set that belief in a set of parameters around which we circle like a firefly around a summer light. But this is more an attitude in which a number of beliefs — one or two more than half — balance out as the metaphysical foundations to this period's philosophical assumptions and theological dictates. We arrive at our assumptions of belief either by our own inquiry or by adopting the beliefs of a community which we found other significant reasons for joining. And in the main, we

seem to find we are at home with the beliefs even if we do not know what they are. The belief often is in being Mormon, not in what Mormons of any variety hold valid.

So in response to the thrice-asked question I would answer: It is an attitude — an attitude of being on the edge of fulfillment, an attitude of frustration, of exile and belonging, of concern and respect, the feeling of religious people about the source of their understanding.

Yet there is a growing bifurcation in Mormonism, a split growing between the purification (if not purity) of the doctrine on the one hand and the awakening of the behaviorists more in terms of Christian love than Sainly behavior (though there seems to be a large group of persons for whom the means have become the end). My comments on LDS experience are obviously limited by knowledge and experience; so relying on my observations of the RLDS of the 1980s, I would suggest this gap is widening as the pressures of fundamental reawakening cracks the complacency of those who have floated on the river of membership, never landing but never committed to flow. The Mormon community has grown too accustomed to bridging the gap and our attitudes reflect it. But the promise of the future requires that we deal with it and make it whole. This is my hope and, in the larger sense, my prayer.