

Confessions of a Modern Day Mobber

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I HAVE PERSECUTED MORMONS for ten years. I began riding with the mob in the early 90's while working for the *Utah County Journal*. Asked one day to write a quick editorial for the paper, I penned "5 Kinds of Mormons." It offered the theory that of all the millions of Mormons in the world, there were only five basic types: liberal, genuine, conservative, orthodox, and Nazi.

As I recall it took less than an hour to write the editorial. Not surprising when you consider that there were so many things about cultural Mormonism inside me itching to get out, mostly those things we have transformed into doctrine out of nothing more than sheer repetition.

"Five Kinds of Mormons" was well received by nearly everyone but the newspaper's publisher. Hundreds of readers, most of them active LDS, praised the humor in the editorial and asked for more. Encouraged by the response, I continued lampooning us and never looked back even when I got into trouble for it.

I needled Mormon dress, hymns, kitsch, wedding receptions, food, seating arrangements, and speech. When I wouldn't stop doing it, I was fired by the *Journal* and picked up by the *Salt Lake Tribune*. My reputation for skewering Mormons grew and followed me when we moved to Salt Lake County last month. Our first Sunday in the new ward began with a noticeable no-man's land around us on the pews. I understood, however, that this behavior was prompted out of fear of turning up in a column rather than distaste. The worry soon abated, and we have since made good friends.

Writing what I do about Mormons initially had far more to do with personal therapy than it did with changing anyone's mind. It was my way of easing the internal tension that occurred during boring and frequently pointless church meetings, a tension that left unchecked might have developed into a scenario involving a rifle and a rooftop. Church for me has always been grueling. Writing about it made it easier.

But several years ago I really began to struggle. At first I thought it was simple writer's block. Gradually I came to understand that it was much worse. The thrill was gone. Perhaps writing no longer offered me the sanctuary it once had. If so, maybe it was time for me to leave. After all, I do not believe everything I am told simply because someone in a position of authority says it is so, and I refuse to let congregated opinion sway my personal convictions. Isn't that the definition of apostasy?

I briefly considered becoming a committed apostate. I talked it over with friends, family, and sometimes even tolerant strangers. I explored the usual Internet web sites and read the testimonies of abuse by the church. One day while lurking around an anti-Mormon website, I read something every bit as ridiculous as anything I'd ever heard in church. A former Mormon claimed that those who walked the edge of Mormonism did so because they simply lacked the courage to jump all the way out of the church. The writer specifically mentioned members who attended Sunstone Symposia and even me by name. I confess to being surprised. All those years of swimming against the flow and not once had I considered the possibility that I suffered the barbs and harangues of the orthodox because I lacked courage to run away from them.

Right then I knew I had to stay. Right then I noticed the similarity between those I regularly lampooned and those who mistakenly believed I was somehow on their side for doing so. Seriously, where is the difference between the charge that fringe Mormons lack the courage to leave and the equally spurious and illogical claim that those who do leave lack the moral fiber to remain?

There are Five Kinds of Ex-Mormons as well, most of them in dire need of a bit of lampooning to help them get over themselves. They suffer from the same malady they see so clearly in others: an inability to distinguish between being filled with the truth and being full of yourself.

Life is a test of individuals. Unfortunately, we forget this. Human beings love company so much that right or wrong isn't nearly as important to us as having our opinions validated by fellow travelers. Some people remain congregated in the church because it suits their personality. Others congregate when they leave—and end up committing the same crimes they once abhorred. I have listened to people I knew long before they left the church, and I recognized that what they had "found" outside of it had not changed them. They were like divorced people stalking ex-spouses. And just like those they believe trapped inside the church, they fail to understand that other people are not their problem. Our greatest hurdles in life will always be ourselves.

I am no exception. My lampooning other people says far more about me than it does about them. It says that I am still Robert Kirby, my own hostage in a guerilla war against convention, a prisoner of my own biology, sociology, and psychology. I will ever be suspicious of any attempt to correlate spiritual matters into a controllable bureaucracy. I have little

trust in organized religion, particularly one that so handily elevates some people above others. For these reasons my hackles go up when I see human beings congregated in groups larger than two. Strand two people in a life raft, and you have maximum cooperation. Put three people into the same raft, and two of them will invent a religion (or even an anti-religion) that enables them to marginalize the third.

I confess that much of church leaves me scratching my head at best and nursing a migraine at worst. I have far more questions than answers to the things I see and hear there. But there are moments when I understand what God wants from the fumbling dichotomy that is me. These epiphanies typically occur early in the morning before the day has become polluted by human noise. There are also those moments, usually in Sunday School, when the only thing I can be is an atheist.

I think God wants me to be me, or at least the best version of me. When the shouting and fretting is done, I am a Mormon. My personality has its roots set deep in a movement chock full of irony. Mercifully, it is this irony that drives me. I hear God best through it. Irony is that difference between the peevish way we want things to be and our frequently miserable and failed understanding of the way they really are. This is not a Mormon problem or even a religious problem. It is oh so human.

Perhaps because I have chosen to remain in the church, I seem to receive far more negative responses from non- or former Mormons than I do from aggrieved active members. One particular reader could have learned volumes about himself had he taken the time to think through the frying pan/fire logic he used in a letter:

It is hard to believe that you are Mormon. Why in the world would you choose to be associated with such a religion? It's run by men and doesn't let women do anything. It claims that God only talks to one person, and that it's the only truth. Mormonism is a very controlling religion. It is a huge corporation that invades people's lives. You should get out.

A lot of what the writer says is true. The church is directed by men, it is rather controlling, and it does claim to have the truth. But here comes the irony. The letter was signed: "Ex-Mormon now Catholic."

So where does a lampoonist belong? Am I sheep or wolf—or possibly a little of both? Or am I something altogether different? The only conclusion I can reach is that my faith should be the product of me rather than of any group's claim to hold the copyright on truth. And because I am me, I have particles rather than articles of faith.

MY 13 PARTICLES OF FAITH

1. I believe in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, and in mankind's innate inability to tell the difference between them and, oh, a giant ball of fire or even an extremely intolerant political party.

2. I believe that men will be punished for their own transgressions, including stuff we did completely by accident or because of testosterone. Women will probably just get probation.
3. I believe that through the atonement of Christ, everyone will one day be able to tell annoying church authorities where to get off.
4. I believe that the first principles and ordinances of the church are: boring speakers, meetings that last forever, music that sounds like someone giving a whale a sonogram, food storage gone bad, and idiotic bickering over caffeine and movie ratings.
5. I believe that a man must be called by God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands, by those who are in authority, and that only regular long distance rates will apply. Meanwhile, women answer only to a biological clock.
6. I believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, viz.: deacons, teachers, centurions, lepers, thieves, virgins, lunatics, mustard seeds, and demonically possessed swine.
7. I believe in the gift of tongues and would die a happy man if, just once, some smart-ass would have the guts to try it when I was around.
8. I believe the Bible and the Book of Mormon to be the word of God as far as I personally can translate them correctly, which I try not to do much because it scares me.
9. I believe all that God has revealed, all that he does now reveal, and I believe he will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the colossal foolishness of the entire human race.
10. I believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes, most of whom will work for Microsoft; that Zion will be built on this (the United States) continent by undocumented migrant labor, and that Christ will eventually rain personality on the church.
11. I claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to it being none of your damn business, and allow all men the same privilege, except for Pat Robertson, Louis Farrakhan, and most cannibals.
12. I believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers and magis. . . . wait, no I don't.
13. I believe in being honest to a point, true to myself, chased by the police, benevolent to deserving people, virtuous on the Internet, and in doing whatever my wife tells me to do; indeed, I may say that I follow the admonition of Paul in believing, hoping and enduring—and that all of this damn well better be worth it in the end.

Declaring oneself in this way has its drawbacks. After my particles of faith ran as a column in the Salt Lake Tribune, I was invited to discuss

them with the stake president. A good man, he offered the possibility that perhaps this was too far over the line. I countered with the point that no one complained the year before when I rewrote the Ten Commandments. I asked him if his problem with the column wasn't really more about his own hypersensitivity than about my flirtation with blasphemy?

So where should someone like me go? Don't answer. It's a rhetorical question.

Two weeks ago, I taught the High Priest Group lesson in my new ward. Since it was the first of the month, the High Priest Group leader said I should choose the subject. I chose as the topic of my lesson a quote from Edward Gibbon: "THE VICIES OF THE CLERGY ARE FAR LESS DANGEROUS THAN THEIR VIRTUES." Then I gave a lesson on the importance of helping people get past harmful Mormon stereotypes.

As lessons go, it was better than some and not as good as others. When I finished, the High Priest Group leader raised his hand and—apropos of nothing that I could see—asked, "Do you know [Salt Lake City Mayor] Rocky Anderson? Well, he's a homosexual. Just as gay as he can be."

Following a moment of confused blinking, I said that I knew Rocky Anderson well enough to know that he was not gay. We debated the point for a minute or two. Gradually, a feeling of belonging came over me.

Seriously, why would I leave? My work here is not done.