

A Conversation with a Faithful Mormon

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing. Mark Twain

Introduction

What follows is a lightly edited transcript of part of an email exchange in which I recently engaged with a faithful member of the Mormon Church.

Believing Mormon:

Dear Mr. Mccue, I was browsing the Internet and came across your letter to Apostle Holland. You sound like a pretty good guy. I don't have anything shocking to say, but I am a member of the church and have been smashed so many times, that at times, I feel lifeless. I say that so you know that I understand the way you feel. I think the issue you are facing is a test of integrity to God's church/truth. So, even though you are being labeled as something you are not, just put up with it like Christ did in his time. Come back to church and show over time that nothing can break you down.

The other day, I was criticized for something so stupid at church, it has happened so many times. I just blow it off and most of the time I do what I must to keep the peace. I can see that in your case it makes sense to do something, but at the expense of your membership? There must be a better way. Just show them that you just will not quit the church. Get back into the race.

If you really intend to make a difference, and want it to be effective, it will take a long time. If you want immediate results, it will be messy, and will not be effective.

Sometimes I wish someone would care enough to respond to my concerns, someone I don't know, and that is the reason I responded to you.

My reply:

A sincere, innovative message deserves a response in kind. The reason that I won't be "going back" is that an entire world I did not know existed has opened up for me since I left Mormonism. To go back would be a big step backwards for me.

Could I have a positive influence? Perhaps, but I think it would be minimal. I am far better off going in a direction that seems more healthy for both me and those closest to me. That direction does not involve Mormonism. However, if due to some miracle Mormonism were to radically change along the lines I indicated to Holland, I would consider coming back. But never on the fully committed basis I used to participate.

There are simply too many other worthwhile things in this world to do for me to ever do that again.

How much do you know about how the world looks to someone who does not have the Mormon worldview? Let me suggest that until you get outside Mormonism (to an extent at least) this is not something you can possibly understand.

I, on the other hand, understand quite well what things look like on the inside. This leads me to suggest that you have more to gain and learn by trying to experience what I am than I do by returning to what I already understand.

Much more of our perception of things like "truth" and "reality" are determined by social influences than most of us like to admit.

I wish you the best,

bob

Believing Mormon:

Have you considered the possibility that you have been fooled by Satan? He is powerful, and can fool even the best of us. Even you!

My reply:

You make the same assumptions about reality that I used to make. Most of them are not justified, in my view, if you are prepared to look at the evidence.

Fooled by Satan? On what basis do you suggest that Satan exists? You "know" Joseph Smith was a prophet of God? How do you know that? Mankind has a long history of coming to conclusions about reality based on emotional experience. If there is one thing that history makes clear it is the folly of doing that.

I am not writing essays that point out flaws in the Mormon Church. I am exploring the ways in which the Mormon Church uses the same thought and perspective-controlling tools to cause people to believe precisely what you do that have been used by everyone from Hebrew prophets to Egyptian pharaohs, to European kings, to Hitler, to fundamentalist religious leaders of all stripes.

The easiest way to approach Joseph Smith is to simply ask if he was reliable. Was he trustworthy? Once you consider the evidence, the answer in my view is clearly "No".

I have appended a time line drawn from a source that most faithful Mormon scholars accept as solid history, Michael Quinn's *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*. You can see my other thoughts on this point in my essay where I question if religious faith is enlightening or blinding (See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.religious%20faith%20-%20enlightening%20or%20blinding.pdf> at page 18 and following).

I am prepared to dialogue with you. But, I will not swap "I believe" statements with anyone. I deal in the world of evidence, probabilities and belief justified by same. Again, if history teaches anything it is the folly of using any system other than the one I just outlined. The various sordid chapters of the Mormon story are a tiny fraction of the evidence to support my position.

All the best,

bob

Believing Mormon:

You are talking to someone who is very logical, but I separate logic from faith completely because you are right--believing because you have faith and no real solid logical proof is not convincing. I still think that there is a place in life for believing even though it doesn't totally make logical sense.

My reply:

You have a bifurcated mind. I used to have one. Life has become much more enjoyable since I unified faith and logic. I invite you to try that approach out and see what you think of it.

In general, I would suggest you read Carl Sagan's book "Demon Haunted World", and Michael Shermer's "Why People Believe Weird Things". You may be a logical person. However, logic leads us down the path defined by the premises we accept. The things that separate the sheep from those who find their own way is the ability and willingness to question premises. The lights will come on for you when you start to do that.

Believing Mormon:

I read your comments and some of them were very insightful. Your insights give a person control over life's reality, it seems to me. It sparked a question that I wanted to ask you: What do you suppose is the whole goal in human existence? And in conjunction with that goal, what exactly do you believe in? Do you even believe in God or that there is an adversarial figure? Have you decided that the Bible is not the word of God?

My reply:

Those are the big questions, aren't they? I don't have answers for them, but some of my thoughts can be found in my draft essay on faith starting about p. 127. The same essay has some good comments at about page 58 regarding how spirituality develops in many people throughout their lives, and how Mormonism and similar belief systems restrict that.

Practically speaking, the things that make my life worth living relate to learning, helping other people, experiencing love and beauty, etc. Evolution seems to have equipped us

with appetites for these things. And our self-awareness enables us to decide what is important to us, figure out the cause and effect relationships connected to that, and then take action to bring that into being. That is how, for example, the United States was formed. Its founders did just what I indicated and had a belief in God that is in many ways similar to mine. When we do the same, we become metaphorically at least, as gods - we conceptualize and then by our actions we create. Einstein, by the way, had a belief in God that is similar to mine, as do many other well-known scientists. And I developed my belief before I found out about theirs. Wrestling at the same time with our spiritual leanings and reality tends to do that to a lot of thoughtful people.

The Bible seems quite clearly to be mostly mythic - that is, not based in real history. Most religious scholars and the members of many mainstream religions accept it as such. The Book of Mormon is completely mythic, in my view. Lots of useful things can be learned from both. But to take them literally will create serious problems for most people. See the same essay at about page 36 on the importance of mythology and harmful nature of literalism.

The more literalistic a faith, the more harm it does in general. Think of the Orthodox (or Ultra-Orthodox) Jews; the Taliban; the Amish; the Jehovah's Witnesses, etc. You can see the ill effects in other literalist groups, but not in your own. And they can see it in yours, but not in their own. That is how human perception works - we see ourselves much less accurately than we see others.

I believe in some kind of higher power, but it seems to me that much more harm than good has come of basing decisions on any particular conception of him/her/it. The founders of the United States felt the same way. Religious leaders who posit a clear conception of God usually also purport to speak for him, and to use their alleged special connection to God for the purpose of controlling other people.

Ironically, the admission of uncertainty and ignorance has been the most empowering, enlightening thing in my life.

I wish you good luck on your journey.

All the best,

bob

Believing Mormon:

I really like what you said about the importance of outside groups being able to see more clearly the faults in groups other than themselves. The last thing you said, about the admission of uncertainty and ignorance as empowering - how has that been empowering to you?

My reply:

If we are certain we have the answer, we stop asking questions. That is much of the

point of the sacred in most societies - to prevent questions from being asked and so to cause premises to be accepted. Then a form of logic can be used to work from those premises to the conclusions the leaders want. That is how Mormonism works. Knock out the premises (Joseph Smith spoke with God; the Book of Mormon is literal history; church leaders speak for God; etc.) And the whole structure falls.

A great book on the importance of asking questions is Nobel Prize winner Richard Feynman's "The Pleasure of Finding Things Out". That is a great book on many levels, actually. Once I admitted uncertainty (and rejected Mormonism) I began to burn with questions and a need to learn more about what was relevant to them. I have experienced this as a new surge of life the like of which I had never known. Certainty kills the spirit and retards growth of all kinds.

Believing Mormon:

So you let go of the idea that the Mormon faith is the "only" truth, but uncertainty is empowering to you, so would you consider Mormonism to be a topic of uncertainty as well? Or have you decided that the idea that uncertainty or multiple truths are a certainty?

My reply:

Nothing is certain except circular logic (which is how the logic used to support Mormonism works – see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf> starting at page 26). So my mind is still open to the possibility that aspects of Mormonism are as true as anything empirical can be. We cannot prove, for example, that the earth is not flat. But, the evidence indicates a high degree of probability that it is not flat. Mormonism, in my view, has roughly the same chance of being "true" as the earth does of being flat. And I am still open to evidence that could chance my view of the probabilities on either of those points.

Believing Mormon:

If you feel that uncertainty is empowering, are you certain that Satan has not fooled even you in this case?

My reply:

Let me repeat - nothing is certain. I have said this at least half a dozen times, and yet you continue to return to it. So no, I am not certain. But the evidence causes me to believe that it is highly improbable that either Satan exists or that he has fooled me. Metaphorically, however, the notion of evil is useful as its embodiment as Satan.

Believing Mormon:

Although the Book of Mormon is only stories to you, the whole issue with Korihor in Alma 30, who preached pleasing words to the carnal mind, and had many of the same

ideas as you, seems to be pretty relevant in your case here.

My reply:

Have you heard of the "Texas Sharp-Shooter Fallacy" in logic? It works like this. A Texas rancher wanted to demonstrate to his friends that he was a great marksman. So he fired a number of shots at a barn wall and then drew targets around them that showed each bullet going into a bull's eye. That is, by drawing the targets after firing the bullets, he controlled the appearance of the evidence he present to his friends. Their theory (that good marksmen shoot bullets into bull's eyes) would cause them to assume based on the evidence he produced that he was a good marksman.

So, "prophets of God" are usually supported by what scripture says, and sometimes are even themselves predicted by prior prophets (or so the scriptures say). Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if you could make up some scripture that supported what you had to say, or better yet, predicted that someone like you was going to be a prophet?

If I am Joseph Smith and either making up a book, or feeling inspired to write something, it is likely that it will support my point of view. To assume that Joseph Smith miraculously discovered ancient writings that told everyone just what Joseph Smith wanted them to hear (including that a great prophet named Joseph would be raised up in the last days - hmmm) is naive in light of the other possibilities. You likely have not heard that parts of the Bible are thought by many scholars to have been written on the same basis – some people trying to reform the Hebrew people at different times and "found" a scroll or two "written" by Moses. These would be much more persuasive than anything they themselves might say. This kind of thing is thought to have played a large role in the creation of some parts of the Pentateuch and the New Testament. Again, we are not certain of this, but the evidence is compelling. And many modern religious and political leaders have done similar things. This is a common human pattern.

So Joseph Smith and his cronies either did what many other power seeking people have done, or a miracle happened. And the only people who seem to believe the miracle are those with a huge investment in the social group that believes the miracle, another common human pattern. Outsiders do not find Joseph Smith 's story even mildly compelling. They react to it the way Mormons react to the story of Mohammed and the Koran.

If you are interested in finding reality, you do not listen to your own group, you listen to as many others as you can and create a composite on the basis of how credible they each seem. And you do not yield to the demands of your leaders not to question the premises they set out for your belief. That is the huge mistake, because our perception of reality is controlled by the premises we accept. By never questioning the basic premises your church leaders insist upon, you give them the power to manipulate you as they wish.

Believing Mormon:

In the attitude of being "opened minded" and trying to break down the idea that God

exists and has chosen representatives to teach one truth, perhaps it is one of the greatest tactics Satan uses on the feeble-minded by those of a "hard heart."

My reply:

Perhaps. But consider what I have already written on that topic. The Texas Sharp-Shooter Fallacy applies here as well.

Believing Mormon:

A much more extreme case it is, but how would you answer the questions of Alma? Having no real proof that God doesn't exist, etc.?

My reply:

More Texas Sharp-Shooters.

Believing Mormon:

If you are willing to accept the idea that you are "open minded" and willing to admit that you are uncertain, then how can you assume that this does not include the Book of Mormon and the teachings therein? Food for thought, no?

My reply:

As noted above, my beliefs do not preclude the Book of Mormon, etc. from being true. But they make that highly unlikely. And at some point, a person is justified in no longer feeling the need to deal with every argument the faithful make. That is why you probably don't feel the need to listen over and over again to the Jehovah's Witnesses or Muslims or Young Earth Creationists. Their position seems so improbable that you are justified in feeling that your time is best spent on other matters. That is how I feel about Mormonism. Nor have I read (and probably will not read) the last few good books that debunk the Mormon approach (like Simon Sothertons' "Losing A Lost Tribe" regarding DNA and the Book of Mormon).

However, I am trying to acquaint myself with reality in all of its forms and if I run into something that makes me seriously question my point of view in favor of some aspect of Mormon belief, I will be as interested in that as anything else.

Many Mormon intellectuals use a form of Post -Modernism to support their views – i.e. nothing is certain; Mormonism "works"; hence we are justified in following it (even if it isn't true) (See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf> starting at page 15). And I studied that carefully with some initial hope that it might work for me. It did not.

Believing Mormon:

I have read your writings and am genuinely impressed by your ability to see things from an outside perspective, but is this at the cost of a false reality where you believe you are now accepting reality but rather have created a logical way out of it?

My reply:

All I can do is repeat what I have already said. Reality is what it is. I am trying to understand it. The Mormon position is highly improbable, based on the best evidence I can gather. The great physicist Freeman Dyson said that he felt great relief, freedom and joy when he let go of his religious beliefs that required reality to be a certain way, and became able to ask any question that would help him to see reality more as it is, instead of as someone hundreds or thousands of years ago said (perhaps with the best of intent) that it must be. I too, have felt that great relief, freedom and joy from learning more about reality.

Believing Mormon:

Ironically, it is clear to me that you are more knowledgeable and intelligent than me. I see life as a test, created by God, and so any other explanation can only be founded upon the philosophies of men, which change constantly, and are usually biased to the interests of their author.

My reply:

How do you distinguish between the philosophies of men attributed to men, and those attributed to God? If I want to control my fellows, am I not better off trying to persuade them that I speak for God? This is the oldest game on Earth.

Believing Mormon:

I fear for you, because I think you are someone of great importance, for which Satan has put you into a slippery situation. But, I think there is much to learn from your points of view, which will not only strengthen my ability to understand others, but myself and my own testimony. Don't take any of what I say as offensive, I think there is a lot of truth in your views. I hope you will continue to explain yourself.

My reply:

I have limited time for this kind of thing, and I hope that our interaction will be of use to you. But I am not set up as any kind of leader. As you look around more, you will find many like me who are simply interested in finding out what is, and are not trying to control anyone. That is one of the many things that distinguishes us from people like Joseph Smith. Whether with pure intent or not, they were all about control. My draft essay regarding Mormonism (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.the%20mormon%20concept%20of%20freedom.pdf>) explains where some of the ideas that were dominant in their day came from. Thankfully, most of humanity has left those ideas behind, as I now have.

Again, I wish you good luck on your journey.

bob