

Are Mormons “Free”?

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None are so hopelessly enslaved as those who falsely believe they are free. Goethe

It is not the fact of liberty but the way in which liberty is exercised that ultimately determines whether liberty itself survives. Dorothy Thompson

Introduction

When we ask “are Mormons (or anyone else) free?” we step onto a huge playing field. I will do little more than take that first step while commenting on three questions: First, what is the Mormon conception of freedom?; second, where does that likely find its roots?; and third, why do questions such as “What is the nature of freedom?” on the one hand cause war (both real and intellectual) while being assiduously ignored by the vast majority of most human groups?

What is Mormon Freedom?

Orthodox Mormon freedom to choose is largely exhausted by one decision – to obey Mormon authority, or not. Many Mormons believe that this choice is made on baptism at age eight, and the psychologists assure us that this commitment to obey is strengthened with each public testimony borne, talk or lesson given, prayer said and hymn sung thereafter. Another important opportunity to increase dedication is provided by the Mormon temple endowment ceremony, in circumstances only slightly more likely to produce dissent than childhood baptism.

The Mormon endowment is generally received at a tender age while surrounded by expectant family and friends who have already made their commitment to obey. Other important life events are often contingent on the successful completion of the endowment. For example, once a young person has decided to marry in a Mormon temple or serve a mission, the endowment becomes a mystery shrouded step incidental to the achievement of other important social and personal goals that do not require the kind of belief implied by covenants of complete obedience. It was until recently taken for granted, for example, that many Mormon missionaries went in search of their Mormon testimony. To top things off, the information about Mormonism in general as well as the nature of Mormon temple covenants provided to those who make this all important choice is notoriously inaccurate.

Mormons did not invent the behavioural control technique of causing commitment to be made early, in public, and repeated as often as possible. This has been an effective belief shaper in religious, political and many other groups throughout history. It also works to sell cars, Tupperware, knives, financial products, etc.

Regardless of what else they may be, Mormon baptism and endowment are classic initiation rights the effect of which is to bind members of a social group together. So, the process by

which Mormonism extracts its commitment does not facilitate a “free” choice, but rather makes obedience to Mormon authority more likely.

Countless authoritative statements by Mormon leaders show the importance of obedience to Mormon doctrine and social practise. For example, Neal Maxwell, in an attempt to poetically describe the decision to obey, said:

“...the submission of one’s will is really the only uniquely personal thing we have to place on God’s altar. ... Consecration thus constitutes the only unconditional surrender which is also a total victory!” (Ensign, Nov. 1995, at page 22).

This submission applies to whatever Mormon leaders say from time to time. The ancient metaphor that man is in some ways like God applies more to Mormon leaders than other Mormons as evidenced by the comparisons of Joseph Smith to Christ.

The Roots of the Mormon Free Freedom

During the 1700s and early 1800s as democratic forces gained strength many intellectuals (including Rousseau, Fichte, Saint Simon and Maistre) wrestled with the tension between the importance of individual freedoms and the danger that these would tip society into chaos. Rousseau, who was particularly influential, taught that the people would exercise their freedom by agreeing to obey through a “social contract” with each other and the state.

Isaiah Berlin summarizes Rousseau’s thought on this point as follows:

“If your problem is how a man shall be at once free and yet in chains, you say: ... if the chains are simply rules the very obedience to which is the most free, the strongest, most spontaneous expression of your own inner nature, then the chains no longer bind you – since self-control is not control. Self-control is freedom. In this way, Rousseau gradually progresses toward the peculiar idea that ... men [should] ... be connected with each other in the way in which the State forcibly connects them.”

And what if the people need their leaders to deceive them and force them along so that they will do what is best? The justification of leadership deception goes back at least as far as Plato and his “philosopher kings”. They were the wise few whom Plato felt should deceive the masses since they were incapable of understanding what was in their best interest. So Rousseau and many others had no trouble finding justification for deception and force as required for the greater good, as they saw it. Mormon leaders from Joseph Smith forward have followed this rule – the end (obedience) justifies the means (deception).

Many have also condemned this approach to human governance. Nietzsche labelled it the “pious lie”, which he said was the foundation of all priesthoods. Ironically, Joseph Smith did something similar when in his summary of God’s plan for mankind he had Lucifer espouse the philosopher king/pious lie approach, and fall from grace as a result.

Rousseau’s idea of the social contract continues to be important to political theory for a variety of reasons. And, the near universal human tendency to use deception to amplify power, which he attempted to justify, eventually led to the extensive checks and balances on the exercise of power that have become democratic keystones. These are notable within Mormonism by their absence. The wish to avoid public accountability and the access to information that they cause

partly explains why Mormon leaders resist most forms of government regulation and have turned down the opportunity to receive and spend government funds.

So early Mormonism adopted a political ideology that, as articulated by Rousseau and others, was useful in creating a cohesive social unit while paying lip service to the idea of individual freedom. And because this organizational form was assumed by Mormons to be inspired by God, it was not critiqued and upgraded within Mormonism as its propensity for abuse became apparent. Mormons generally do not consider it possible that their religious leaders could take advantage of them, leading (among other things) the Mormon Church amassing assets and revenues would rank it at about number 200 on the Fortune 500 list of the world's largest business organizations.

Why Are Many Explosive, Foundationally Important Social Issues Ignored?

Human instinct, our capacity to perceive and all other features of our biology, were designed long ago by evolutionary forces to be “adaptive” – that is, to maximize our chances of survival and reproduction. This leads to one of evolutionary theory's most important insights: Our brains were not designed to “find the truth”, but to help us survive and reproduce. Sometimes accurately perceiving our environment helps us in this regard, and at other times not seeing what is in front of us does.

For example, while our instincts evolved, the well-being of our dominant, small social group and our security within it were far more important to our survival and reproductive opportunities than is now generally the case. Therefore, when we are confronted with information that if accurately perceived (“Our leader has been lying to us!”) might threaten our group's existence, one of our group's foundational values or our place within the group, we tend to misperceive the information so that it does not endanger us. The concept of the “sacred” is often used for this purpose – certain ideas are so important that their truth cannot be questioned.

We are more likely to misperceive when under the influence of our emotions. And our emotions tend to flare when our group's foundational values are threatened by accurate information that calls their legitimacy into question. However, we tend to be clear headed when examining the foundational values of other groups, and so can spot their irrationality. The obvious problems with other groups' values coupled with our inability to perceive our own irrationality strengthens our group. And particularly powerful emotional experiences, often characterized as “spiritual experiences”, are human universals. These are used in most human groups to support the “truth” of foundational beliefs.

So, from an evolutionary point of view it was usually more important to be secure within our social group than “right”. This means that as long as most members of a group believe something, it will tend to be accepted by the rest of the group. And the longer a belief has been accepted, the slower it is likely to change even if is demonstrably silly. In a 2004 Gallup poll it was found that only 35% of US adults believe that evolutionary theory is accurate. About the same number believe that the Bible is literally true. And a staggering 20% believe the Sun revolves around the Earth.

While the inertia just described is powerfully, it has its limits. Foundational values that cannot be supported by the best available evidence are regularly challenged publicly, which causes fur to fly as emotions rage and members of the group fight over what they stand to lose or gain if the established order changes. This is what leads to revolutions, suicide bombings, airplanes

being flown into buildings, mass migrations, and sometimes seismic shifts in belief and behaviour.

Conclusion

As the Internet makes information available in unprecedented ways, pressure for fundamental change mounts. The movement away from the minimalist definition of “freedom” used within Mormonism is a tiny part of this. Much larger fish are being fried as we begin to clear away the ideological fog around issues such as “how many humans can the Earth support?”, “how seriously should we take global warming and other ecological issues?”, “how does sexual orientation work?”, “to what degree are men and women justified in simply choosing their roles relative to each other and society?”. Issues related to what freedom means are critical in each of these and many other cases.

We have long underestimated the way in which our perspective, which is largely a product of our social group, controls what we can see. Or as Einstein said, “It is the theory [in which we believe that] decides what we can observe.”

Our perspective continues to broaden. This should be expected to cause the pendulum to continue to swing toward greater individual choice. If we go too far in that regard, a taste of chaos will bring the pendulum back toward institutional control.

This ebb and flow is not new. But it is now more powerful than ever.

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