

The Perils of “Social Mormonism”

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

What follows is a lightly edited post I made to a thread on to the Recovery from Mormonism board (see http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/w-agera.php3?site=exmobb&bn=exmobb_recovery) in reply to a fellow named “Maturin” who advocated remaining connected to Mormonism on a social basis because of the turmoil that it would case him personally as well as members of his family if he announced his state of disbelief.

A General Rule without Judgement in Specific Cases

I have no criticism for people who are well informed and decide to continue to participate in Mormonism on their terms as long as their actions in this regard to do not impair their children's (or other's who rely on them) opportunity to develop in a healthy fashion. They are using religion – as should be the case – instead of being used by it. But this is harder to do that we might imagine.

Each path before us has offers different pros and cons and the one Maturin and other people who I know personally and respect have chosen has a few cons that are particularly difficult in some circumstances. It also offers important pros (peace at home; some business and community relationships of particular importance that are not severed; etc.) I don't minimize these, and can't understand how important they are to a person's life since I have not lived it. And finally, I think it is fair to consider how our personality types play into this. We are geared genetically and conditioned by experience to deal with stress and confrontation in different ways. For some people it would be impossible to do what I feel compelled to do. I don't fault them for that. Hence, it is somewhere between difficult and impossible for me to judge that the decision of any particular person to retain, or sever, her connection to Mormonism in one way or another, is "wrong".

Social Mormonism's Downside

However, I think it is useful to consider the price those who choose this particular path are required to pay. Having done so, this path seems to offer more bad than good in most cases. And again, I make this observation without any criticism for Maturin in particular. Here are the big "cons" from my point of view with which one must deal while on the path of "inner darkness", as one of my friends likes to call it.

I think the children of those who remain "active" while they are "unfaithful" face particular challenges. Can they be raised within the Mormon conditioning system and somehow not be infected by it? My personal view is that up until 8 or

perhaps 12 years of age, the Mormon system works great. But when it is time to learn about the reality of Santa Claus, sex and many other things, Mormonism breaks down.

There are at least two sides to this coin. The first is the least important, which is that a child raised within Mormonism does not have as much chance (and in some cases no chance) of learning many important things. I won't try to be complete, since that would mean writing a book. But a few things that come immediately to mind are:

1. Scientific (or merely "rational") thinking. The Mormon use of "feelings" to find "knowledge" is the antithesis of science and highly dysfunctional.
2. Metaphoric thinking. A literal minded approach to most things is unhealthy. Mormons tend to be far too literal minded. It is healthy to introduce children at the earliest possible age to metaphoric, symbolic thinking. This opportunity is degraded or killed by Mormonism.
3. Global thinking. Mormonism is tribal to the core. This means that issues related to the importance of breaking down tribal barriers are not dealt with.
4. Environmental/overpopulation issues. These not on the Mormon map because the conflict with basic Mormon beliefs, and this is not likely to change anything soon. This is likely to lead to a life out of sync with reality in many important ways.

The second side of the coin is much more important. Children raised Mormon are taught some profoundly unhealthy things, including the opposites of each of those mentioned above. But most of all, think of how confused the moral reasoning of a child raised Mormon by unfaithful parents is likely to become. At what age can a child deal with this kind of complexity: "The nice people at church mean well, but they don't know what they are talking about. So, you have to ignore them when they say ... But don't tell them that you disagree with them, because that will only make them upset and cause trouble for our family. We have to keep what we believe a secret. I know this is different from how we have talked about behaving at school and elsewhere, but church is a special place and we have special ways of behaving there. And, I know you had a lesson last week about how taking the sacrament renews your baptismal covenant and how that means that you are promising to obey all of god's commandments each week including what the Prophet tells us to do, and as you have pointed out, we don't do a lot of the things the Prophet, Bishop etc. tell us we should do. You have to understand that promise we make at church are not like promises we make in other places ..."

I suggest that there is no age at which this kind of thinking would be healthy, and that for a child it would be profoundly dysfunctional. Psychologists have shown that those who rationalize in this fashion in any environment tend to begin to do so in other environments. It degrades the moral fibre of those who do it.

Another major problem with social Mormonism in general is what it will likely do relationships between “unfaithful” parents and their children.

Mormonism does its best to become a party to our most intimate relationships (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.a%20few%20thoughts%20about%20Mormon%20Marriage.pdf>). That is what is at work here. The Mormon Church attempts, through its well intentioned youth leaders, to put itself in a position where if Mom and Dad stumble in their responsibility to teach a child the "truth", the Church can do it in their stead. And if the child chooses the Church over their parents at some point, it will be there to support the child. The Church's objective is clear – to acquire an asset that will pay tithing and donate time in the long term. If allegiance to parents might impair the value of that asset over the long haul, the parents will be denigrated and hence their influence reduced. This is generally not done in an overt fashion. Rather, love for the parents is expressed. They become an object of pity and a project to be worked at. And their influence is not to be trusted, since their lack of obedience is a clear sign that they have lost the Spirit and hence cannot exercise sound judgement.

Finally, the road of the social or cafeteria Mormon is so rich in cognitive dissonance (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 51) that I question how healthy it is. How early can a child learn to walk the mine field of inner darkness? Who can I speak to, and who not? And in each case, what can I say? This reminds me of the children of holocaust Jews in hiding who had to learn to be quiet in order not to threaten the lives of their families, and themselves.

I experienced the trumping of parents by Church in a minor way with my ultra faithful parents. When we married, my wife and I were counselled by a CES director in Edmonton that we should start our family immediately, and were provided with lots of reference to the words of Mormon prophets to support that position. My parents encouraged us to wait a little while at least before starting a family. We felt that they were "slipping" a bit in their faithfulness, and followed the prophets' advice. Baby no. 1 was born 10 months after our marriage, and my wife was sick more or less constantly for the following 17 years as she had baby after baby. I was concerned about this. She felt that she wanted to continue no doubt out of a desire to be "faithful". I felt it was her decision, and so supported her in that. We had our heads up our asses. But I digress.

And what about the friendships our kids will develop within the Mormon community. Mormon friendships are largely conditional upon continued

obedience to Mormon authority. When the kids are young, this is not a big deal. As they progress through their teenage years, and approach missionary age, it becomes critical. A kid who gets off the "mission/temple marriage" path is likely to lose most of his or her Mormon friends. This alone gets some kids into the mission field where the worst possible conditioning takes place. I think it is much more healthy to allow our kids to form friendships that are likely to be less conditional and hence more likely to be authentic from the get go. Learning to pick kids from a large population at school or elsewhere that are compatible with you and whose company you enjoy requires the development of certain skills. The Mormon way tends more toward having your friends picked for you by the few your age who are Mormon and in your ward or at your school. We spent years fostering friendships for our children that now appear far less than optimal. One son in particular was forced to endure endless hours with a mean kid his age who was in our ward. He came to regard that boy as his only "real" friend, largely because of the vast amount of time they spent together. This was unhealthy for his self esteem. He is now developing a broader spectrum of friends who seem to treat him much better.

I hope that is enough to make my point regarding how social Mormonism affects kids. I decided that being raised Mormon in the environment just described might make my kids strong, but so might naming each of my sons Sue, and I didn't do that.

People who have children at home and attending church are in a much more difficult position regarding the choice between inner darkness and behaviour consistent with belief than are people whose kids have left (or almost left) home.

I know some people who are well informed regarding Mormon history and take the position that their kids will figure it out, as did they, and so do not say anything. I do not think that this position is morally sound, generally speaking. To purposefully withhold important information that you would have wished to have had at the same stage in life is in breach of the golden rule, moral principles based in utilitarian theory, and most of what I understand about morality that is based on justice theory. Those are my three primary filters for moral reasoning (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/moral%20conflict.pdf>). The same reasoning, precisely, condemns the Mormon Church's leadership for keeping the members in the dark – the leaders do not wish to lose things they value, like the followership of the members, and so decide to withhold information that may cause the members to disobey them, even through leaving the members in such ignorance is bad for the members. If a parent chooses to leave his or her child in ignorance out of fear that the parent will lose status in the community, or that important relationships of the parent will be disrupted, this is at best questionable for a moral point of view.

How is the self respect of social Mormons affected? Again, different people deal with this kind of issue in different ways. I was not able to look myself in the eye

for the brief time I tried to believe x and appear to most people to believe y. I felt inauthentic. I can tell that some people like Maturin struggle with this. It is part of the price they pay to keep peace, relationships, etc. in their lives. And I know some people who are not bothered by this at all. They cruise along, doing their own thing.

And finally, what effect do that actions of social Mormons have outside their families? I suspect that at least some of my parents' friends who were active Mormons while I was growing up were closet doubters or apostates. But they never let on as far as I could tell. As I matured, in this crowd of Mormon university professors and professionals, it was easy to adopt an "if it is good enough for them, it is good enough for me" mentality, and so not question. The Mormon Church's policy of silencing dissent is designed to facilitate this. This is why it makes perfect sense from a policy point of view for the Mormon Church to permit disbelievers who will keep their mouths shut to attend and participate: the Mormon Church gets a free crack at conditioning their kids; and the very presence of intellectual types who do not overtly question makes it easier to persuade those who are less inclined to question in any event to follow along. This is a little like following along with the Nazis, but not bayoneting any babies yourself.

A Concluding Analogy – The Buddhist Boatman

Let me conclude with an analogy that I owe to the philosopher Alan Watts and a Buddhist parable he tells. He says religion is the boat we use to cross a lake so that we can find a place that works well for us from a spiritual point of view. We must cross the lake. There is unlimited space on the other side and hence unlimited ways of dealing with the endless variety of human beings and hence infinitely different spiritual wants and needs. However, where we come into life all there we have is a boat launch, and a few boats. While it is possible to swim the lake, few can do that on their own. It therefore makes the most sense to use a boat, and while there are lots that are available our dependence on a small group of people who have usually selected a particular boat before we arrive on the scene means that this is the boat we will likely end up using.

But, says Watts, make sure you remember to get off the boat when it reaches the other side of the lake. That is the whole point of the boat – to cross the lake and open up an endless range of possibilities that can be tailored to your individual wants and needs. But many boatmen do not see it that way. They often insist that you stay on their boats as they travel back and forth (some are much worse for this than others). If you have the misfortune to find yourself with one of these, ignore him and get off anyway. It is worse still if a lot of your small group has been persuaded to stay on the boat, and do all they can to persuade (or even force) you to remain with them.

Maturin and others are in the regrettable position of being surrounded by people who insist on staying on the boat while it goes back and forth. That poses a difficult question – does one get off alone, or stay on the boat and pretend. Maturin and others choose to stay – sort of. He spends a lot of time looking through binoculars at what is happening on land. He sneaks off when the boat touches land, spends as much time as possible off the boat without getting caught, and gets back on when he has to. He might, perhaps, even arrange for a dummy who looks like him to be propped up in a corner on the boat for a full voyage so that he can really enjoy land life for a while. Not a pleasant position to be in.

I have nothing but encouragement to offer to those who, like Maturin, have awakened and then find that the price required to get out is so high that it is worth paying the price exacted of those (and their posterity) who stay in.