

MEDIATION MORMONISM

Religion better than true

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What profit a person if their religion be saved, but it loses its soul? A valid critique of progressive approaches to religion cautions that the result would not be claimed by believing adherents of that tradition. Is it possible to have it both ways? Is it possible to articulate an approach to particular religions that maximizes benefit and minimizes harm? Can one present the “best version” of that religion, but maintain distinctiveness that believers would claim as their own?

I propose the following thought exercise, a question. If a fully invested, yet open minded literal believer and a sympathetic atheist former member were locked in a conference room with access to any needed resources (including catering and comforts), and they couldn't leave until they articulated a form of Mormonism they agree on, what would result? Note very carefully that I said agree *on*, not agree *with*. If they had to agree *with* each other's statements and beliefs, by definition you would never get anywhere. But agree *on* has potential. This is a methodology of mediation. Like a divorcing couple, the members of the tradition need to come to agreement, not coincidentally also in part “for the sake of the children.” This method could produce a win-win form of a religion that everyone can get behind—literal believers because the approach aligns with historical and theological precedent, and atheist former members for example because the principles are self-evidently beneficial. I speak of religions so good they need not be true—but feel truer to believers anyway (Since invested relationships make a game-changing difference, our conversation partners should be close friends with mutual caring and respect).

To make this exercise more accessible, I have dramatized it with the friendship of Josh, an active, believing but open minded member and Luke, an atheist but sympathetic ex-Mormon.

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“Ok, so what is the idea here again?” Luke asked.

“To see if we can articulate a form of Mormonism that we agree on,” Josh replied. “I know you don't believe any more, to put it mildly, but we have known each other since we were in Primary. We were at each other's weddings. If anyone can do this, we can.”

“I am game,” Luke said with a bit of a smirk. “Any Mormonism that I would approve of would have to be so much better it might end up looking like a different religion to you all.”

“Well that is the challenge. It needs to pass your muster, but it also needs to remain recognizable to me. You know that I genuinely believe all this.”

“Right.... and I like you well enough despite that.” Luke’s smile was genuine. “So should we start with a specific topic, or just fix Mormonism in one fell swoop?”

“How about missionary work?” Josh asked.

“Oh man, what a waste of time and money. Harmful even,” Luke retorted. “Grinding in confirmation bias, rules and structure that lead to anxiety and depression, young adults who think they have all the answers, even cultural imperialism masquerading as gospel, not to mention the unfair social expectations... I would never let my kids go on missions.”

“Do you really have no positive memories of your mission?”

Luke became thoughtful. “Hmm. When you put it that way, I can’t dismiss it completely. Being in a different culture was an eye-opening, maturing experience. It encouraged me to work hard, even if I now consider the ‘work’ to be ridiculous. And similarly, being focused on others’ needs changed me, even if I consider the spiritual focus to be misguided. I would have much preferred a service opportunity.”

“Why couldn’t that be possible?” Josh pushed. “What if LDS missions became primarily service missions? Other religions already do that. Missionaries could meet with local community leaders and say in effect ‘We are young, strong, and are here to help you in whatever way you can.’ The Church already takes that approach in some locations.”

“That sounds good, but what about proselyting? Isn’t that the whole point, you know, saving souls and....such?”

“It could be responsive rather than proactive. In the process of serving the people, missionaries could answer questions and discuss the gospel with those interested. That is how Paul did it.”

“Following the example of the New Testament. That would be a departure for Mormons” Luke quipped. “I could actually get behind that. I don’t believe in any of the principles of Mormonism. I consider myself an atheist. But I don’t deny the power that religion, and even literal belief in the supernatural has. If those 90,000 or whatever missionaries were improving communities around the world and addressing genuine needs, I can handle some Book of Mormon thrown in there. Even if it weren’t the musical.”

That got a chuckle. “Yeah, this approach would be a win-win.” Josh added. “Missionaries would have a much better experience, feel good about what they were doing, be better prepared for future responsibilities. They would make a difference that everyone could see, whether or not they believed in Mormonism. And retention rates would go up because those being taught would be genuinely interested.”

“I am beginning to see how this exercise works” Luke admitted grudgingly. “Ok, bigger topic. Temples. They are at the center of LDS faith. Temple recommend holding Mormon is the only valid Mormon. I think they are a waste of money and end up ironically dividing families instead of making them ‘eternal’. Plus let’s not even start on worthiness interviews.”

It was Josh’s turn to get thoughtful. “I see what you mean. I fully believe that ordinances are essential for everyone, but I don’t think we need quite so many temples. And I have friends whose entire families weren’t able to attend their wedding... that doesn’t seem right. What if there were less temples, and the ones we have were used better? Again, there is a great deal we could learn from other faiths. Sacred space is important. Supposedly the Celestial Room is for meditation, but too often I am shooed out. And I think if we wanted to really respect sealings, we would separate weddings and sealings... have *everyone* get married civilly and then sealed a year later. Yeah, we could tackle worthiness interviews another time. I have my issues with them as well.”

“I knew there was a reason we are friends” Luke smiled. “You are altogether too reasonable for a believer. Almost thou persuadest me to be partially active.”

Luke became very serious. “But let me strike at the core of my issues. See if you can resolve those, Brother Josh. I think Mormonism is a waste of time, a misdirection at best, deeply harmful at worst. Even deadly sometimes. Members donate massive amounts of time and money... for what? To make fat the institution. For malls and hunting preserves. And what do members learn? What is taught to little children? Not how to be a good person. No, how to be a good *Mormon*. They are treated as roles—priesthood holder, mother—not as individuals. They are given *scripts*—don’t have sex outside marriage, don’t drink coffee—rather than being taught how to live. I am a better person for having left the Church.”

Josh took all this stoically. “You aren’t wrong, my friend. But what about me? Am I a worse person for being an active member with a temple recommend?”

“No”, Luke admitted. “But you are the exception. We can have this conversation *despite*, not *because of* the current practices and approaches of the LDS Church.”

“But I don’t think that the problems are part of the gospel. I think there is a way to teach children and adults in a way that teaches *both* principles of living well and remains distinctively

Mormon. I admit the Church needs to change... in significant ways. And that is one reason we are having this conversation. Why there need to be a thousand conversations such as ours, between people who deeply care for each other, who are open and sympathetic. I think that those conversations can result in a Mormonism so good, it needn't be true. A religion that we can both agree on, even if we don't believe in it."

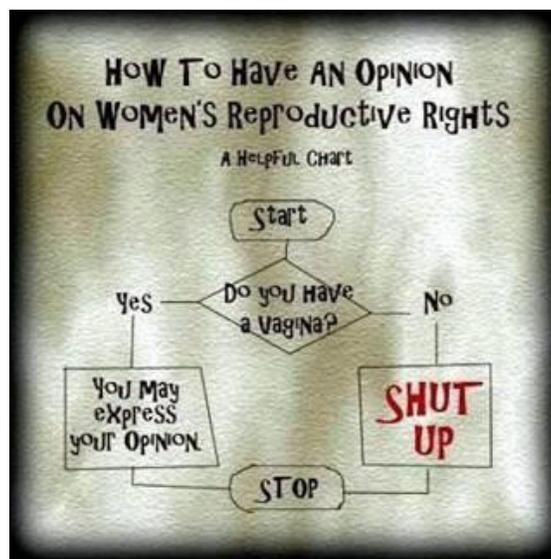
Luke nodded. "I am game. I don't suppose you would want to revise the Articles of Faith over a beer?"

"Make mine a root beer and let's do it."

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The task of reforming an organization or tradition is fraught with problems and questions. Who has the right to reform and change? Even more critical and complex, what are the criteria for reform? What is good? What is bad? What counts as better? How do we measure benefits? Whose perspectives and values set the standard? What counts as harm? Is harm ever justified? How do we balance the needs and sensitivities of some against others? What are the factors in a cost-benefit analysis? How would we develop a most beneficial, maximally ethical, minimally harmful form of any tradition? Does such a thing exist? Even if it does, how would we get those involved on board?

A conversation between present and former insider would bypass or at least bracket many of these issues. I would suggest that even though outsiders can provide inspiration, ideas and resources, the work of reform and change belongs to insiders. A chart about the most recent string of political debates over abortion and birth control sums it up well:



I want to be very clear I am proposing an approach, not an outcome. This essay is a plea for a certain kind of conversation and perspective. If we reach across barriers and difference and discuss what “common ground” we have, what we agree is valuable, useful, and good, we will immediately have a form of our tradition that works better for us, and in the long run perhaps these conversations will catalyze shifts and improvements in the tradition and institution as a whole. If one person writes a manifesto for change, they would need to address every one of the above problems. They risk rejection as a troublemaker, or a cult of personality if they succeed. This approach by contrast would graft into the organic process of selection and change that happens naturally with communities and traditions over time.

In our example, the literal believer represents the community. He will make sure that the compromise remains recognizable, that it passes the “smell test”. Even if the “body of Christ” needs a transfusion or transplant, if the life saving interventions are perceived as foreign they will be rejected.

The sympathetic post-Mormon represents an outsider, but a very particular type of outsider-- one who understands the language and investments of the faith, who also maintains some claim to the tradition. She will make sure that the compromise remains defensible and valuable *independent of truth claims*. Since morality is contextual, any action can be justified by the right worldview. What if your culture teaches that no man will accept you unless you have had a portion of your genitalia removed? What if your God commands that men marry teenagers, or parents sacrifice their firstborn? Many of us have the impulse to hold religions accountable, but there are those within virtually any worldview who will defend it. And even if a culture needs to be changed, how do you effect that change? This dialogue between perspectives can keep the religion recognizable while also holding it accountable and pushing it toward a better form of the religion, a form so good it doesn't need to be true.

The particulars of Mormon culture add to the already daunting challenges listed above. Perhaps most seriously, there is little tolerance for suggestions and even interpretations from members. Doing so is seen as failing to “sustain Church leaders”, and teaching manuals explicitly caution teaching personal interpretation. The current manual Teaching, No Greater Call preserves a quote by then Elder Spencer W. Kimball from 1948: “There are those today who seem to take pride in disagreeing with the orthodox teachings of the Church and who present their own opinions which are at variance with the revealed truth. Some may be partially innocent in the matter; others are feeding their own egotism; and some seem to be deliberate. Men may think as they please, but they have no right to impose upon others their unorthodox views. Such persons should realize that their own souls are in jeopardy” The same manual adds J. Reuben Clark's caution, “We should not teach our private interpretation of gospel principles or the scriptures.” These quotes beg the question: what can we access **apart** from our own

interpretations? Another challenge lies in the marginalization quite explicit in these quotes of those who fail to affirm institutional interpretation.

These limitations intensify the need to work within current paradigms, at least to start. Such a conversation could produce differing approaches to change. I want to stress that all these steps are natural processes of the development of interpretation, religion, and culture. Religion, like all other institutions, evolves to meet the needs of new times and situations. I am suggesting proactively tapping into that progression, not injecting something foreign into the mix.

1. We can employ principles that are familiar and within current interpretation, but draw out new meanings, implications, and practices. A new interpretation of tradition is easier to accept than changing wording of an authoritative text. There is tension between maintaining enough fidelity to tradition to remain recognizable, and producing enough novelty to shift viewpoints.

2. We can engage in selective emphasis--using familiar principles to check others, highlighting productive and potent teachings most needed in our circumstances. The Givens' superb work *The God Who Weeps* is an example of this approach I hope will be widely embraced.

3. We can use unfamiliar parts of the tradition that will still be accepted as soon as they are unearthed... this is where current structures of authority and legitimization can work to our benefit. Presenting new narratives of familiar historical events for example can bring our expectations into closer conformity with historical data, aligns the stories with the types of spiritual experiences more of us have, and shift our expectations in a way that better prepares us to meet the challenges of our life. In short, we can make our teaching of tradition more nourishing and effective. The "Gospel Topics" recently released by the Church would be an example of this approach.

4. We can use the principles and tools of the tradition to reform it more fundamentally when needed. In theory, or perhaps better in theology, Mormonism holds all the tools for even fundamental change.

When exploring the potential of Mormonism to adapt, a key element of the thought exercise could be to ask "What clarifications and revisions of doctrine and policy would fully believing, active members embrace *if* those changes were proclaimed by President Monson from the General Conference pulpit?" Given Mormonism claims continuing revelation, open canon, and revered leaders, what kinds of changes *couldn't* be implemented?!

And this need brings us back to our hypothetical mediation of worldviews, our literal believer and sympathetic atheist. We can carry out this experiment in our own lives. First, we have elements of belief and doubt in ourselves. If we align more with literal belief, we can ask ourselves, "What if I am wrong? What if reality doesn't turn out the way I expect?" If we would

make the same decisions even if our worldviews proved false, we can know we are living according to values and goodness that endure beyond truth claims.

If we align more with doubt, we can contemplate the benefits of belief, even if we don't agree with the details undergirding those outcomes. No matter where we stand on the spectrum, utilizing the lens of both believer and skeptic increases both our access to the richness of life and our ability to communicate with others, which brings us to our final step.

"Mediation Mormonism" has already arrived, though it remains to be integrated into the institutional Church. Grant Hardy explores the Book of Mormon in a way that allows for but does not require historicity. Neylan McBaine and Kate Kelly both use current LDS interpretation and policies to advocate for diminished gender inequality in the Church. Taylor Petrey has articulated possibilities to integrate same sex relationships into LDS theology. Other scholars have nuanced views of the Apostasy. Terryl and Fiona Givens have forged room for questioning and doubt within mainstream Mormonism. Richard and Claudia Bushman and other heroes have pioneered a more honest Mormon history. In my own podcast, Engaging Gospel Doctrine, I have tried for over two years and hundreds of hours to teach Sunday School lessons in a way that would prove valuable to both believer and atheist. So far I have received expressions of appreciation from members of both groups.

We need each other. We want to belong; we want to be heard; we want to be respected as we are. We need community, and our heritage benefits from a respectful, open exchange between those of differing beliefs. Instead of bringing battering rams to the discussion, we can sit with one another, speak the same language, and find points of agreement. This process will transform both us and our traditions, bringing us all to greater truth and goodness.

Bonus: Articles of Faith 2.0

1 We believe in God, the Eternal Father and Eternal Mother, and in Their Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.

2 We believe that humans will be punished by their own sins, and not for Adam and Eve's transgression.

3 We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all humankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and covenants of the Gospel.

4 We believe that the first principles and covenants of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.

5 We believe that a person must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.

6 We believe in inspired organization patterned after the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.

7 We believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, and so forth.”

8 We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is transmitted and translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

9 We believe all that God has revealed, all that They do now reveal, and we believe that They will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

10 We believe in the gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that we will help renew the earth and restore its paradisiacal glory.

11: Keep same.

12 We believe in being subject to kings, queens, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.

13 We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all people; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things good

and true, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.