Leaving Mormonism

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1 Introduction

In March 2017, a counter-organisational website made national headlines after its release of internal documents belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (henceforth LDS) drew legal threats from the Church. MormonLeaks, a WikiLeaks inspired website launched in December 2016, released internal Church documents including financial records and memos that were largely ignored by Church officials. It was the March posting of a Power Point presentation detailing “issues and concerns leading people away from the gospel” (www.mormonleaks.io), however, that raised Church ire. Following a take-down order, the document was removed for a few days before being restored with an attorney’s letter. In the meanwhile, several media outlets had already captured and published the content. Both the content and the Church’s protection of the document suggest an organisational concern over member retention.

With 16.1 million members worldwide (Statistical Report 2017), the LDS, whose followers are commonly referred to as Mormons, is a rapidly growing faith and the only uniquely American religion to gain global acceptance. Like many faiths, the Church is concerned with new member conversion. In addition to children born into the faith each year, the church baptises nearly 250,000 new converts through their active missionary system (Statistical Report 2017). But, as new converts join, a number of the formerly faithful leave. The Pew Forum (2015) reports that Americans, particularly young adults, are leaving churches in record numbers, with a third of millennials reporting that they are religiously unaffiliated. This trend, coupled with the interest the Church has shown (through leaked documents) in reasons members leave makes a consideration of Mormon exit particularly pertinent.

2 Introducing the Case

Leaving Mormonism is, arguably, more complicated than abandoning less encompassing faiths. Unlike other faiths, the LDS is rigidly structured and

highly institutionalised, leaving little room for member individualism or disagreement. Church headquarters in Salt Lake City maintains tight controls over local ward operations including lessons, teachings, and cultural practices. Hinderaker (2015) and Hinderaker and O'Connor (2015) characterised the faith as *totalistic*, for its reach into members' lives. We defined totalistic memberships as value-based, identity formational, involving primary family and friend relationships, and requiring fealty.

To contemplate leaving Mormonism is to consider leaving behind fundamental and identity formational values, cultural practices, beliefs, and primary relationships.

The cultural and doctrinal practices of the LDS, arguably, foster a more totalistic membership than other churches. To begin, doctrine labels those who leave the faith as apostates, a sin that separates the former member from both God and faithful family members eternally. Scripture teaches: "But whoso breaketh this covenant after he hath received it, and altogether turneth therefrom, shall not have forgiveness of sins in this world nor in the world to come" (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 84:41), and members "that are found to have apostatised, or to have been cut off from the church, as well as the lesser priesthood, or the members, in that day shall not find an inheritance among the saints of the Most High" (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 85:11). Mormonism is a religion based in the doctrine of apostasy. The church considers itself a restoration faith, a re-establishment of God's one true church and priesthood authority on Earth. Rejection of the gospel is akin to rejecting God—a sin that cannot be atoned in death. Eternal separation from family members, further, is doctrinally dictated by the Mormon practice of temple marriage, which seals spouses and all children born of their marriage together eternally (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 132:19). Breaking the covenant of temple endowment, thus, endangers the eternal family.

The cultural practices of Mormonism create a tight-knit religious community that is consuming of the member's life. Members are expected to maintain organisational values in their everyday lives that include austerity and refraining from coarse language, alcohol, cigarettes, and caffeine. Faithful members who attend temple wear sacred garments daily under all clothing as a constant reminder of their covenant with God. Givens (1997) noted that Mormons spend more time in church than other faiths, both attending multiple hour services on Sunday and engaging in weekday church activities. Shipp (2000) connected the strong sense of Mormon community to the Church's history of communal living and separation. She likened the Mormon move to Utah in 1847 to an American diaspora that created a culture of self-reliance that the current church still retains.

The 2011 Pew Research Center report on Mormons in America (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, 2011) supported the modern Mormon communal identity Givens (1997) and Shipps (2000) promoted. The report noted that 82 percent still say that their religion is very important in their everyday lives, and 77 percent say that they wholeheartedly believe all of the faith's teachings. This connection to the Church is demonstrated even more starkly in the Pew report's finding that 85 percent of married Mormons are married to other Mormons; a percentage higher than that of other faiths including Catholics (78 percent). Further, 57 percent of Mormons surveyed at large, and 73 percent of those living in Utah said that most or all of their friends are Mormon. The Pew report notes that while Mormons indicate high levels of community and religious commitment, non-Mormons still criticise the faith, most frequently using the word "cult" to describe it. Shipps (2000) and Givens (1997) both attributed modern public perceptions of Mormonism as a cult to the communal and polygamist history of the faith, and noted that this criticism serves to create the modern Mormon identity. These historical and doctrinal roots of the Mormon faith serve to tether the member tightly to the church, and make exit both risky and difficult.

3 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Considered from a communicative standpoint, organisational exit is situated within Jablin's (1984, 1987, 2001) phasic model of assimilation (anticipatory socialisation, encounter, metamorphosis, exit). Assimilation literature recognises the inherent tie between socialisation and later exit. Values instilled in the socialisation process are the ties that members must break during exit. Jablin advanced the study of exit (2001) with addition of a staged model of exit including preannouncement, announcement/exit, and post-exit organisational sensemaking. Research in corporate environments has treated exit as failure to metamorphose (Carr et al. 2006; DiSanza 1995; Gibson and Papa 2000; Jablin 1984; Myers 2005), or the "inevitable conclusion" (Kramer 2010: 186) of membership. The notable exception was Kramer's (2011) study of volunteers leaving a choir. His finding that volunteers simply stopped showing up, leaving the door open to future return, suggested that unpaid members engage in a fluid exit that does not involve a formal announcement, or a difficult post-exit sensemaking. My own work studying exit from the LDS (Hinderaker 2015; Hinderaker and O'Connor 2015), however, suggests that the process of leaving a totalistic faith community mirrors neither the phasic nature of corporate exit, nor the fluid exit of volunteers.

To exit a totalistic faith is to leave not only an organisation, but the core identity. Research on religious exit has articulated this tie to identity. In their study of Orthodox Judaism, Davidman and Greil (2007) noted that exit entails leaving behind the cultural script taught to describe religious identities, leaving ex-members without a language to describe their new selves. Avance (2013) treated online exit stories as expressions of deconversion testimony that allow construction of a new ex-Mormon identity. Many such websites exist, providing a glance at the lived experiences of those leaving faiths.¹

4 New Findings Focusing on “Leaving Religion”

Findings presented here represent a combined summary of data from my previously published works on leaving Mormonism (Hinderaker 2015; Hinderaker and O'Connor 2015) to offer the reader a broader picture of apostasy and exit from the LDS. All quotations are taken from these two works. The findings summary presented here represents a combined data set of 100 narratives gathered over a two-year period from online communities (www.postmormon.org and www.exmormon.org), and analysed as microstories, or single tellings of lived experiences. Boje advanced the use of microstoria analysis as a rich reading of stories not of the elite of an organisation, but of the “little people” (Boje 2001: 45) living within organisational confines. Boje (2001) refers to this bottom-up constructed narrative as “antenarrative,” or outside the predominant organisational story, but predictive of future narrative. Consistent with Boje’s method, narratives in the studies summarised here were coded with an abductive process that assumes an organisational truth as members experience it, and an approximate truth of theory’s ability to predict and explain based on previous literature, then coded for emic typologies to compare to existing research. Analysis provides, then, a picture of both individual exit experiences, and a larger grand narrative of leaving Mormonism.

The narrative of exit that emerged mirrored neither the corporate exit of previous research, nor the fluid volunteer exit process Kramer (2011) observed. Exit was described as a “journey,” or “traveling the road out” that was neither short nor linear. Rather, former Mormons described initiating, stopping, then reinitiating the exit process multiple times. Exit was reached through

¹ A number of ex-Mormon online communities exist including exmormon.org, postmormon.org. Sites for former members to connect in real life or on social media include exmormonsunite.com, an ex-Mormon Meetup.com page, and a Facebook group for ex-Mormons.

a prolonged process of testing exit, returning to faith, renewed doubt, and re-initiation of the exit process. Mormons experienced exit as a series of stoppages as they quit one part of their faith at a time, stopping one activity such as tithing, then, another like going to temple or activities at the church. The narratives described a sense of daring at each stoppage. As one writer expressed, "I started testing the waters. I wasn't attending church, and nothing bad had happened to my family. So I quit paying tithing, just to see if we would immediately burn in hell. Nope, we didn't."

Where corporate exit research reflects a pre-announcement period of communicative sensemaking about the decision to leave, Mormons did not describe discussing the potential exit with friends, family, or other members. Rather, the pre-announcement period was prolonged and agonising, involving years of self-doubt and silencing. While all narratives analysed discussed a level of disbelief, the decision to exit was often triggered by a particular event that precipitated a period of scrutinising formerly repressed doubts to doctrine. Catalytic events engendered a sudden change in attitude towards the Church and were described in terms of enlightenment: "the veil lifted," "I saw the light," or a "light bulb moment." Rather than turning towards faith for comfort, ex-Mormons described traumatic events as an impetus to beginning the exit process, particularly when clergy and church leadership reacted in ways members felt inappropriate. One writer questioned her place in the church after her husband died and clergy would not allow his closest friends, who were ex-communicated former Mormons, to speak at the funeral. Members experiencing divorce or other familial struggle described doubting the doctrine of eternal marriage, and thus the Church. One woman described talking to her bishop about domestic violence, and beginning her exit after the bishop told her to pray harder and make her husband a cherry pie. Violence or sexual abuse, particularly if dismissed by clergy, became catalysts to doubt that eventually led the member out of the faith. Even when not linked to perceived trauma, Mormons described beginning the process of exit after uncompassionate clerical encounters. One writer described beginning a two-month period of confusion and doubts after a ward leader told him "that the bishopric preferred the church services that our family did not attend" because his disabled son was disruptive.

Disbelief in doctrine separate from perceived trauma was a gradual process of disillusionment. Writers described learning of particular pieces of church history that they found distasteful or unbelievable, then embarking on research that provoked deeper doubts. Historical works that contradicted Church history, such as Native American history that contradicted the Book of Mormon, which teaches that Christ and early civilisations interacted in North America, were particularly likely to induce doubt. Members questioned temple ceremonies, which they described as "weird," "bizarre," or "cultish," and

cultural practices such as the prohibition of coffee. As one writer put it, "I had a hard time reconciling Mormonism with rational thought—why certain things were necessary. Why would God require certain things to get into heaven?"

The deep doubts expressed by exiting Mormons stands in sharp contrast to exit research in corporate or volunteer environments (Jablin 2001; Kramer 2010; Kramer 2011). As Mormons found themselves unable to either believe or practice their faith, they expressed feelings of personal inadequacy, or failure, shifting the narrative from flawed doctrine to self-indictment. Inability to believe was rationalised not as erroneous teachings, but as personal unworthiness that they feared might be punishable by God. One woman miscarried a child while contemplating exit, and wrote, "I never told a soul but secretly I believed that maybe God didn't want me to have children because of my not being valiant in the pre-existence." In the midst of self-doubt, members expressed fears that kept them from leaving the faith. Nearly all of the narratives analysed included fear of family rejection or retaliation for leaving the faith. As one member wrote, "my motivation at the time wasn't from some burning testimony—it was from fear. I was afraid they would quit loving me."

Where organisational exit literature expects communication with peers and family to rationalise the exit decision, Mormons neither communicated doubts, nor announced their exit. Doubts were instead willfully concealed, while working to maintain an outward appearance of faith. Members referred to wearing a "Mormon mask" to feign an appearance of faithfulness, meanwhile undertaking a lone effort of exit. As one member wrote, "somehow it just never all tied together for me. Internally it never felt quite right, yet I continued to live dualistically, ever the strong, active Mormon under the weight of so many doubts." Several men described concealing their doubts even while serving active missions and baptising other members. When members finally separated from the Church, they did so quietly, choosing to announce the decision only after they had completely stopped practicing. In the aftermath of exit, Mormons described family rejections and loss of friends that legitimised earlier fears. One woman described her mother shutting her out for months. Other members described family arguments that turned into long-term feuds. Many described a sense of grief at the loss of Church rituals and practices, a sense of missing something that was formerly fundamental in their lives. More positive effects of exit included feeling internal peace and growth of new relationships with non-Mormons.

The prolonged and oscillating exit process Mormons described suggests two considerations for study of religious exit. First, results suggest a more nuanced view of organisational exit than corporate literature suggests. The process of exit from Mormonism suggests that where the stakes of exit are high, members engage in a non-communicative pattern of active concealment. Second, the

exit process is intrinsically tied to the reach of a faith organisation into the members' lives. Where organisational values are deeply ingrained by a rigid assimilation process, the process of exit is neither simple nor finite.

Current phasic models of exit suggest a linear and defined process of communicative sensemaking, announcement, and severing of ties. The process of Mormon exit, however, mirrored neither this phasic model, nor the more passive exit observed with volunteers (Kramer 2011). Mormons described a prolonged and oscillating exit marked by deep personal doubt that reinitiated faithfulness. Where Kramer (2010) treated organisational exit as an inevitable conclusion, a finite state wherein the exiter is either in or out, Mormon exit suggests exit is not a zero-sum game. Results suggests a more fluid view of exit for faith communities marked by retention of core religious identities. In the aftermath of exit, former Mormons with still-faithful family described continued attendance at Mormon family functions and participation in cultural Mormon practices. The sense of grief and loss former Mormons described, moreover, suggests that members retain attachments not only to ingrained faith values, but to cultural practices that may be tied to the core Mormon identity, a process Ebaugh (1988) likened to exiting not a position, but a role.

The active process of concealment Mormons engaged in suggest a link between the stakes of leaving and communication during exit. Where research in corporate exit reveals a communicative pattern of talking out the exit decision and weighing options with friends, family, and peers, Mormons masked both their contemplation of exit and their doubts. Employees and volunteers may quit assuming small responsibilities at a job or detach from coworkers when considering leaving. These actions represent visible cues that make others aware of the member's detachment. Unlike a job, however, partial participation in a totalistic faith is still viewed as apostasy. Mormons used the derogatory term "Jack Mormon" to describe the partially faithful, and described active masking of their tests to exit to avoid the perception. Mormons described displaying, in effect, hyper-metamorphosis, acting highly faithful while secretly exiting the Church. Concealment may be linked to the potentially high relational stakes of leaving a totalistic faith, as concealing the exit decision delays social penalties until the exit is final. The price, however, is a lack of support from peers during the exit process.

The process of exit from Mormonism suggests that the totalistic reach of organisational values into the members' lives is closely tied to the exit process. The consuming faith values, cultural practices, and primary relationships of Mormonism are not only symbols of membership, but constitute the member's foundational identity. Teachings for both children and new converts are designed to instill values at a core and identity formational level. The extent

to which an individual identifies with Church values during socialisation may relate to the propensity to exit. Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham (1988) found that children raised in highly religiously identified Mormon households were more like to remain active in the church for life than children raised in less identified Mormon homes. For those deeply identified who later exit, however, leaving represents leaving behind not only an organisational role, but also an elemental part of the self. The sense of grief and loss Mormons described after exit points to the loss of identity that leaves the exiter adrift once ties are severed. Leaving a totalistic faith involves an untethering from foundational beliefs that are not readily replaced with another faith. The former Mormon becomes an apostate, a classification carrying negative social connotations that highlight the social and cultural consequences that are distinct in totalistic exit. A few who leave the faith take to critiquing it. Many anti-Mormon writers are former members of the faith, including Jerald and Sandy Tanner, who Foster (1984) called “career apostates,” for their publication of multiple anti-church articles, books, and LDS documents.

5 Conclusion

Exit from Mormonism represents departure not from an organisation in the traditional sense, but from consuming values that constitute member identities. Findings on Mormon exit have implications for both faith organisations seeking to retain members, and for the scholarly study of faith exit. From an organisational standpoint, the catalysts to doubt and exit suggest an opportunity for clergy to respond to personal crises in ways that draw members towards faith, rather than turn them away. The self-doubt, grief, and loss of identity expressed by Mormons suggest that for scholars, a more careful consideration of the formation of religious identities is warranted. Where religious scholars have explored the difficulty of constructing an ex-member identity (Avance 2013; Davidman and Greil 2007), deeper understanding of religious identity socialisation, particularly in totalistic faiths, is necessary to understanding the process of exit.

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