TALLWOOD HIGH SCHOOL

To What Extent Can

Mormonism be Considered a

Cult by Mainstream Society?

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Abstract

People from all spades of life suffer from the disillusion of preconceived notions. As a result it is with great responsibility we approach the Church of Latter-Day Saints to decode the truth of whether or not Mormonism is a cult. By using scriptures from the Mormon Church such as the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine of Covenants*, and the *Journal of Discourses,* questions of racism, polygamy, and strict restrictions are aroused. African Americans purpose on Earth according to Mormonism is to stand in as Satan's representation on Earth. African Americans have a cursed lineage as their black skin is signification of the mark of Cain, according to the *Book of Mormon*. However, with such derogatory diction one could predict it is only because of the time period. With considerable research of prophets and captives of polygamy, it is found plural marriages have been condemned by the Church of Latter-Day Saints for hundreds of years. Therefore, to appropriately label a particular group one must understand that a cult by definition is only sense of great attentive care, homage, or worship to a faith. From specific sources and research, the Church of Latter-Day Saints is a cult, and the only condemnable acts are from the fundamental extremists.

Disclaimer

It is my goal through this project to not criticize Mormons for their beliefs, but to better understand others in attempt to end unfair judgment and bias. As a student of the Global Studies World Languages Academy, I have learned that everyone is unique and different. However, as global citizen, it is our duty to understand others and not judge on preconceived notions.

Introduction

In today's society, we are often swayed by the public opinion. Unable to make independent decisions, students suffer from a disillusion of what is right and wrong. People in the world today are clouded with the judgment reflected by the environment which they were raised. Creating personal and justifiable opinions and morals is an essential stepping stone in life. Judging books by their covers and drawing conclusions in today's society is reckless as we should be more accepting of others. One such question society asks when it comes to religion is if Mormonism is a cult. As religious scientists, is with deliberate intention one must open up the sacred texts of the Church of Latter-Day Saints and decode the truth. As 21st century thinkers in today's world it is our responsibility to approach cultures and ethics with open eyes.

The lives of most religious founders have come down to us, not as straight biography, but as sets of devotional myths and pious object lessons. The aim of these stories is not to inform the reader so much as to edify. As the Buddha once said, "the question of what the founder actually said or did is not among those that tend unto edification."[[1]](#endnote-1) And yet, as the great comparative religion scholar Mircea Eliade said, "Western thinkers have been willing to sacrifice everything including religious faith for the sake of pure knowledge. We want to know what happened, if we can, even if that should bar us from the manipulation of the traditional holy tales. But, as anyone who has embarked on the journey of historical discovery knows, the effort is not without a kind of modification of its own.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Times Past

The history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also referred to as the Mormon Church, had a rocky start as they claimed their founder, Joseph Smith, was a divine authority to which a historic church has been called "an abomination" as it was supposedly inspired by Satan. As the times evolved into the 20th century Mormons were viewed with accepting eyes, however, the label "cult" is still associated with reference to Mormonism today.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized with six founding members in Fayette, New York, on April 6, 1830. The earliest members were almost all family, friends, or neighbors of the Prophet Joseph Smith who was born and raised in New England. He sees God the Father and Jesus Christ in the First Vision in 1820. Later, an angel visits Joseph and calls him to be a prophet and to translate the *Book of Mormon* from golden plates of Nephi, ancient origins buried in a nearby hill.

Smith originally believed in a concept of heaven and hell for the after death. In 1833, however, he had another revelation that there would instead be three kingdoms: the Terrestrial, the Telestial, and the Celestial kingdoms to which all people would eventually be given when the world ended. Another place, the place of "no glory for all eternity" is termed 'outer darkness' for those who do not make it into one of the kingdoms.[[4]](#endnote-4)

According to the Mormon faith, having children is one major purpose of human life. The birth of each child provides the opportunity for a spirit-child of God to experience mortal life. This life is a form of test to show an individual's obedience to God and if they can receive the opportunity to advance toward a state of being that the apostle Peter called "the divine nature." As the *Bible* tells us Jesus came to earth born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus was the only one of God's spirit-children created by the Father in the flesh therefore he is divine.

Another important Mormon law performed by individuals known as temple officiators is endowment, which instructs Latter-day Saints in the meaning of life and death. The endowment allows worthy individuals to form special promises with God that involve respect and duty to strict ethical codes. These agreements are symbolized by ritual clothing used in temple ceremonies and by special clothes worn as underclothing. The endowment helps Mormons advance toward exaltation, the highest degree of salvation.

Mormon beliefs are based on ancient and modern revelations from God. Many of these revelations are recorded in scriptures. Although Mormons do accept the *Bible* into their re1igion they also have additional books which Mormons consider scriptures of God. These scriptures include the *Bible*, the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenant*s, and the *Pearl of Great Price*. The Latter-day Saints regard the *Bible* as the word of God, but they believe that it is an incomplete record of all that God said and did.

The *Book of Mormon* is a recorded history of three early groups of people who were from the western hemisphere. Mormons teach that the *Book of Mormon* was divinely inspired and regard it as Holy Scripture as it is believed to contain ancient prophets who lived from approximately 2600 BC to 421 AD. Joseph Smith claimed that the last contributor to the book by the name of Moroni buried the book in present day New York and returned in 1827 as an angel. As an angel, Moroni revealed the book to Smith and told him to translate the book and

restore Christ's church.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The *Journal of Discourses* is a 26-volume collection of public sermons by early leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints published in 1854. The first editions of the journal were published in England by George D. Watt, the stenographer of Brigham Young. The *Journal of Discourses* is not an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. It is a compilation of sermons and other materials from the early years of the Church, which were transcribed and then published. It includes practical advice as well as doctrinal discussion.

After the death of Smith, the leadership of the Latter-Day Saints passed to Brigham Young. He led a group of pioneers and settled in Salt Lake City in 1847. Throughout his life, Young founded many settlements over the western United States. Currently, the Church is led by a male president, who is also a living prophet, and a Quorum of 12 Apostles. The Church of Latter-Day Saints believe that women are not ordained to priesthood and do not have direct communication with God.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Satan's Representation

"But let them apostatize, and they will become gray-haired, wrinkled, and black, just like the Devil."[[7]](#endnote-7)

The above excerpt is a direct quote from Joseph Smith who is the first president, prophet, and founder of the Mormon Church. According to the Mormon faith when the "council of gods" were planning how to redeem mankind Jesus desired to save man through free choice, however, Lucifer or Satan objected and instead wished to force men to serve God. Lucifer offered to come down to Earth as the Son of God. However, Lucifer refused to follow the full plan of the Father and decided to change the terms of salvation, as a result he decided to deny men their assistance in attaining salvation and dethrone God.[[8]](#endnote-8) As a result a war broke out between the spirit children. Those who decided to side with Lucifer had their skin black and were referred to as the "cursed line." These less valiant and cursed individuals supposedly had spiritual restrictions placed 011 them in their pre-existence or before morality and "are known as negroes."[[9]](#endnote-9)

"Had I anything to do with the negro, I would confine them by strict law to their own

species, and put them on a national equalization."[[10]](#endnote-10)

Apostles of Mormonism have also supported the claims that those with black skin have “cursed lineage" as they represent Satan as a "seed of Cain" for their rebellion against God. Because of this "deliberate rebellion" African Americans were denied the privilege of priesthood as they were unworthy. This continued in effect until 1978. Under political pressure Spencer Kimball, the LDS president in 1978, claimed God had removed the curse and black men could now become Priests. This also contradicts the essential point of not only the *Book of Mormon* but also the *Bible* that the words of God are irreversible, however, by this altercation the God of Mormonism is apparently changing. Many argue with this point that everything is manipulated by the LDS presidents and nothing is the true word of God any longer. As it may be Christianity is all but a collection of stories of what God had spoken.

How is it that the words were not then also manipulated throughout the years and decades before publication? Everyone has a past whether it is good or bad. However, should they still be condemned for their previous actions? If Christians practice what they so dearly preach then what happened to forgiveness? If that is the case then the only quality you can truly hold in religion is faith. Therefore, it is an individual choice of what religion they would like to follow.

In defense of the Latter Day Saints the subject of racism at the time period in which the *Book of Mormon* was written is understandable to its generation. When the Mormon Church was first established Joseph Smith referred to African Americans to the rebellious niggers in the slave states[[11]](#endnote-11)' which was later reprinted by Mormon historians in the *History of the Church* to read the rebellious negroes in the slave states.[[12]](#endnote-12) This is a prime example of how the common slang of the era might have influenced Smith's word choice, whereas in today's society the mention of the term "nigger" is highly frowned upon. This may also be evidence of how history can be manipulated if the historians themselves change what was originally spoken.

*The Mormon Cult* by Jack Worthy evaluates the experience of growing up Mormon, this personal narrative tells the story of one man's disappointment with his faith and consequential excommunication from the Church of Latter-day Saints. This account reveals the apparent racism and sexism within the church and seeks to expose the controlling methods of indoctrination and the harsh process of excommunication. The basic beliefs of the religion are explained, personal stories and analyses are shared, and church authorities are cited to support the claims of extreme gender and racial discrimination. This book recounts the experience of a survivor who feels the duty to explain his truth.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Polygamy

A church member was once told an elder, "Sister Sarah, you are a regular Satan." In response to this the woman replies, "There are only two classes of Mormon women, devils and fools.”[[14]](#endnote-14) These significant conversations sparked a revolution in the hearts of nervous women who were imprisoned in the religious tradition known as polygamy. In an interview with a former victim of polygamy Carolyn Jessop revealed the horrors of one combine alone. Jessop claimed, "Everything you did was monitored and controlled and everybody reported on everyone else. It was a police state. You were not allowed to make decisions in your life. I had no power over my life or the lives of my children. It was a terrible way to live." Jessop explained how she was married at age eighteen and continued to have eight children with her husband and polygamist Merril Jessop. He has been reported to have multiple wives and children engaging in abuse towards not only Carolyn but her children. It was not until her daughters fourteenth birthday, when Merrill had claimed to change his marrying age to fourteen, that Jessop was compelled to get out of the combine, saying "I think it's [polygamy] a form of pedophilia hiding behind a religion as protection.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Carolyn Jessop was from a polygamous community in Texas that claims to follow The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Similar combines are located throughout the United States; however, these are only groups which have branched of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This combine was founded by Rulon Jeffs and built his original compound in Colorado City, Ariz., on the Utah border. His son, Warren Jeffs assumed the title of "President and Prophet and Revelator" and the absolute authority that came with the position. Jeffs was on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted list when he was captured in August 2006 while driving through Nevada in a Cadillac Escalade with one of his wives and his brother. Police said Jeffs had four computers, sixteen cell phones, various disguises and $55,000 in cash."[[16]](#endnote-16)

However, what this repost did not tell the public at first was why Jeffs was on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted List. Jeffs was put on trial on two counts of rape as an accomplice for his role in arranging a 2002 marriage between a fourteen year old girl and her nineteen year old first cousin, along with arranging marriages to other teenager girls to older men.[[17]](#endnote-17) Then on June 9, 2010, a state judge, at the request of the prosecutor, dismissed all charges without penalty of ever being retried on these allegations. Then in August 2011, he was convicted in San Angelo, TX of child sexual assault for intercourse with a 1 5-year-old as well as aggravated sexual assault for intercourse with a 12-year-old. During the sentencing phase his nephew testified to have been raped since he was 5 years old and his niece testified to have been raped since she was 7 years old. On August 9, 2011, Jeffs was convicted on two counts of sexual assault of a child and sentenced to life in prison.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Many opposing historians will agree that the conviction of women was through a secret policy to degrade them to the position they belonged to. As an essential doctrine of the church, polygamy would have never gained as much power as it did if it had not had been rigidly enforced as it was. Traditionally a woman's purpose was to merely stand in the shadows as an inferior creation and to simply add glory to his name and the man's kingdom if he was a Mormon of high respect.

As a former prophet Heber C. Kimball declared, "I think no more of taking another wife that I do of buying a cow, and if you want to build up the kingdom you must take more wives." As men are constantly urged by spiritual leader to "build up the kingdom," a double meaning referred to the historical well-being of the church, or to personal celestial glory. As Brigham Young stated, "If the women would not submit to polygamy, they should be eternally damned." It has also been recorded that Brigham Young himself told women they must not expect their husbands love because "it was enough honor to bear children to a Saint."[[19]](#endnote-19)

Young became governor of Utah in 1851 and instituted the practice of plural marriage, or polygamy, in 1852. This custom, though approved by Smith, was relentlessly criticized by other Americans. It endured for 40 years in the face of strong opposition from the United States government. Before 1890 it would be a considerable discussion that argues how polygamy degrades the status and liveliness of women only to glorify men. In 1890 the president of the church ordered members to refrain from contracting any marriages forbidden by the law of the land. By this time Utah had become part of the United States. Military conflicts led to the end of direct Mormon political control of the state. Plural marriages persist in a few isolated places in the West, though the groups that maintain the custom are not affiliated with the Mormons in Salt Lake City.[[20]](#endnote-20) Therefore, Mormon polygamy has not been a practice for more than 100 years.

With exception of the splinter groups who call themselves Mormons today who continue the practice of polygamy, including those in Carolyn Jessop's situation. Splinter groups of the Mormon church believe they are following die *Book of Mormon*. However, they are not officially connected with the Mormon Church in any way simply for the fact that plural marriage is an offense worthy of excommunication from the Mormon Church. Those Mormons who had already entered into plural marriages prior to 1890 continued to support each other in those marriages, but no more Mormon polygamous marriages have been performed since then.

The Word of Wisdom

"Werefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a low which was temporal; neither any man, no thee children of men, neither Adam, your father, whom I created." (Doctrine and Covenants 29:24)[[21]](#endnote-21)

The Latter Day Saints believe that physical and spiritual things have an influence on another. The Lord declared in the *Bible* that everyone takes care of their bodies as our bodies are gifts from God and necessary for happiness. From this derived Joseph Smith's instructions in the *Doctrine of Covenants* which sets moral laws which are encouraged and those which are commanded to avoid.

The Church of Latter Day Saints has eleven million members who must follow moral laws of their church which include sexual abstinence outside of marriage, stressing education, prohibition of abortion, intolerance for violence, and total avoidance of the use of illegal drugs,

wine, alcohol, and hot drinks (black tea and coffee).[[22]](#endnote-22) These rules were put in regulation because they were uihea1thy and would interfere with a persons relation to God. These severe

laws especially in society today are quoted to be the biggest reason as to why the Latter Day Saints are labeled as a dangerous cult.

However, because of this strict lifestyle, Mormons have the lowest teen pregnancy rates, abortion rates, and crime rates.[[23]](#endnote-23) The latest federal health figures in the 1997 rank Utah has the fewest births to unwed mothers at sixteen percent. The national average was over thirty percent. The next lowest state after Utah was Idaho, with twenty percent. Idaho has the second highest population of Mormons, with approximately one-third of the population belonging to the Church.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Samaritans of the Future

The Sunday School, the largest secondary organization, provides religious education for adults and children. The Women's Relief Society helps the sick and the poor, and directs women's activities.[[25]](#endnote-25) The Young Men and Young Women organizations provide programs for teenagers. The Primary Association sponsors classwork and recreation for children three to eleven years old.

The church operates an extensive educational system. It provides weekday religious education for high school students in schools located near public high schools in many states and in several other countries. The church conducts weekday religious organizations for Mormon students near college campuses. It also maintains fully accredited colleges and universities in Utah, Idaho, and the Pacific Islands. The best known of these is Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

Latter-day Saints assist aged, disabled, and unemployed members through a voluntary welfare program. Projects directed by the wards and stakes help the poor. Voluntary contributions from members and income from church-operated businesses support the church. Most members give a tithe which is one-tenth of their annual income to the church. This mandatory contribution to the church funds education and helps other Mormons to get jobs.

While in college, thousands of young men work without pay for 18 to 24 months in a worldwide missionary program. While in this program strict rules are put in place to keep the Youth pure. The mission is a one-two year voyage in a City with a group of other college Missionaries. In this time the boys obey to a strict schedule of when to wake up and when to be in bed. These young men are forbidden interaction with any friends and only allowed to email their families or call on Christmas and Mother's Day. These men follow an "elbow rule" which basically prohibits and extending length of time away from your roommate even within the house.[[26]](#endnote-26) Some argue that these young men should be allowed to be adults and exercise self-control on their own; however this system has worked throughout the decades.

What is a Cult?

According to J. Gordon Melton, "They were groups that just didn't fit, and they were termed cults. They were treated primarily as esoterica in American religion.[[27]](#endnote-27) Since the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830, many of its critics have accused The Church of Latter-Day Saints of being a cult. Indeed, this feeling was so strong in the early days of the Mormon Church that vicious enemies believed if Joseph Smith could only be taken out of the picture, then the movement would fall apart.

Nonetheless, to appropriately label a particular group one must fully understand what a cult really is by definition. It is essential that our sources for this understanding must be authoritative, scholarly, and largely objective. It is particularly important to carefully select these sources because anti-cult ministries or societies have also crafted their own definitions of the term "cult". There have been many religious cults where followers were captivated by a personality and that personality could convince his or her followers of nearly anything. This power has often been used in a destructive fashion, further adding to a negative connotation associated with the word.

So in response to this we will overlook these definitions and instead tap into history's definition of "cult" around the time of the creation of the Mormon Church. In order to eliminate bias on the definition of the term "cult" the 1828 edition of Webster's Dictionary would have been an excellent choice. Odd as it was the 1828 Webster's Dictionary did not contain the world "cult" in it. However, the 1913 and 1920 edition did contain the word "cult," any system of religious beliefs and ritual, it is usually in the sense of a great attentive care, homage, or worship to a faith.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The Oxford English Dictionary is widely regarded as the accepted authority on the English language. It is an unsurpassed guide to the meaning, history, and pronunciation of words throughout the English-speaking world. As a historical dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary is very different from those of current English. This means that the Oxford English Dictionary focuses on present-day meanings, but you will also find the history of individual words. According to this source a cult is a "formal religious variation, a religious system and its adherents, or a faddish devotion.[[29]](#endnote-29) It is only from mainstream society which individuals are given the pre-assumed notion that cults are evil. In society today the word cult is a dirty term referring to those who worship the devil or preform blood rituals.

Conclusion

The Church of Latter Day Saints in itself is not evil. In every organization and group there will always be the extremists. These extremists are the people who participate in outdated activities such as polygamy. Mormons are like any other good standing religion in the world.

In the narrative Under the Banner of Heaven by Jon Krakauer the extremes of Mormon beliefs are exposed, where 40,000 Mormon Fundamentalists still practice polygamy in isolated communities. Defying both civil authorities and the Mormon establishment in Salt Lake City, the renegade Leaders of these Taliban-like theocracies are extremists who act under the will of God as they defy civil authorities. Krakauer constructs a multi-layered, narrative of the delusion, polygamy, savage violence, and unyielding faith of Mormons today. He reveals the shadowy past and present morals of America's fastest growing religion, and raises challenging questions about the nature of religious belief.[[30]](#endnote-30) This novel however is not blaming The Church of Latter Day Saints in general, but singling out the fundamental extremists. A majority of the aspects we criticize Mormons over are either outdated or only practiced by the extremists.

Can Mormonism be considered a cult by mainstream society? By definition the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is without a doubt a cult. Just by being a religious System and by worshipping alone signifies Mormonism as a cult. This means that any religion which has adherents is categorized as a cult. The only condemnable acts made that are associated to Mormonism are from the fundamental extremists. Mainstream Society can be persuaded by any and every source of media that approaches it. As global citizens and 21st century thinkers it is our duty to expose these accusations and find out for ourselves the underlying truth. Mormonism is a cult.

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