

Purposeful Strangers: A Study of the ex-Mormon Narrative

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Introduction

The modern LDS Church is simultaneously lauded as an all-American, pro-democratic beacon of religious and political conservatism; suspected of being merely a large corporate shell interested in the growth not only of its membership roles but also its balance sheet; and held in contempt, largely by Evangelicals and other conservative Christians, who find both the doctrines and practices of Mormonism cultish at best and nefarious at worst. Nowhere is Mormonism's schizophrenic social position more evident than in the narratives of those who were once Mormon but have since left the LDS Church.

The personal exit from any organization, especially those which are socially controversial, tends to produce a very specific type of narrative which gives an account of an individual's experience within, and eventual withdrawal from the organization. This is especially true in the case of modern Mormonism. Vocal and seemingly motivated ex-Mormons produce and disseminate exit narratives, often written in the context of **pop**-psychological terminology such as *recovery* i.e. "Recovery from Mormonism", which describe in various ways their victimization at the hands of Mormonism generally and their subsequent movement from being victims to victors.

Vocal portion of ex-Mormon Culture

- Language
 - TBM – True Believing Mormon
 - The Morg – The Mormon Church
 - Morgbot – a “mindless” following Church believer
 - Mopologist – a Mormon apologist
 - TSCC – “The so-Called Church”
- Key Personalities
 - Bob McCue: ex-Mormonism intellectual – highly revered
 - Tal Bachman: popular music artist – consistently refers to Church President as “Cult Führer” and Church as “Loyalty Cult”
 - Richard Packham – considered an expert on Church History and Doctrine

Indeed, an entire ex-Mormon movement has emerged in the past decade developing its own unique social structure, language, and culture in the process.¹ Ex-Mormonism, as it were, has long-existed as a subset of a larger, and largely Evangelical counter-cult movement. This latest ex-Mormon iteration, however, is characterized by its mostly secular focus; and distrust, if not outright rejection, of not only LDS doctrinal literalism but most forms of religious conservatism as well.² Recent ex-Mormon narratives do not generally describe a process of what sociological literature would describe as “leave-taking” or “switching”; what Latter-day Saints would call being “inactive”, but rather, focus on the description of a fundamental shift away from what is perceived as rigid literalism to an unbounded scientific rationality. In this sense, members of the emerging ex-Mormon movement should be sociologically considered

¹ For example, there are cults of personality built up around prominent ex-Mormons and unique words such as TBM, the MORG, Morgbots, etc...

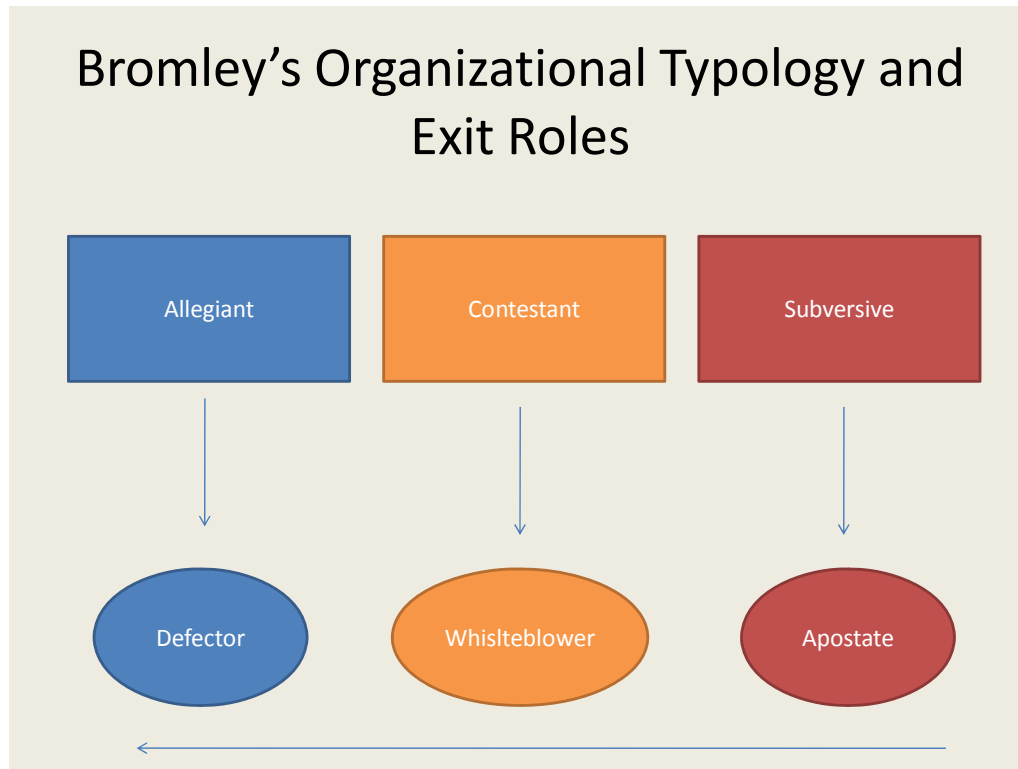
² It is important to note that there are conservative religious participants in the secular ex-Mormon movement but by and large, counter-cult ex-Mormonism and secular ex-Mormonism operate in separate and distinct spheres.

apostates although I hesitate to employ this label due to the extremely negative connotations this word has within the LDS community. Therefore, I wish to make it clear that throughout this presentation I use this word purely in a technical sense and in no way intend to attach inherent negative connotations to its meaning. The use of a word such as *apostate* in light of its significance and meaning in LDS history and culture may lead some to oversimplify what appear to be complex notions and descriptions of social and cultural estrangement found within the narratives of ex-Mormons and therefore, I urge listeners to avoid the temptation to hear and interpret this word in its non-technical and LDS-specific context.

This paper will examine the ex-Mormon narrative *as narrative* and will attempt to glean from this very specific literary form, insights into the culture of contemporary ex-Mormonism. This paper is not an attempt to explain the specific reasons why individuals leave or have left the LDS Church. As will be discussed shortly, after-the-fact narratives are inherently unreliable in establishing the authenticity of actual occurrence. Rather, this presentation seeks to explore the complex culture and mood of said narratives and identify areas and issues in need of further research and study.

This presentation is framed in the context of abstract concepts found in sociological literature dealing with the nature of religious apostasy. Accordingly, I will begin by presenting a very brief overview of relevant sociological theory and will attempt to place Mormonism, and particularly the modern LDS Church, within this larger conceptual framework.

Organization Type and Exit



David Bromley identifies three types of organizations and classifies them according to “the degree to which their interests coincide with other organization units in their respective environmental fields.”³ These include Allegiant, Contestant, and Subversive organizations respectively.⁴

Bromley observes that “all types of organizations experience some rate of participant exodus, and exiting participants are a potentially important source of information that could be

³ David G. Bromley, "The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles: Defectors, Whistleblowers and Apostates," in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (Westport, Connecticut London: Praeger, 1998), 21.

⁴ It is essential to note that these classifications constitute a continuum and therefore, a single organization maybe classified as allegiant, contestant or subversive organization simultaneously. Ibid.

used to discredit the organization.”⁵ Therefore, organizations have incentive to control or manage the exit process of members as much as possible. Bromley argues that “whatever the nature of individual or situational motivations...organizations in the low-tension positions are most likely to be able to control the exit process as to prevent public dispute, while organizations in a high-tension position are much less likely to be able to do so.” Thus, Bromley “[identifies] three distinctive contested exit roles – Defector, Whistleblower, and Apostate – that are characteristic of Allegiant, Contestant, and Subversive organizations, respectively.” Each type of exit has its own unique set of characteristics and produces its own type of narrative.

Most relevant to our discussion here however, is Bromley’s description of the Apostate role as it relates to Subversive organizations. Unlike Defectors and Whistleblowers, Apostates “[undertake] a total change of loyalties by allying with one or more elements of an oppositional coalition without the consent or control of the organization.” Thus “the [apostate] narrative is one which documents the quintessentially evil essence of the apostate’s former organization chronicled through the apostate’s personal experience of capture and ultimate escape [and] rescue.”⁶

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

The Apostate “*Captivity Narrative*”

’Captivity narrative’ in which apostates assert that they were innocently or naively operating in what they had every reason to believe was a normal, secure social site; were subjected to overpowering subversive techniques; endured a period of subjugation during which they experienced tribulation and humiliation; ultimately effected escape or rescue from the organization; and subsequently renounced their former loyalties and [therefore], [issue] a public warning of the dangers of the former organization as a matter of civic responsibility.

Due to a “polarized situation and power imbalance, there is considerable pressure on individuals exiting Subversive organizations to negotiate a narrative with the oppositional coalition that offers an acceptable explanation for participation in the organization and for now once again reversing loyalties.”⁷ The most common apostate narrative can be classified as:

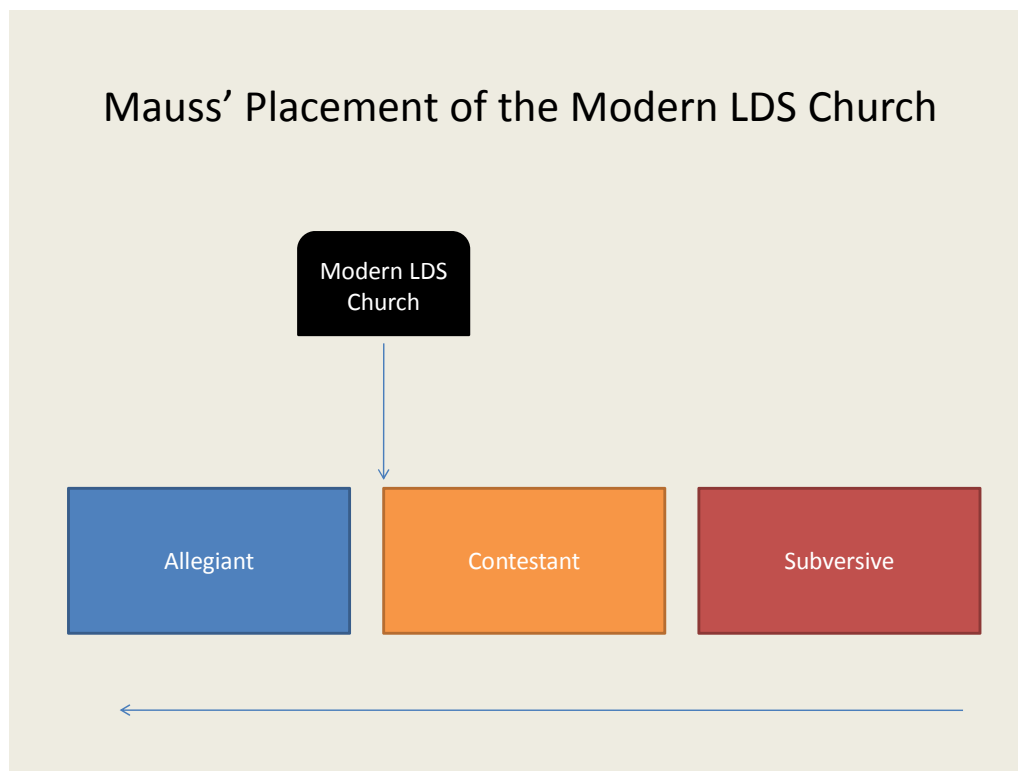
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Upon exiting a subversive organization, apostates assume a “newly constructed role [which places them] in a position that is diametrically opposed to [their] former beliefs and

⁷ Ibid., 37.

commitment.”⁸ Consequently “the apostate seeks to polarize the former and present identities, accentuating a personal transformation akin to conversion” and “the intensity and zeal in which the apostate embraces the new moral vision, seeks atonement through public confession and testimony, and makes salvific claims of redemption ... suggest that the ex-member’s new affiliation may be analyzed as a type of quasi-religious conversion in its own right.” Indeed “it is typically characterized as a darkness-to-light personal transformation.”

Mauss’ Placement of the LDS Church in a Modern Context



We can utilize Bromley’s typology in two distinct ways when considering the LDS Church: first, in what I term this historical progression model and second by employing what I

⁸ Stuart A. Wright, "Exploring Factors That Shape the Apostate Role," in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (Westport, Connecticut London: Praeger, 1998), 97.

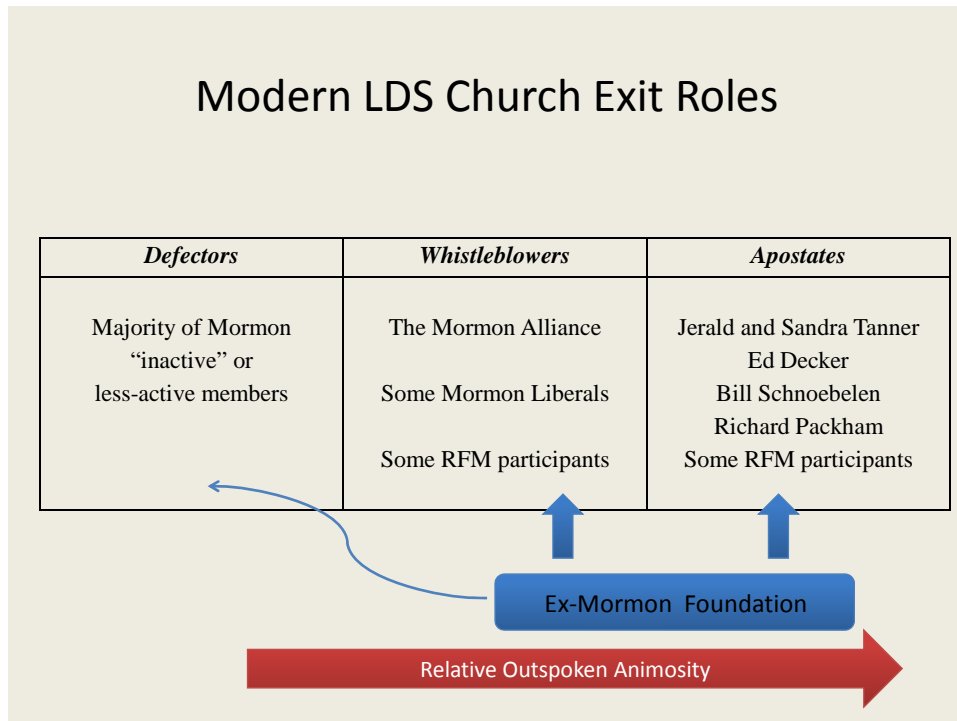
have labeled the societal segment analysis. Armand Mauss, in his book *The Angel and the Beehive*, gives a thorough account of the LDS Church's social positioning through time; societies' reaction to this positioning; and the various levels of tension which have existed at various stages of LDS Church development.⁹ In general, the LDS Church has gone from being considered a highly subversive organization (due mostly to plural marriage and fears of tyrannical leadership dynamics) from 1830 to the early 1900's; to experiencing high levels of assimilation through the 1950's; and has more recently, through what Mauss calls a "retrenchment motif", assumed a position "somewhere between Allegiant and Contestant, perhaps closer to the latter."¹⁰

The use of historical progression model is extremely useful if we are attempting to identify modern Mormonism within a static position along Bromley's organizational typology. Clearly, the LDS Church would fit, as Mauss has indicated, between the Contestant and Allegiant organizational types due to the moderate-to-low tension experienced *in general* with society at large. Yet we must also recognize that there are some segments of society which view the modern LDS Church as highly-subversive. It is from these segments that ex-Mormon apostate narratives emerge and demonstrate characteristics of Bromley's proposed narrative structure.

⁹ Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive, the Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

¹⁰ ———, "Apostasy and the Management of Spoiled Identity," in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (Westport, London: Praeger, 1998), 53.

LDS Church As Subversive: The Societal Segment Analysis



The modern LDS church simultaneously produces the three types of exit Bromley has identified. Namely: Defectors – those whom we would call less-active Latter-day Saints; Whistleblowers – best characterized by groups such as the Mormon Alliance; and Apostates – former Mormons who align themselves with oppositional coalitions who are set against Mormonism in one way or another.

Evangelical Mormon critics find the modern LDS Church subversive on mostly theological grounds. They reason that because the beliefs and practices of the Church are so beyond what could be considered traditional Christianity, that individual Mormons are in spiritual danger and that their eternal souls are in jeopardy. Consequently, these groups are

generally formed as ministries to help “witness to Mormons” about the “real Jesus” in an effort to bring them out of Mormonism.¹¹

The Ex-Mormon Foundation

- Leadership:
 - Richard Packham: Founder of the ex-Mormon Foundation – considers some of the cultural and doctrinal results of Mormonism to be “evil.”
 - President: Chad Spjut
 - Secretary: Kathleen Jones
 - Treasurer: Dianne Ormond
 - Membership Secretary: Nathan Kennard
- Board Members:
 - Jarom Smith
 - Tom Donofrio – proponent of Spaulding theory – has done very valuable research into revolutionary war documents as they relate to the BoM.
 - Sue Emmett
- Loose alliances:
 - Recovery from Mormonism – RFM – exmormon.org
 - Postmormon.org

Secular Mormon critics have no singular focus or uniting motive to match the intent and zeal of Evangelicals. Richard Packham, the founder of the ex-Mormon Foundation, is an avowed atheist and thus has no theological motive; however, he has stated that he believes some results of Mormon doctrine and culture can be considered “evil”.¹² Therefore, his aim and in broad terms the purpose of the foundation is to help people wishing to leave the Church; transition out of Mormonism into leading “normal lives” in a purely secular sense.

It is from these two distinctive groups; the Evangelical and secular Mormon critics, which view the modern LDS Church as subversive; that LDS apostate narratives emerge. Rather than simply transition out of Mormonism or become “inactive” or “less-active”; ex-Mormon

¹¹ <http://www.concenredchristians.com>, <http://www.utlm.org>, <http://www.lifeafter.org>

¹² Richard Packham, "Reflections of an Old Apostate in a Brave New World" (paper presented at the Exmormon Foundation Annual Conference: A Brave New World, Salt Lake City, 2005).

apostates make a conscious and clear break with the LDS Church as an institution and align with either theological or secular oppositional coalitions through the process of narrative production.

Loosely speaking, the writing of a narrative serves as a kind of “rite of passage” wherein authors become members of a new-found community. The construction of such a narrative for “admittance” into a new community is not surprising. In Bromley’s conceptual framework, the ex-Mormon foundation and their theological counterparts act as “oppositional coalitions” to the LDS Church and thus, “upon the rendering of an acceptable narrative, [these groups accept] pledges and tests of loyalty and professions of regret as the basis for reintegration into social networks to which [they] control access.”¹³ Of course in the case, such requirements are certainly not explicit but very often – becoming a part of an ex-Mormon community; be it theological or secular – begins with narrative production.

With this general sociological and societal framework in mind, we can now look closely at the ex-Mormon narrative in detail.

The Ex-Mormon Narrative

It is a fascinating sociological phenomenon that the narratives of both entry and exit from religious movements are mirror images of one another. Both describe the circumstances and context which brought about an eventual epiphany which led either into or out of, a particular organization.

When analyzing the ex-Mormon narrative it is essential to place the narrative in the proper sociological context. Several researchers have pointed out the inherent unreliability of

¹³ Bromley, "The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles: Defectors, Whistleblowers and Apostates," 37.

apostate narratives in establishing fact.¹⁴ Daniel Johnson goes as far to say that “substantial portions of apostate accounts – indeed, perhaps even entire accounts – have nothing to do with ‘real-world happenings or experiences.’”¹⁵ Johnson’s conclusion comes from his analysis of anti-Catholic narratives from the 19th century which were produced when the Catholic Church was considered highly-subversive by American society at-large. In such an extreme anti-Catholic atmosphere it is not surprising that Catholic apostates were able to construct narratives containing blatant fabrications because during this time there were essentially no defenders of the Catholic Church to question these narratives or act as a check on their reliability. Such was the case with late 19th century Mormonism as well when wild apostate narratives were produced and widely accepted because Mormonism had no societal credibility and the public was eager to believe anything negative or salacious about the Church.

Such is not the case with modern Mormonism. First, there is an entire industry of Mormon apologetics which has sprung up to counter both anti-Mormon claims and ex-Mormon narratives. Additionally individual Mormons have become successful and admired members of society and therefore, the public is generally more skeptical of wild claims made against the Church. In general, the Mormon exit narratives which originate from secular anti-Mormon sources are less likely to contain blatant narrative fabrications while those produced by members of theological anti-Mormon groups are more likely to contain fabrications which further the narrative’s evangelical purpose.

¹⁴ See : Daniel Carson Johnson, "Apostates Who Never Were: The Social Construction of Absque Facto Apostate Narratives," in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (Westport, Connecticut London: Praeger, 1998). And Lewis F. Carter, "Carries of Tales: On Assessing Credibility of Apostate and Other Outside Accounts of Religious Practices," in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy, the Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (London and Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998).

¹⁵ Johnson, "Apostates Who Never Were: The Social Construction of Absque Facto Apostate Narratives," 135-36.

Even if, however, we determine that a narrative is more or less likely to contain blatant fabrication, we must not look to the narrative as a source of actual fact but rather, consider them as only part of a much larger picture. Lewis Carter points out that “believers [are] much more likely to minimize or ignore negative traits in a community” while “apostates [are] more likely to identify negative traits which the group [does] not in fact exhibit.”¹⁶ It is for this reason that I am not attempting to establish fact or reach conclusions on “real-world happenings” from this study. Rather, I am looking to these ex-Mormon narratives as cultural signposts which provide insight into ex-Mormonism itself, rather than as definitive indicators of specific “problems” within modern Mormonism. These narratives are not sufficiently explanatory of the reasons why individuals exit Mormonism; and therefore, any attempt to construe the data presented here to reach this type of conclusion would be extremely misguided. **This is not to suggest that the reasons for leaving Mormonism as given in these narrative are inauthentic or untrue. However, in order to reach the conclusion that such reasons are substantive – the data presented here must be validated by further sociological study.**

¹⁶ Carter, "Carries of Tales: On Assessing Credibility of Apostate and Other Outside Accounts of Religious Practices," 222.

Methodology and Sources

Methodology

- Preliminary or Pilot Study
- Sources *not* selected or solicited randomly, nor screened for bias
- 136 narratives analyzed
 - 145 unique narrative elements identified
 - One-to-many relationship between narratives and elements

This study should be considered a preliminary or pilot study. The data presented here represent only the narratives directly considered by the study. Therefore, the data is not meant to be extrapolated to apply to *all* ex-Mormon narratives. The sources used in this study were selected neither randomly nor screened for bias.

A total of 136 narratives were collected and analyzed for this study. A corresponding list of narrative elements was created simultaneously to represent the content or themes of each narrative. Ultimately, 145 unique narrative elements were identified. As each narrative was read and analyzed, it was associated with corresponding elements. Thus, there is a one-to-many relationship between narratives and elements.

Sources

- Recovery from Mormonism – exmormon.org
 - 111 unique narratives
- Evangelical Ministries: Concerned Christians, Life After
 - 26 unique narratives
 - 25% contain blatant fabrications
- Narratives from both sources exhibit similar structure

All narratives were selected from online collections including www.exmormon.org , www.concernedchristians.com, and www.lifeafter.org. Recovery from Mormonism which I will hereafter refer to as RFM, had the largest collection of narratives or “stories.” I was able to identify and extract 111 unique narratives from the main sections of the RFM board.¹⁷

Stories collected from Concerned Christians and Life After Ministries are much shorter and more focused than those narratives found at RFM. Not surprisingly, these narratives are formulaic and clearly written with the mission of the host organization in mind. Concerned Christians and Life After ministries both state explicitly that their goal is convert Mormons to the “real Jesus” whereas RFM’s stated goals are more support-oriented rather than evangelical. It is

¹⁷ RFM also makes available a bulletin board system where anyone can post their exit stories and to date, this board hosts over 600 postings. These individual postings tend to be less organized and of a lower quality than the stories posted on RFM’s main site. Often, they focus on one aspect of an individual’s exit and some postings do not deal directly with exiting Mormonism at all. By contrast, the stories posted on the main site are well constructed and more representative of the traditional “apostate narrative.” Each has a consistent flow and a clear beginning, middle, and end. Thus, I limited my study to these higher-quality narratives rather than index and analyze the lesser quality bulletin board postings.

important to note that I reviewed the RFM narratives first, followed by Life After and Concerned Christians. Also, that I did not recognize or find blatant narrative fabrications until reviewing the Life After and Concerned Christian narratives. This is not to suggest that the RFM narratives do not contain inaccuracies or possible misrepresentations but rather; that the evangelical narratives at times introduce blatant fabrications to further the purpose of the narrative and to reinforce the narratives' overriding evangelical themes. RFM narratives do not possess any consistent and overriding organizational theme and therefore; fabrications of this kind would be superfluous. Blatant fabrications appear to be absent from the RFM narratives yet are present in 25% of the evangelical narratives examined in this study.

Ex-Mormon Narrative Structure

The narratives examined in this study each exhibit a similar structure and format and contain several common elements regardless of their source. There are several possible reasons for this common structure. In the case of RFM, narrative authors are likely highly-influenced by reading other narratives and thus the stories posted in 1995 and 1996 during the genesis of the site, likely established a pattern for later narratives. Likewise, the evangelical narratives were written with a very specific purpose in mind and consequently are structured as testimonials which serve the overall purpose of the hosting ministry.

A second possibility for the common narrative structure is that Ex-Mormons do in fact share a common experience in exiting the LDS Church. I suspect that both factors come into play in the construction of ex-Mormon narratives. **To me, most of the narratives reviewed in this study possess an “air of authenticity” which I judge by my years of involvement with the LDS Church and those marginal to it. Thus, while the format and structure of these**

narratives may be somewhat artificial, I believe that the general feeling behind the accounts and the described process of apostasy is very likely authentic.

Introduction – Establishing Credibility

Introduction – Establishing Credibility

Introduction Elements	<i>RFM</i>		<i>Evangelical</i>	
	%	n	%	n
<i>Born/Raised LDS</i>	52%	58	48%	12
<i>LDS Convert</i>	20%	22	16%	4
<i>Pioneer Ancestry</i>	11%	12	8%	2
<i>Attended BYU</i>	17%	19	4%	1
<i>Served Full Time Mission</i>	24%	27	0%	0
<i>Seminary/Institute Attendance</i>	10%	11	12%	3
<i>Bishop</i>	2%	2	0%	0
<i>Relief Society President</i>	2%	2	4%	1
<i>Temple Worker</i>	2%	2	0%	0
Total Narratives		111		25

These narratives generally begin with some sort of introduction which states the purpose for writing and serves to legitimize the story which will follow. The author often states how long he/she was a member of the LDS Church, if he/she was a convert or born into the church and if born into the church will often cite LDS Pioneer ancestry. Additionally, the author may make mention of callings or positions they held or provide other indications of their “activity” level while a Latter-day Saint. In addition to specific church callings, this may include mention of seminary or institute attendance, full-time missionary service, or matriculation at Brigham

Young University. The narrative introduction often sits in sharp contrast to what comes later. The author generally wants to make it clear that at one point they were fully in Mormonism and now they are completely out.

Statement of Disenfranchisement or Detachment – “The Apology”

Cultural Estrangement Elements	<i>RFM</i>		<i>Evangelical</i>	
	%	n	%	n
<i>Never Received Testimony</i>	27%	30	20%	5
<i>Vulnerable at time of Conversion</i>	7%	8	12%	3
<i>Long-term Discontent</i>	7%	8	12%	3
<i>Doubt Validity of Spiritual Witness</i>	16%	18	8%	2
<i>Difficulty with Church Members</i>	34%	38	24%	6
<i>Free Thought Discouraged</i>	15%	17	0%	0
<i>Temple Experience Unsettling</i>	35%	39	20%	5
<i>"One True Church" Attitude</i>	14%	15	8%	2
<i>Homosexual</i>	6%	7	0%	0
<i>Feminist</i>	16%	18	0%	0
<i>Total Narratives</i>		<i>111</i>		<i>25</i>

Yet, while the author wants to illustrate that they were once fully Mormon, they also want to provide an explanation for why they once accepted beliefs which they now completely reject. In a sense, authors offer an “apology” or explanation for why they were once part of the LDS belief system. Also, authors often point out feelings of long-term discontent within Mormonism. For those authors who were born or raised LDS, they often include statements that a “testimony” of Mormon beliefs was never received or that the credibility of a “spiritual witness”, the key component of any Mormon testimony, should be seriously doubted. Nearly

50% of the narratives reviewed included some sort of indication that while the author may have fully active within Mormonism, they never fully accepted LDS beliefs. Of course, of equal importance is that 50% of these narratives *do not* describe long-term doubts or discomfort and thus I want to caution against the temptation to oversimplify these narratives by concluding that individual exits are driven mainly by lack of personal testimony. Those authors who were converts to the LDS Church often explain that at the time they joined Mormonism they were emotionally vulnerable from divorce, abuse, or some similar life-altering event and were taken in by the kindness of Mormon missionaries or LDS Church members. In fact, nearly 44% of authors which identified themselves as converts made a point to emphasize that they were vulnerable at the time of their conversion. Overall, these statements of long-term discontent and vulnerability function as a genesis for the author's account of the exit process and provide context for explaining how/why the exit process began.

When I began this study I expected that doctrinal issues or problems would be the driving force behind these exit narratives and the point of their focus; that somehow specific issues of LDS Church history or claims of scriptural literalism would force people to reconsider their faith in the face of difficult and daunting questions. What I found however, is that most of these narratives deal directly with issues of cultural pressure and disengagement and that the narrative authors generally address specific doctrinal concerns only in an after-the-fact manner. Additionally, the narratives focus on the results of discovering doctrinal difficulties – generally feelings of hurt, confusion, and anger – rather than on the doctrinal issues themselves. The evangelical narratives were much more likely to focus on specific doctrinal claims or disagreements – mostly citing how LDS Church doctrine is unbiblical – but even these narratives expressed that a sense of spiritual emptiness or cultural disenfranchisement was the beginning of

their exit out of Mormonism. It is important to keep in mind however that while the majority of these narratives describe a period of disenfranchisement, there were those narratives which described exiting Mormonism for purely doctrinal reasons. I would contend however, that since strict orthodoxy or at least the appearance thereof, is such a large part of LDS culture that when individuals adopt or confront heterodox views, they feel tremendous cultural pressure to either re-conform their belief or hide their doubts. Either choice seems to be untenable. In this way, it can be said that even concerns which begin as purely doctrinal or historical are likely to lead to some feelings of cultural pressure and disengagement at some point.

That these narratives would express such descriptions of cultural disenfranchisement is not surprising. Generally speaking, LDS culture is very specific in its requirements and there are clear, if not explicit expectations of what a Mormon “should” be. It is a common assumption within the LDS Church that Mormons become apostates because of their desire to violate certain commandments which are part of the LDS cultural norm including abstinence from pre-marital sex and the avoidance of alcohol, coffee, tea, and tobacco. Naturally, members who violate these norms will find themselves somewhat separate from Mormon culture and left with a feeling of estrangement. Some of this type of estrangement is described in these narratives. However, most descriptions of cultural estrangement are linked with issues of thought or belief, rather than specific violations of behavioral norms. Additionally, modern Mormon culture is theologically centered on the concepts of marriage and the nuclear family. Therefore, those within Mormonism who do not easily fit into these norms and expectations may find also themselves culturally estranged. Mormon culture also places much emphasis on acquiescence to authority and respect for a rigid hierarchical structure. Therefore, some narratives express frustration at what is perceived to be the suppression and discouragement of free thought in individual

members by the Church hierarchy. One author recounts how he was disciplined by a local Stake President for writing to Church headquarters expressing disagreement with the Church's political involvement in China. The author reports that he was repeatedly told by his Stake President that the "Bretheren hold the keys" therefore their decisions – even political decisions – are sanctioned by the Lord and that he, as a member of the Church, had no right to express disagreement.

Each narrative, in one way or another, expresses some sort of cultural estrangement between the individual and Mormon culture at-large which occurs either before or after the author discovers Mormon doctrinal and historical challenges. A widely held belief amongst some active Latter-day Saints is that apostates leave the Church because they are offended by leaders or other members. The narratives examined here lend support, at least in part, to that perception. Nearly 34% of narrative authors report having had a negative experience with other Church members who, for one reason or another, made them feel unwelcome, unworthy, or otherwise excluded from the Church community. Additionally, this includes accounts of the author observing or becoming aware of what they judge to be hypocritical behavior on the part of members of the LDS Church.

Other narratives report feelings of guilt or confusion over central LDS worship; mostly in regard to LDS Temple practices. From a young age, Mormons are encouraged to look forward to the day when they can worship and eventually marry in the Temple. 32% of the narratives reported discomfort with either their first Temple experience or Temple participation in general. Of these, most described the Temple experience as being odd, unspiritual, and even upsetting. It is unclear how many authors experienced the pre-1990 Temple endowment versus the more modern version.

Discomfort with other key tenets of Mormon doctrine – including the position that the LDS Church is God’s “one true church” and that a testimony of the truth of this claim can be obtained through a spiritual experience – is also a common theme in these narratives. For example, one author reports that while serving a full-time mission in a Central American country he was confused by the seemingly authentic spiritual experience of a man who felt that he should *not* accept Mormon claims and join the LDS church. This author’s missionary companion explained that this man had been deceived by Satan but the author felt that the man had experienced a genuine revelation from God. Thus, the question: “How can Mormonism be the ‘one true church’ if non-Mormons experience authentic spiritual experiences confirming the truth of their faiths?” For those authors to whom faith is still important, they interpret these spiritual experiences as general expressions of God’s love and not as the confirmation of specific truth claims. However, most evangelical as well as RFM authors express significant doubt as to the validity of such spiritual confirmations of truth and explain them as being merely emotional responses. Evangelicals maintain that truth is to be found in the Bible while secular authors express confidence in reason and science.

Other authors report feeling culturally estranged because they were homosexual or held a strong Feminist ideology – two issues in which the modern LDS Church has adopted conservative doctrinal and social positions. A few female authors express that they felt unimportant because they were unmarried and had no children. In general, it seems as narrative authors were in some way marginal to Mormon culture. Of course, whether this represents genuine experience or is the product of the narrative creation process is a question worthy of further study.

Doctrinal Problems – “The Laundry List”

Doctrinal/Historical Problems – “The Laundry List”

Doctrinal and Historical Issues	<i>RFM</i>		<i>Evangelical</i>	
	%	n	%	n
<i>Unbiblical</i>	3%	3	48%	12
<i>Polygamy</i>	22%	24	20%	5
<i>Joseph Smith</i>	15%	17	8%	2
<i>Book of Mormon</i>	34%	38	16%	4
<i>Blacks and the Priesthood</i>	22%	24	16%	4
<i>Altered Church History</i>	27%	30	0%	0
<i>Adam-God Doctrine</i>	14%	16	0%	0
<i>Blood Atonement</i>	7%	8	4%	1
<i>Book of Abraham</i>	15%	17	12%	3
Total Narratives		111		25

The discussion of doctrinal issues and specific LDS truth claims is present in nearly all of the narratives but is generally proffered as an after-thought recitation. It is often the case that “Tanner” history is accepted and reported while the nuance of “Quinn” or “Compton” history is lost – at least in the narrative. This recitation generally follows the discussion of cultural estrangement and in many cases functions in the narrative to justify or validate the estrangement described previously. In only rare cases are doctrinal concerns and problems described as the **singular** genesis of the exit process. Rather, doctrinal and historical issues function to solidify or widen the gap between the author and Mormonism. However, doctrinal and historical concerns do seem to produce the most anger and frustration in the narratives because they evoke a sense of betrayal in the author. Such angst can be described thusly: an author has been taught a particular version of Church history or has built a conceptual world-view based on LDS truth

claims only to discover that (at least in the author's mind) he or she has been "lied" to regarding key elements of Mormon history and doctrine. The author generally blames Church leadership for the supposed cover-up and is apt to describe the whole affair in conspiratorial terms. It is this perceived cover-up which creates the vitriolic and often irrational criticism which is present not only in some of these these narratives, but also in parts of RFM community as well. By decrying a supposed LDS Church conspiracy and cover-up, some of these narrative authors actually create or speculate on secret Church motives and begin to interpret every Church action, both past and present, in terms of this conspiratorial framework. The adoption of this conspiratorial framework may impede or prevent a complete understanding of some of the issues at hand.¹⁸

Interestingly, I became the subject of a conspiracy theory after attending the ex-Mormon conference in Salt Lake City in October, 2007. During an open microphone period I rose to express my regret at how some active LDS members had treated those who have left the Church, and to tell attendees a bit about my ongoing research. I mentioned that I had discussed some of my preliminary findings some in Church leadership— in particular my dismay at how poorly it seems some ex-Mormons had been treated by friends and family while leaving the Church – and that the those leader's almost universal response to me was that we need to have "big arms in the Church" to welcome and accept those with disparate experiences and belief. I was hastily shouted down by some conference attendees before conference organizer Sue Emmett made a plea that I be heard out but eventually it became apparent that what I had to say was not to be received in that environment. At the conclusion of the conference an attendee posted his belief at post-mormon.com that I had been sent as a spy by LDS Church leadership to keep tabs on the growing ex-Mormon movement. Of course, had I actually been sent as a spy, I suppose getting up during the open microphone session and announcing my presence was likely not a wise

choice. Of course, I do not want to leave the impression that such wild conspiratorial views are characteristic of the ex-Mormon Foundation or its membership generally; they are simply expressed quite vigorously by a few and go largely unchecked. I found most people in attendance at conference to be very kind and sincere with a genuine interest in my work and a willingness to share their experiences. Many individuals approached me after the open microphone session to express their regret at how I was received – most notably Sandy Crain at that time the foundation President – and engage in what I considered to be meaningful dialogue which I found both moving and profoundly helpful.

Again, what is of interest here is the violent emotional reaction that these narrative authors seem to experience once they learn of doctrinal and historical problems in the LDS Church and also the deep feelings of anger and resentment disillusionment with traditional LDS views tends to produce. Of course, this type of reaction is not to be completely unexpected as the majority of narrative authors have some of the very basic assumptions which have informed their world-view challenged and completely undermined. In such circumstances it is easy to see why many authors experience a violent emotional backlash.

The Testimony – “Out of Captivity”

The Testimony – “Out of Captivity”

Testimony Elements	<i>RFM</i>		<i>Evangelical</i>	
	%	n	%	n
<i>Evangelical</i>	10%	11	76%	19
<i>Agnostic</i>	7%	8	0%	0
<i>Belief in God - Not Christian</i>	9%	10	0%	0
<i>Liberal Christian</i>	5%	5	0%	0
<i>Pagan</i>	2%	2	0%	0
<i>Atheist</i>	4%	4	0%	0
Total Narratives		111		25

The final component of each of these narratives is an expression of gratitude for new-found freedoms or beliefs. Often, authors will report that their time in Mormonism was a time of being “trapped” or “controlled” and that now that they have rejected Mormon claims and embraced a new world-view, they experience freedom and pleasures previously unknown. In this way, 40% of all narratives examined can be classified as traditional apostate “Captivity Narratives.” Certainly, these captivity narratives are not as extreme as those written when Mormonism was universally considered Subversive during the early Utah years. However, these modern narratives have adopted the language of Western orthodoxy in espousing the merits of individuality, freedom, and reason – contrasting these values with the stifling over-bearance of the modern LDS Church. As these authors were once trapped, now they are free.

Narrative Implications and Additional Questions

This study should focus our attention on the social and cultural estrangement aspects of Mormon apostasy first and foremost. As I have illustrated above, the narratives themselves seem to be driven by an estrangement process both doctrinal and social. I believe that we, as liberal and intellectual Mormons are partially to blame for perpetuating these feelings of estrangement.

For too long we have been marginal to Mormon culture and have conceived of ourselves as “the other.” In many cases, we have defined ourselves by what we are not and by what we do not believe, rather than as what we are and by what truths we have found. Rather than positively affirm our faith, we have often sought identity through the discovery and adoption of heterodox views. The irony of course, is that the whole notion of orthodoxy is anathema to Mormonism. There is no orthodoxy, but merely the perception thereof.

Regardless of any particular truth claim or its so-called validity, there is one observable and tangible, yet amazingly silent reality. In our midst there are those who struggle and suffer with their faith. There are those who feel alone and isolated and whose world-views are shattering regardless of how much they fast, pray, hold family home evening, or read the Book of Mormon. These saints often feel as if they are alone.

At first glance, Mormonism may give off the appearance of a homogeneity of culture and belief, yet, there is a strong undercurrent of lively discussion, debate, belief, and conversation involving a wide-range of Latter-day Saints who may or may not accept all of modern Mormonism’s unique truth claims. I believe that we, who are engaged in this conversation are called to make our faith manifest to kindred spirits – to validate their struggle, to share our experiences, our doubts, and our love. Recently, one first-time attendee of Sunstone West commented on his blog: **“Sunstone attendees treated me exactly the way we hope and ask**

ward members to treat all newcomers.” Let us extend that experience beyond the walls of this symposium. Let us, in our unique and individual way, seek out those who need and want to hear our perspective and our testimony. **May I be so bold as to call such an effort *Mormon neo-Liberalism?***

Mormon neo-Liberalism

- Visible
- Positive and faith affirming
- Pastoral (Mosiah 18:8-10)
 - Mourn with those who mourn
 - Carry other’s burdens
 - Provide Comfort
 - Become carriers of God’s Love

Within the narratives reviewed for this study, it seems that the authors believed they were presented with an either/or, black and white choice: accept Mormonism and all of its disparate truth claims; or completely reject it. Yet, many at this conference are examples of those Latter-day Saints who do not reject Mormonism altogether but revel in its paradoxes, contradictions, and challenges.

These narratives would seem to indicate that a possible difference between the ex- and liberal Mormon may be the degree to which each perceives his or her individual latitude of belief within Mormonism at-large as well as their ability to perceive Mormonism as what Armand Mauss has called a “human institution” with its inherent strengths, weaknesses, and struggles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, may I suggest that those of us who consider ourselves Mormon liberals or intellectuals come “out of the shadows”, as it were, and assume a pastoral role for those who may become ex-Mormon. By existing and behaving as a sub-culture, rather than as an integral part of the larger Mormon tapestry of experience, we contribute to the myth of Mormon orthodoxy. By this I mean that every Latter-day Saint struggles with their faith, prefers some doctrines over others, and ultimately forms a unique world-view informed, but not strictly defined by LDS theology. Certainly, some of our brothers and sisters will find that they are more comfortable outside the Church. We will miss them. However, many who struggle are seeking a reason to stay; to retain their heritage and develop a faith which is informed by their Mormon roots.

I am not fully sure how this pastoral effort should be carried out. I suppose that each of us find ourselves in vastly different circumstances with local priesthood leaders who demonstrate varying levels of tolerance for liberal expression in their wards and stakes. As members of the Body of Christ we must respect the jurisdiction and views of local priesthood leaders – regardless of how well those views correlate with our own. Certainly the past 15 years have shown us that of strong “in-your-face” advocacy can be counter-productive and ultimately hurtful. In any circumstance, however, I believe it is possible to reach out in appropriate and meaningful ways.

It saddens me to see so many good and wonderful people leave the body of the Church because they may feel the pressure of a false choice between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. As Joseph Smith said:

“I want the liberty of believing as I please; it feels so good not to be trammeled.”

Let us, who have experienced or are currently facing our own challenges of faith; reach out to our fellow Latter-day Saints who struggle and let them know that they, just as Joseph Smith and indeed every Latter-day Saint: have the liberty to believe as they choose and remain in good company with the Saints.

- *Thank you.*