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THE PHENOMENON OF THE CLOSET DOUBTER

A Description and Analysis of One Approach to Activity in the Church



MORMONS pride themselves on being a tight-knit group. But there are groups within the group—investigators, believers, non-believers, jack-Mormons, the faithful, temple recommend holders, cultural Mormons, “inside-outsiders,” the active, and the inactive. I would like to add another group to the list—“closet doubters.” Other names might include faithful doubters, faithful disbelievers, active disbelievers, or hopeful doubters.

During my mission to Japan, I chanced upon a super-active, but genuine non-believer—my first encounter with a faithful doubter. She was serving in the Young Women’s Mutual leadership and was extremely active in the branch. I had been talking to her about bringing her non-member friends and, in the course of conversation, tore open her soul, learning the secret of her disbelief.

I thought at the time that an active non-believer must be a rare bird. But it was a little like learning a new word. What you think is a rarity is suddenly recognized all around you. Since that day in 1962, I have had the opportunity to cautiously identify and speak confidentially with a number of people who have invisible memberships in the group I am calling closet doubters.

What is a closet doubter? A closet doubter, as I have chosen to define it, is an active Latter-day Saint who has secretly rejected (or disbelieves) one or more of the fundamental tenets upon which today’s church is based such as Joseph Smith’s First Vision, the divine calling of

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Joseph Smith as prophet, the Book of Mormon as an angel-delivered history of the early Americans, and the divine origins of Joseph Smith’s later revelations as published today in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. But closet doubters continue to be active in the Church. They attend meetings, teach Primary and Sunday School, hold temple recommends, serve in quorum presidencies and bishoprics, and some even work for the Church. Outwardly they are little different than other active members. Notice that I do not include persons who have lost both belief and activity, or those who have announced their loss of belief.

Most doubters I have met were in their mid-twenties to mid-forties. Younger men and women apparently have neither the experience nor the education necessary to catalyze the complex reactions necessary to become a closet doubter. Older persons, if they were doubters in their younger days, seem either to have slid into inactivity or have regained their belief. Doubters tend to be educated and well read, particularly in history, psychology, philosophy, or science. Most have studied the scriptures and appear well versed in Church history. They come from strong Church backgrounds. They are often the offspring of traditional Mormon families, or they have been committed converts. Many are returned missionaries, many have married in the temple, and most have close and important ties to the Church such as daily jobs or Church callings.

What do they believe, how did they become doubters, and why do they stay active? Personal belief seems to be a continuum and is in a constant state of flux. The

extremes are represented by "I know (something) is true" and "I know (something) is not true." The typical active Church member professes a positive belief in the Joseph Smith story. Closet doubters, by definition, must (secretly) admit to disbelief or profess negative belief. But, and this is a most interesting condition, most closet doubters appear to have had a relatively strong belief before becoming doubters. Most, though doubting the authenticity of the official Joseph Smith story, express commitments to the goals, principles, and practices of today's LDS church. The reasons are often summarized as follows: The basic principles of the Church came from the Bible and thus are not the invention of Joseph Smith. Principles of love, caring, sharing, kindness, honesty, integrity, and sacrifice are universal, true, noble, believable, and worthy of support. Programs associated with obtaining a good education, maintaining health, and providing public service are worth supporting. Most say something like, "The Church may not be true in the 'one and only true church' sense of the word, but there's certainly nothing better out there." Few are expecting to find any "true church" and few are searching for separate avenues to satisfaction. In fact, it is interesting to note that settled doubters appear to be relatively happy, fulfilled people, with little hint of hate or vindictiveness.

This is surprising, given the anguish most experience during their "de-conversion." Before finally admitting to a lack of belief, they experience an agonizing transition period, usually measured in years and often filled with insecurity, alienation, anger, and confusion. This "in-transition" state is accompanied by feelings of guilt ("I mustn't feel this way," or "I shouldn't have read anti-Church literature"), feelings of denial ("Of course I

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believe," or "It's just a stage," or "I've got to stop thinking this way," or "I'm being tried, so it'll pass if I just stick it out"), feelings of shame ("What kind of a sinner must I be?"), feelings of anger ("Why me?"), and feelings of loneliness ("I'm the only one with these thoughts and problems," or "There is no one who understands"). Given these emotional conflicts, it is not hard to understand why some seek professional counseling.

After finally facing up to the fact of their disbelief, most say they feel an odd sense of relief and a freedom not felt during the transition. They say things like, "The truth has made me free," and "Free agency finally means

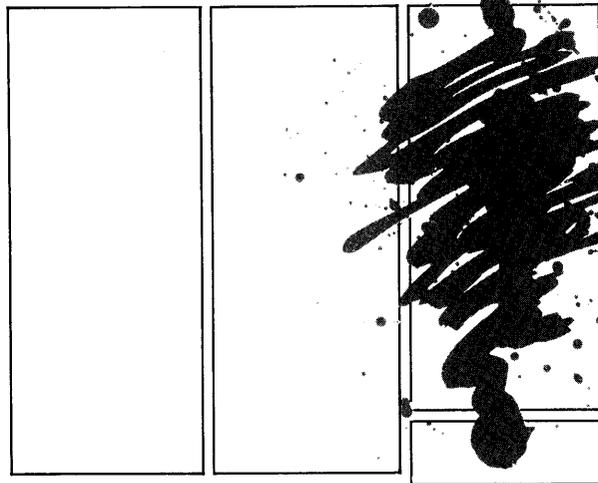
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something." Some feel good in making a free choice to participate, without the guilt that hovered over them during the transition. Furthermore, some express an "understanding" of their circumstances and are able to rationalize, even to cherish, this "understanding." This is not to say that confirmed closet doubters are free from inner conflict. Far from it. It just takes another form and is usually more tolerable.

No doubter's motives for continued activity are as pure and idealistic as I have just described. Most doubters are tied to the Church like birds are to the earth. It might be okay to fly a bit, but gravity eventually has its way. These "gravitational" ties include being married to a believing spouse (you don't further weaken the relationship), the desire to give children strong and stable support (to keep them away from drugs, sex, and anti-Christian behavior), family traditions and history ("It would hurt my mother if I went inactive"), job security (particularly if you work for BYU or the Church), a social life revolving around friends who are believers (how do you attend your friend's, or more seriously your son's, temple wedding if you're inactive?), and of course FEAR (the thought that the official Joseph Smith story might be true, after all).

Some justify their continued activity as contributing to improvements in Church practices they consider wrong, weak, or embarrassing. Those often mentioned include the black issue (now resolved), the temple ceremony, women's rights, the stress on unquestioning obedience, the missionary system, the self-serving nature of Church programs, poor teaching methods, questionable business practices, authoritarian leadership, and the lack of vertical dialogue from members to leaders. Many express feeling of hope—hope that perhaps in the great scheme of things God indeed will recognize the Church; hope that perhaps doubters can find happiness; hope that they can do some good through the programs of the Church; and hope that, by some small chance, they might be wrong about their doubts.

Well, where are they? How many are there? And why do we hear so little of them? I believe they're everywhere in well-established Church locales, but they're probably more concentrated in the larger cities, on university campuses (including BYU), and in the more affluent wards. As to the numbers, there is really



no way of knowing. There could be thousands or just a few.

What predisposes one to become a faithful doubter? How does one lose beliefs of a lifetime? These are the most difficult questions and cannot be answered definitively in this essay. But education does seem to be one factor. Others include inquisitiveness, difficulties with authoritarian leadership or "male-oriented" leadership. Knowledge of Church history seems to be common. Access to the arguments against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon is often present. It is, however, difficult to tell which comes first, the doubts, which lead to search for confirmation, or the detracting literature (such as the Tanners), which leads to a loss of belief. I have noticed that for many people it is a stepped process: a little doubt supported with a little justification leading to more doubt, the search for more justification, and so on.

What impact do they have on the Church? Doubters are definitely involved in events at the local level, and because of their educations and skills, they often have positions of leadership and influence.

Now I would like to introduce a few closet doubters. This will make the phenomenon more personal, more real.

From a late-thirties housewife, mother of three, graduate of BYU:

By the time I finally recognized my lack of belief, my children were in school. My children don't need any disruptions in their lives at this time. It's hard enough. My husband is in the Seventies quorum in our ward. What alternatives do I have? If I start talking now it could hurt his work. I'm not unhappy. I just find it easier to keep quiet about the whole thing. My husband is very good about it all. I don't think he really understands. He thinks I'm going through a stage, a trial. It's easier for me to let him think that. Anyway, maybe I am. I hope he's right.

From a 40-year old High Priest:

The big thing left for me now is hope. I hope, I pray that

things will turn out right. I hope the Church is true but I really doubt it. It's worth staying with. Faith and hope. It's all I have, all I need, truly.

From a mid-thirties salesman:

My contact with the world started my journey into doubt. I went through a terrible period of guilt and hate. I was impossible to live with. I lost my first wife over this, so I find it easier now to keep quiet. It's not my place to be going around destroying people's faith. The Lord showed me the light. Let him show others if that is what the Lord wants for them. Who's to say what the big picture is? I'm the last to say that I have all the answers.

From a member of a bishopric:

I have really thought seriously of quitting it all. But every time I do, all the positives seem to outweigh the negatives. I can influence things somewhat in my ward, but I have to be really careful not to do anything to embarrass the bishop. I try to stress the positive aspects of the gospel—sharing, love, giving. You know, those things that people need really bad. I always keep the Word of Wisdom, pay my tithing, and, you know, that kind of stuff. But I do it because of my position, and for my wife and kids. My kids don't know a thing, but my wife knows everything. In a way, she's coming to see things from my point of view—you know, starting to support me in subtle ways.

From a 22-year-old sister, a convert of six years, studying in Utah:

I joined because of my friends. The only friends I have now are in the Church. If I start causing trouble, I'll lose my friends. I know it sounds childish. But my parents were very upset when I joined. I don't have close ties at home anymore. I hope to marry a Mormon. And nobody wants an inactive Mormon.

From a 23-year-old sister, just married to a non-Mormon, and a Ph.D. candidate:

Father-in-Heaven has answered my prayer—the Church teaches Christian principles but it isn't perfect. But before I received those answers it was rough. I didn't know who to turn to or who might help. I

hope to get my husband to join. I feel a lot of peace with myself, knowing that I love the Church for its people and for what it can do for people, not for what it was, or purports to be.

From a 22-year-old returned missionary, presently studying history at the University of Utah:

I never did gain that burning testimony everybody kept talking about. In fact, my faith in Joseph Smith disappeared during my mission. It's just too incredible!

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out of the closet might be a shock for those whose testimonies rely on the strength of another's faith.

My mom and dad spent a lot of money . . . most of their savings to send me to England. If they knew . . . well, it would hurt them. I think I'll be pretty active. I'm not searching for a quick fix from anybody. The Church is my life and my guide. I'm just going to be cool and use what's good for me.

These closet doubters keep their interpretations hidden within. Sometimes, even spouses do not know the extent of their doubts. Why is this? First, there is the fear of being ostracized, or worse, put on the pedestal reserved for investigators. Mainstream believers often remain aloof and feel uncomfortable around those who ask too many questions or demonstrate a doubting nature. More seriously, believing members often interpret a rejection of their beliefs to be a rejection of themselves. The second reason for secrecy is the fear that the chance for meaningful Church participation might be reduced. More than a few worry that a non-sympathetic bishop might deny them a temple recommend. On the other hand, some have confided in bishops who have been understanding and supportive. Third, the Church has said on several occasions that it can tolerate divergent beliefs as long as those beliefs are held personally and no attempt is made to sway others. This is interpreted to mean, "Remain a silent doubter." Finally, many express the thought that it is not their place to destroy or alter the faith of anyone else. Coming out of the closet might be a shock for those whose testimonies rely on the strength of another's faith.

Doubters learn to speak truthfully, but discreetly. When asked to bear testimony, it comes out something like, "I know that the Church teaches correct principles; I know that the Lord answers prayers; he loves every person, we must all work out our own salvation." Can they accept President Kimball as a "Prophet, Seer, and Revelator"? Some say, "Why not? Certainly no one else is. I can accept the possibility that he is a prophet." Others say, "I accept, with what faith I have." The question regarding the prophet is probably the hardest

one for those seeking a temple recommend to answer. Even if they can deal with that question, getting a recommend is often difficult because it vividly reminds the doubter that he or she is living a life which is not totally candid.

This need to maintain secrecy, to sometimes practice a subtle dishonesty, isolates the doubter and creates internal conflicts. Such conflicts are the successors to those experienced during the often hellish time of transition.

Will closet doubters survive? The outlook is hopeful. Most individuals I have met appeared relatively stable and happy. Some have gone inactive. Some have gone inactive, then returned again, still doubting but hoping. Some have come out of the closet. One I know has developed a strong belief again.

As for the future, several scenarios have been suggested to me. The first, somewhat farfetched, proposes that in time some of them will quietly reach positions of substantial authority in the Church and initiate changes in the claims made for Joseph Smith. Another scenario has their numbers and influence growing over the next few generations until the LDS church reaches the present status of the Catholic church: many not truly believing the official story but staying and supporting because of inertia, culture, tradition, and family ties. A third scenario pictures the Church somehow inviting and accepting disbelievers

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into open, full, and active fellowship. None of these imagined events seem very realistic, or attractive, for that matter.

I suggest, however, that someone of authority should investigate the phenomenon of the closet doubter. There needs to be a structured study of the origins, levels, and supports of belief among Mormons. The origins of skepticism should not, cannot, be overlooked for long. We will have to face up to them, and the sooner the better. As William James put it, "He who acknowledges the imperfectness of his instrument, and makes allowance for it, is in a much better position for gaining (and sustaining) truth than if he claimed his instrument to be infallible" (*Varieties of Religious Experience*).

Finally, I encourage doubters to share their thoughts and feelings with us, even if incognito.

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