

The Spectrum of Belief

The Development of Religious Behavior
in the Mormon Community

BY R. JAN STOUT

To the outside world, Mormons are often viewed as a cohesive group of people who share a common world view and adhere strongly to similar values and religious commitments. Despite this appearance of conformity and unity, a

wide spectrum of behaviors and beliefs exists in the Mormon community, from the Iron Rod (obedient conformist) and Liahona (questioning independent) Saints described by Richard Poll to the "Closet Doubters" identified by D. Jeff Burton. Other descriptive labels include cultural Mormons, Jack Mormons, intellectuals, fundamentalists, and active temple-goers.

Conversely, in spite of apparent differences both within and between religions, Latter-day Saints need to recognize the heritage we share with members of other faiths. In all successful religions, "being religious" involves an integration of belief, feeling, and practice. A body of beliefs and factual assertions must nourish the theologians and philosophers among us. Feelings of ecstasy, wonderment, and awe supply the mystical and transcendent needs. Rituals provide continuity, tradition, and solemnity for binding the intellect and emotions in a workable format. People obviously attach varying significance to these three factors, but all must be present to make for a widely accepted religion.

But even this observation does not go far enough. As M. Scott Peck has observed, "Since everyone has some understanding—some world view, no matter how limited or primitive or inaccurate—everyone has a religion" (*The Road Less Traveled*, p. 185). Specifically, our self-awareness forces all of us to struggle with questions of evil, death, ultimacy, and purpose. As a result, man, I contend, is of necessity a religious creature.

Fundamentally, then, we humans are far more alike than we are different. Yet dogmatic beliefs and behaviors keep us in contention. Why?

The formation of beliefs and religious practices is a highly complex and multi-factored phenomenon which is as poorly understood by Mormons as by anyone else. How do we reach the point where our beliefs acquire form and definition? Is that point only the product of complex psychological processes, cultural pressures, and dogmatic teachings? Or do God, the Holy Ghost, and Jesus Christ intervene to build testimonies for the faithful? Do we want our beliefs to reduce uncertainty and tension or to increase awareness, contingent knowledge, and existential anxiety?

Although it is not possible to explore all the components involved in the process of belief in a single paper, a limited conceptual approach may provide some insight. While these conceptual factors apply to all people, I will attempt to focus on their impact for the Latter-day Saint.

THE PROBLEM OF ANXIETY

The unconscious development of our various religious orientations is influenced by a number of factors. Role models, identification, pressure to conform, and other learning devices all contribute to the establishment of a theological position. In addition, provocative research in the area

of sociobiology suggests that much of our behavior may be genetically determined. Studies of identical twins reared apart imply that even our religious activities may be influenced by powerful biological forces. Too, our religious beliefs can be profoundly influenced by specific individuals who "carry the word." Visionary prophets have the ability to touch the lives of countless followers by providing a meaningful focus for their religious experience.

While these influences are important, I nevertheless believe that a central factor in this process is the force of anxiety. This is not to suggest that conversion experiences are solely motivated by attempts to limit anxiety states. However, the need to belong, the escape from feelings of powerlessness, and the fresh infusion of meaning into converts' lives significantly augments the wish to be Mormon. But the "core religious experience" is perhaps, beyond the ultimate understanding of any psychological theory.

Anxiety has three basic forms, each of which confronts us with different developmental tasks. Psychiatrists refer to these types as "separation anxiety," "castration anxiety," and "existential anxiety." Fundamentally, each is inextricably interwoven into the shroud of our human dilemma: coping with death and the fear of personal extinction.

Separation anxiety can be described as the most primal tension-producing state. The infant's first encounter with this affect occurs when mother is no longer at his beck and call. He feels alone, vulnerable, and abandoned. The security of the womb has been lost and new, frightening perceptions are encountered. The breaking of the bond with the mother must be endured repeatedly and eventually numbed through denial and repression. Yet this original experience serves as a prototype for the anxiety state. It can be replayed countless times, and we must struggle to acquire defenses and solutions to its impact.

Castration anxiety does not necessarily mean literal anatomical dismemberment. It is the type of anxiety that accompanies the fear of punishment and retribution of any kind. We become aware of our lack of power and our need to seek support. We may have transgressed against a powerful perceived authority figure and desperately want to escape the inevitable wrath of his judgment. Joining a group can provide collective protection from this. Our fear and powerlessness are transformed into strength and security.

Existential anxiety arises when we are forced to confront the terror and uncertainty of a universe that seems awesome and overwhelming. We look beyond the safety of our family and predictable events to a world full of risks, dangers, and unknowns. There is no ready refuge from this awareness and dread. Traditional reassurances and answers will not fill

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the void. In experiencing existential anxiety we look beyond them into a new and challenging frontier.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS TYPES

There are four groups of Mormons whose religious positions are determined to a significant extent by the interplay of these anxiety states, social forces, and life experiences. These are the "compliant-dependent," the "social-organizational," the "skeptical-individual" and the "transcendent-integrated."

Compliant-dependent (C-D) traits can arise in response to separation anxiety. These people retain their basic childhood orientation: a strong need to please, submit, and obey in order to avoid the dreaded fear of abandonment. C-Ds are adept at scanning the horizon for cues that keep them safely in the normative center. Belief can easily become subservient to personal comfort.

Charles H. Monson refers to people he calls "habit-doers" and "God-gamblers" ("Religious Experience as an Argument for God" in *And More about God*, pp. 117-19). They live with their childhood habits, never bothering to ask significant questions; or they argue that God exists and religious activity is important, feeling that they have everything to gain and nothing to lose by believing, and conversely, nothing to gain and everything to lose by disbelief. These types easily fit into the C-D category, preferring not to risk being cut off from warm nurturing.

C-D types also experience a strong desire for unconditional love and place great emphasis on "people-pleasing." The syndrome described as the "Mother of Zion" seems to evolve largely from compliant-dependent behavior.

Many Mormons can recall the cozy satisfying memory of a star placed on the forehead in Junior Sunday School or the smile of approval from a pleased parent at the end of a two-and-a-half-minute talk. This is strong reinforcement stuff: Religious symbols and messages that promise us the chance of overcoming separation are highly prized. As Ernest Becker noted in *The Denial of Death*, "We obey our authority figures all our lives, as Freud showed, because of the anxiety of separation. Every time we try to do something other than what they wanted, we awaken the anxiety connected with them and their possible loss. To lose their powers and approval is thus to lose our very lives." (P. 212.) The strength of this drive for symbiotic comfort is rooted in our infancy and never completely leaves us. For C-Ds it remains the ultimate motivator for their religious life.

A note of caution: we should not take separation anxiety too lightly or view it simply as childlike and infantile. It is not reserved for compliant-dependent people alone. The feeling of intimacy, ecstasy, and unity with God may be essential to the transcendent religious experience described by Harris in his book, *I'm OK—You're OK* (p. 233). Certainly overcoming separation is the central message of the Atonement. However, to remain childlike and dependent is to deny our personal responsibility for attaining an integrated religious life. Kierkegaard warned, "To

venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose one's self."

Social-organizational (S-O) people value the group above all else. They gravitate toward authority and often seek positions of power. They can be rigid, legalistic, and obsessive-compulsive. They fear losing control and dealing with powerful emotions.

For S-Os the core anxiety problem revolves around punishment, loss of power, and impotence. This castration anxiety is an invention of the child, but it can consume the psychic life of adults. To a large extent, obedience to a strong, authoritarian religious body can help relieve this fear. Rituals and order become important, and attention to detail and proficiency in scriptural recall are highly coveted by these Mormons.

Social-organizational people are often greatly concerned with the "last days" and ultimate judgment. Love is considered conditional, and there is a strong patriarchal orientation; God is perceived as a loving father who rewards his children only when they have been dutiful, obedient, and faithful to the end. It is sometimes easier for them to follow the letter rather than the spirit of the law. The Iron Rod Saint described by Poll is perfectly at home in this category.

S-Os are Maslow's "non-peakers" and religious "bureaucrats" (*Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, p. 25). Mormon S-Os find security in the organizational structure of the Church and often rise to levels of considerable authority through their hard work, loyalty, and obedience.

The *skeptical-individual* (S-I) has had to learn to deal with existential anxiety. The formulation that seemed to answer the religious questions of life earlier in childhood begins to falter. As one surveys the complexities and uncertainties of life, doubts can arise. "Does God really intervene and answer prayers regularly?" "Why was I born at this time and place in such favorable circumstances?" "What about God's other children who live in abject poverty and suffer miserable life situations?" Questions like these are not easily answered or ignored by the skeptical-individualistic person. They gnaw on his or her conscience and generate even further questioning.

As one's secular education increases, so does speculation. There is a growing sense of individual responsibility and less reliance on the Church to answer and resolve questions and doubts. For some this is a time of rebellion against authority. Skeptic-individualistic people often want to reject compliant-dependent and social-organizational Mormons, and they resent such traits in themselves.

Personal tragedies can suddenly catapult us into the S-I stance. Some Mormons find themselves bewildered, disillusioned, and betrayed by their previous religious orientation. This may lead to "falling away" into inactivity and cynicism. One may even angrily assert that "God doesn't exist and never did!" and reject all forms of active religious life. Or a cherished spiritual commitment may be quietly abandoned. Skepticism may appear in early adolescence; it may be brief—or it may last a lifetime.

Some S-Is evolve into “closet doubters” described by Burton. They do not want to abandon their religious ties, but they covertly struggle with questions and doubts. Others search for new ways to interpret the gospel and deal with life’s mysteries.

There can be an exhilarating sense of freedom in learning to live with doubt, uncertainty, and questions. Existential anxiety can encourage growth and inspire the courage to explore new horizons. Yet there is always the danger of slipping into nihilism, cynicism, and meaninglessness. S-I Mormons often envy the certainty and security enjoyed by unquestioning Church members. They look back nostalgically to a time when life seemed more predictable and secure.

Some Mormons successfully compartmentalize their religious beliefs from their secular curiosity and growth. They stay safely in compliant-dependent or social-organizational stages. Although they may develop powerful intellectual insights and scientific knowledge, their intellectual growth doesn’t seriously challenge their religious structure.

There are probably few *transcendent-integrated* (T-I) personalities among us. While many may have had brief tastes of this attitude, it is an elusive stage and difficult to maintain. The first three stages described are largely “egoic” in nature—that is, the individual’s self-awareness and self-consciousness play a primary role. There is great concern with personal salvation, preservation of power, and awareness of one’s intellectual life. The transcendent-integrated person has been able to move beyond these concerns. This state is available to all of us in those moments of spiritual enlightenment Maslow described as “peak-experiences.” We become aware of feelings of ecstasy and wholeness and comprehend the unity of all things. Our concern for our fellow men transcends narrow self-interest.

At this level the integrated aspects of our personality become crucial. Lowell Bennion in his small and beautiful book *The Things that Matter Most* discusses the importance of integrity. He states, “There are two moral virtues which, I believe, encompass all others: integrity and love. If we would cultivate these two with an increasing understanding of their meaning we would fulfill our moral nature and find deep joy and great satisfaction.” (P. 43.) In this stage we seek to integrate all those moral values which give deeper meaning to life. Existential anxiety is quieted and one comes to terms with one’s being.

Many Mormons regard certain Church leaders and General Authorities as individuals who personify the transcendent-integrated personality. These people inspire and touch our lives in deep and significant ways. They seem to have found a way to reconcile all of the stages described thus far. They recognize these traits in themselves and can therefore love and accept a broad spectrum of Mormons who are struggling with their own spiritual lives.

These stages of spiritual development should not be viewed as fixed or stationary. Some individuals may be content to spend most of their lives in one such position while others will move through the

stages in a continuum of growth. Under times of disillusionment or greater emotional stress, there may be regressions to a safer, more comfortable place. While the implication exists that higher stages are better than lower ones, we should acknowledge that people’s needs and values vary widely. Basic personality styles may favor a specific type of religious orientation. For example, some individuals are naturally passive and noninquisitive; others are more exploratory and curious. Some may hunger for certainty, while others seek out mystery. It is also possible for us to experience these conflicts simultaneously.

We may readily see these traits in others; but I contend they exist, to some extent, in all of us. We all have experienced the same anxieties and struggled to resolve them. I believe the ultimate position we take will determine, to a great extent, the way in which we view God and our own place in the universe, as well as our concepts of reward, judgment, and exaltation.

CONCLUSION

I believe each of these groups has something important to contribute to the spiritual and religious life of the Mormon community. For that matter, they contribute to our own individual religious life. As religious beings, we humans are embarked upon a spiritual pilgrimage to discover meaning and purpose in our existence. Out of this journey has come a kaleidoscope of religious approaches which seeks to give answers and direction to our quest. The compliant-dependent and social-organizational Latter-day Saints have discovered a solution to their anxiety problems through orthodoxy. In a complex and chaotic world, they have found a degree of certitude which gives meaning, clarity, and direction to their lives. The more liberal, skeptic-individual Mormon must be willing to live with tensions, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Though this position can easily disintegrate into a world view of cynicism, nihilism, and existential anguish, it can also become a place for new discovery and religious growth. But although the first three stages can partially fulfill our basic needs and wishes, they are all focused in the question, “What’s in it for me?” Ultimate spiritual fulfillment beckons us toward the transcendent-integrated position. Short of this we remain locked in our egoic interests in a perpetual state of anxiety.

Perhaps the most succinct call to self-transcendence is found in St. Matthew: “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (10:39). This is the essence of overcoming the meaninglessness and emptiness of egoic pursuits. It is a unifying message, not only for Mormons but for all people seeking a life of spiritual growth.

R. JAN STOUT, a Salt Lake City psychiatrist, is an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Utah College of Medicine and former president of the Utah Psychiatric Association. The author is indebted to M. Scott Peck for the general outline of the four religious positions or types, which he has modified to some extent. Important contributions in this area have also been made by Kohlberg in his “Stages of Moral Development.”

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