

Beyond the News

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Is Mormonism a Cult?

By Peter Eng

Picture courtesy of weforanimals



Is Mormonism a cult?

This question has been the intermittent talking point in American politics. But this question was asked before it became political and will be asked long after the fleeting interest of the media and of politicians. The controversy surrounding the American controversy is a useful reference because it brings out the issues in the context of real-life questions, like, "Even if Mormonism is a cult, does it matter that we elect a cultist into political power?" Such questions cause us to look for answers in a real-life situation, and not as a theoretical issue.

The issue at hand is that Mitt Romney, a Mormon, is one of the front-runners for the Republican Party in the upcoming election. Pastor Robert Jeffress endorses Rick Perry (Governor of Texas), and Jeffress identifies Mormonism as a theological cult indicating that Romney, as a Mormon, is one strike

against him. Vested politicians and the intolerant media immediately attack Jeffress for being intolerant. Why this media frenzy against a pastor?

Ignore the headlines. They tend to condition our thinking. Listen to [Jeffress](#) on YouTube (CNN and Fox) and you will be surprised to hear his real position: (1) Mormonism is a theological cult, not a sociological cult; (2) Mormons are not Christians; (3) Even though Romney is not a Christian and Obama is one, he would vote for Romney (a non-Christian) over Obama (a professing Christian) because the non-Christian (Romney) holds to more Christian values that the professing Christian (Obama); (4) Mormons, as a group, do not go to heaven, inasmuch as no Christian denomination goes to heaven as a group; salvation is individual not community based.

Once upon a time, there was a shoelace manufacturer. He was highly successful in his business. He knew how to make the best laces at the lowest prices. He prospered and became very well respected in the community. People began to ask him for advice. The advice ranged from business, to life, to religion, to physics, to philosophy. Armed with his life successes, he freely asserted truth on all subjects of life. He would not tolerate disagreement. His success is proof that he is right in everything.

We can fall into the trap of this anecdotal shoelace manufacturer. We think our success entitles us to authoritative opinion regardless of our expertise or ignorance. In the court of law, an expert witness is asked to testify on his area of expertise. Imagine yourself a juror. Can a judge allow a movie star to

testify on blood splatter pattern or tire marks because the witness has star power? Who is the expert witness on whether Mormonism is a cult? Is it the media and politicians, or is it Christian ministers who are trained in the field?

We must not be naive and think the media or politicians to be the neutral party in the discussion. They are only the ignorant party. Their opinions are secondary to those who know. They have star power, not information, not studied judgment.

It is interesting that the discussion is about the conclusion, not the facts. The media and politicians have not asked, "What is a cult?" Or, "Why do the vast majority of Christian ministers consider Mormonism a cult?" Instead, they simply call us names, saying that we are intolerant for identifying Mormonism as a cult. They seem to have abrogated to themselves the right to conclude without knowledge, and cast aspersions on those with knowledge. Seems like hubris to me.

Let me present to you my thoughts on Mormonism as an expert witness, and you, the juror, decide if Mormonism is a cult. There are three considerations: (1) What is a cult in religious phenomenology? (2) What is meant by a theological cult in Christianity? (3) What is a sociological cult? (4) Should we vote a cultist into political office?

The Religious Phenomenon of Mormonism as a Cult

I agree with much of what Jeffries said. One point where I don't agree with him is when he calls non-Christian religions "cults." As a religious phenomenon, cults are break-away groups from major religions. We may not agree with other religions, but if we call all non-Christian religions "cults," we change the acceptable meaning of terms. As a religious phenomenon, we can safely make the following observations:

(1) All major religions have differences of opinion within their own systems of thought. Some differences are quite significant, but their similarities still qualify them to be the

same religious group. For example: Christianity has Catholics and Protestant; Islam has Shiites and Sunnis; Buddhism has Theravada and Mahayana, etc. These are considered major groupings within a religion, and have some legitimacy to represent that religion.

(2) Major religions have breakaway groups that they consider cults. These breakaway groups have deviated so much from the original religion that they cannot be accepted as legitimate groupings within that community; and more often than not, these breakaway groups have unworthy motives connected to their founders and they use mind control techniques to retain their followers. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists (and others) ought to make their own determination. For instance, Christians consider the following cults: Mormonism, Watchtower Society (Jehovah's Witnesses), Moonism, etc. I believe Muslims consider the following to be deviant breakaways: Ismailis, Qadianis, Nation of Islam, etc. And Buddhists mostly reject the following: Falun Gong, Nichiren Buddhism, Aum Shinrikyo, etc. (I don't know enough about Hindu cults to comment.)

As a religious phenomenon, and without theological or moral judgment on Mormons, we can say plainly that Mormonism is considered a cult by Christians. We generally don't argue with other religions what they consider cults. If Buddhists decide that Falun Gong is no longer a Buddhist cult, who am I to insist it is one? Or if they say it is one, who am I to say it is not? Each religion makes its own determination on what is a cult and what is not. Christians have decided that Mormonism is a cult, so who are these politicians and media people to tell us it is not a cult?

One more thing about cults in general

Before we go on to the subject of Mormonism proper, a qualification is necessary. There is another use of the term "cult" that is not related to our discussion, and Mormons use it as a [red herring](#).

In academic language the term "cult" refers to the religious practices, as opposed to a belief

system of a religion. For instance, Taoism and Hinduism focus on rituals and ceremonies, not on a system of beliefs. These religious practices are called "cult."

In this sense, the cult of Christianity comprises the two sacraments among Protestants, or the seven sacraments among Catholics. The cult of the Old Testament concerns sacrifices and observances that Christians no longer follow. The Muslim cult comprises the five pillars of Islam. Academics talk about a civic cult, that is, the official religion of a nation, like the civic cult of the Romans or the ancient Chinese, where the emperor sacrificed to the gods on behalf of the people. This is a term used in the study of religion as a whole (not limited to Christianity) to refer to the rituals or practices of a religion.

A pro-Mormon website tries to confuse this issue and say that Christianity is also a cult. This is just another Mormon attempt to do a flanking attack on Christianity and trying to blur the distinction. (Guilty site in question: www.mormoncult.org.)

What is a Christian Cult?

A Christian cult is a religious group that has arisen from a Christian context, but has deviated from Christian truths to the extent that Christians generally reject them as deviant or a cult (theological cult); and / or a group that possesses the sociological characteristics of enslaving control over its members (a sociological cult).

What is the line that a group would cross that would qualify them as a theological cult? There may be some variations among Christians on the exact nature of that line.

For me, a cult is one that deviates so much from the original gospel message that there is no salvation in the message the group presents. One may dispute if the individual within a cult can have enough truth to be saved. But if the group has deviated so much that its official teachings do not lead people to become God's children, that group is a cult.

It is apparent that we cannot detail Mormon beliefs here. But it is right to point out those

aspects of Mormon beliefs that create the majority view that Mormonism is a cult.

Mormonism Beliefs that Make Them a Cult

One source for the study of Mormonism from the Christian perspective is Walter Martin, [Kingdom of the Cults](#). Though this book is not new, it has been updated, and its representation of Mormonism remains solid. A less studied approach can be found in the website where ex-Mormons post their stories: www.exmormons.org. They identify fourteen core Mormon beliefs: <http://exmormon.org/d6/drupal/fourteen>.

1. Source(s) of Authority. Mormonism appeals to four works they consider their primary authority: the Bible (KJV only), the [Book of Mormon](#), [Doctrine and Covenants](#), and [Pearl of Great Price](#). They believe that the Bible is corrupted, and they have superior and superseding revelation from God. Revelation is not closed, and God continues to speak through the Mormon Church. This explains why original Mormons practised polygamy and later mainstream Mormons do not. The leaders of the Mormon community have the right to change doctrines. Today, those Mormons who insist on the original version of Mormonism are polygamists. Mormon beliefs are continuously developed and these beliefs are posted online as the Latter Day Saints "Journal of Discourses" (www.journalofdiscourses.org). (The official name for Mormonism is, "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" usually abbreviated to LDS.) This Journal of Discourses record Mormon beliefs, and is available for any who wishes to examine them.

Mormons teach that the KJV is the word of God. They will quote isolated texts to prove their point. They will defend it in public, but will also say that it has been corrupted when pressed, and that is why they need additional revelation from God. They select the KJV because its archaic language makes it easier to twist towards their own ends, but they only give lip service to the Bible because it is used only to convert Christians to Mormonism, and

thereafter jettisoned for their newer and better revelation.

2. The Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon (BM), written by [Joseph Smith](#), asserts that the American natives were actually Jews who immigrated from the Middle-East. On account of their constant sinning against God, God turned their skin dark as punishment. (Jesus eventually went to America to teach the natives advance methods of agriculture.) This BM was given to Joseph Smith (their founder) as writings on gold plates (which no one has seen) with a sample copy of the inscriptions (certified by a scholar asked to examine it as nonsensical scribbling from an ancient alphabetical book), translated by Joseph Smith by looking through spectacles made of stone lenses called the Urim and Thummin. Joseph Smith was ostensibly trying to swindle someone in connection with the claims to these gold plates.

It is hard for me to take these ludicrous claims seriously, but I shall engage in a serious refutation of the core assertion, that Native Americans were Jews with skin turned dark. I shall not evaluate the highly questionable life of Joseph Smith, which I invite you to do on your own.

(1) Native Americans have a totally different language from the Jews or from any Middle-Eastern language. (2) Native Americans never knew the wheel and there is no reason for this ignorance if they were from the Middle-East. (3) Native Americans are anthropologically different from the Jews; and DNA tests link Native Americans more to Asians and not to Jews. (4) BM claims there were horses when the Jews came to America. Horses were brought by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. (5) Nehi (one of the characters) had a bow of steel. There was no steel before the Spanish presence. (6) BM talks about scimitars which did not exist until it was used by Arabs in the sixth century. (7) BM talks about silk which did not exist in America.

Certain Mormons twist the data to try to fit their theory, but their strange interpretation is rejected by most scholars in their field. Lest we get carried away with all these scientific details about special genes or bone fragments,

we must not lose sight of the obvious: language. Americans today speak a very close variant of British English. When Europeans immigrated to America, they did not invent a new language; and they did not lose their facility in the European languages. America could remain a polyglot of languages from Europe, or adopt one of several European languages. It is complete nonsense to think that Jews lost their language and writing skills when they immigrated to America, and starting speaking Navajo, Comanche, Sioux or Cree.

3. God. Mormon anthropology and cosmology can be taken together. According to Mormons, the god (of this earth) once lived as a human in another planet. There are many gods in the universe and these gods produce spirit children. These spirit children await their birth on earth. To give this teaching respectability, they call it "pre-mortal life." Our redemption and perfection lies in our becoming gods. There is a famous Mormon saying: "As man is ... God once was...as God is...man may become." Mormons believe that many of the OT saints have become gods. There are many gods and we essentially worship the god of this world.

We need to be clear that Mormonism is NOT a monotheistic religion. It is polytheism. At best, Mormonism engages in monolatry (the worship of one god), but not the belief in one God.

Monotheism is foundational in Judaism and Christianity. It is clear from the OT that God does not accept polytheism much less the hubris of man becoming god; which is the lust of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

4. Jesus and salvation. Jesus Christ was the firstborn of god's many spirit children. God is not spirit. He has a body and engages in sex. Out of this activity, Jesus was born. The original Mormon prophets said that god had sex with Mary but she remains a virgin and gave birth to Jesus. Mormons today tend to say they don't understand the process of the virgin birth, and avoid asserting that a god had sex with Mary. But it remains true that Mormons believe Jesus was the first child that god had through the normal process of gods

having children. They also say that Jesus Christ was polygamous.

While Mormons today use the same vocabulary as Christians calling Jesus "Lord," and talk about trusting in Jesus as their only redeemer, they do not mean the same thing.

For a Mormon, salvation is through marriage and family. The earthly Mormon families become divine families. Mormons become gods and goddesses, and continue to produce spirit children. The family is not temporal but eternal.

Whatever Mormons affirm about the redemption of Jesus (they seem to be shifting), or what it means to be saved (even though it is through Jesus), is totally alien to mainstream Christianity. For a Mormon, to be saved is to become a god – through Jesus Christ, no doubt.

It is useful to raise the issue of the Mormon family at this point. Some evangelical Christians are delighted that Mormons are against homosexuality, and advocate marriage and the family. What they may not know is that Mormons make marriage and family as the way to godhood. Their support for the family comes at a price: their claim to godhood through marriage and family.

Do Mormon Practices Make Them a Sociological Cult?

I agree with Pastor Jeffries that Mormonism is a theological cult, but I am not ready to concede that Mormonism is not a sociological cult as he implies.

It appears to me that in the early days of Mormonism, it had all the characteristics of a sociological cult. But Mormons have worked hard to use terms to make themselves more acceptable, downplay their heresy and emphasize values that are acceptable to Christians (e.g. family). They produce music that is acceptable by all (Mormon Tabernacle Choir's famed rendition of Handel's Messiah). They abandoned teachings on polygamy. Mormonism does not physically isolate Mormons, but they engage in aggressive indoctrination. They also engage in

aggressive brand marketing so their best people and qualities are in the forefront.

While Christians encourage tithing as a Christian commitment to God, cults typically impose it. One *raison d'être* for cults is money. Their collection of tithes is usually not an act of free choice, it is emotionally imposed or physically regulated. In addition to tithing, members can end up doing ridiculous things to raise money for the group. The Children of God (cult) were asked to steal from their parents, and to engage in prostitution to raise money or get converts. Moonies are worked to the bone to get money for their evil leader.

1. Mormon and Mammon. Mormons are rigorous in their tithing requirements. They insist god does not need your money, but if you do not tithe, you may burn in hell. From what I know, they do not check on members' paycheck to ensure they tithe. In the spectrum of cults, they do not rank the highest in monetary demands (e.g. Moonies), but they rank higher than other mainstream Christian groups.

The Mormon Church does not account for how they spend their money. There is a total lack of accountability on how money is spent. Even Mormons who tithe are not entitled to this information. This is quite typical of sociological cults. In terms of monetary accountability, Mormonism falls squarely within cultic behavior. In terms of acquisition of money, they fall just within cultism (use of spiritual blackmail), but it is not as severe as other cults.

2. Sex and marriage. Cultic leaders often give themselves great sexual liberty (David Koresh, Jim Jones, Moses David, etc.) This was true of Joseph Smith the founder of Mormonism who practiced polygamy, and in vestigial forms, this continues among Mormon groups who have not disavowed their earlier practices. The official Mormon Church (LDS) leaders seem to have repudiated polygamy. There are charges to the contrary, but on the whole, there seems to be inadequate evidence to say they continue with polygamy. In terms of sexual behavior, I would say that Mormons have become main stream; and even though it started out as a cult in sexuality, in this

regard, Mormonism does not qualify as a sociological cult today.

3. Power. Cults have an authority structure that lack accountability. If a cult survives its founder, the authority structure may be mollified. It is clear that Joseph Smith controlled the lives of the people who followed him. In the early days of Mormonism, the power structure was clearly that of a cult.

Today, authority resides with one person – the Prophet / President of the Church. He continues to get divine revelation from God. He functions like the Pope to the Catholics, but he has greater latitude in changing matters of faith and life than the Pope. He is assisted by two counselors forming the First Presidency. In addition, they have a Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and of the Seventy, etc.

Their structure mimics Jesus and the twelve apostles. There is no accountability to the people. Mormon practice clearly assigns authority of doctrine and life to the Prophet. In terms of power structure, they remain typical of cults.

4. Proselytism. One social characteristic of cults is the extreme lengths they go to proselytize. Mormons are required to spend two years of their life as unpaid missionaries to proselytize. In this regard, they are again quite typical of cults. However, they do not require an entire life spent making money and disciples, so they are not the worst expression of extreme proselytism.

5. Social Structure. Cults try to control the individual. This includes: (a) behavior control, (b) information control, (c) thought control, and (d) emotional control. In extreme instances, like Jim Jones, there is the communal isolation of the group. This isolation was true of Mormonism at its founding. However, the argument can be made that their isolation was due to persecution or rejection. Mormonism today does not have the same level of social structures as the past, and Mormons today are free to function normally within a given society. They are not socially destructive (like the Moonies). They can function economically and can exist in significant numbers without

social disruption. At the same time, they exercise much more of the other aspects of control that one would expect in a normal religious situation. One example is the mandatory two year missionary service. This creates a level of discipline and vested interest in the group not seen in non-cultic groups.

Should We Vote for a Mormon?

According to Pastor Jeffress, he would hold his nose and vote for Romney against Obama (my words, not his). He suggests that Mormonism is not a sociological cult. In my estimation, Mormonism has made significant sociological changes, but I am not prepared to say it has changed enough to be taken off as a cult in the sociological sense.

Jeffress says his voting priority is: Perry (genuine Christian); Romney (non-Christian with Christian values). I can understand this priority based on moral or Christian values. At the same time, I am not persuaded that Christians naturally make the best political leaders. If the political issue of the time is to make some moral progress (e.g. end slavery [as in the past], end abortion on demand [current issue]), then it *may* make sense to regard Christian values as priority.

In reality, it makes better sense for Christians to win people to Christ than to engage in political activism.

If enough people say we don't want abortion on demand, politicians of whatever stripe will quickly change their position! Just look at Obama. He obviously does not have an issue with the gay lifestyle. But America is against gay marriage and he cannot afford to support gay marriage, so he adopts an electable position: marriage is between a man and a woman. We don't need his conviction for him to support the right cause. We just need to direct his policy by our votes.

If we look at past Presidents, an interesting non-pattern emerges. Nominal Christians: Barak Obama (D); Bill Clinton (D); George Bush 42 (R); Ronald Reagan (R). Practicing Christians: Jimmy Carter (D); and George Bush 44 (R). I think most people, Republican or Democrat, cannot see a pattern of a

President being a good Christian, effective in governance, one that aligns with their own conviction.

Even though I am a pastor and Christian values are at the top or almost at the top of my considerations. I don't consider Romney's Christian values relevant to his electability. My consideration is the negative implication of what happens if he is elected. It would make Mormonism acceptable.

It is clear from the media and the politicians that those with the megaphone already consider Mormonism acceptable. But it is not. It is a theological cult. I still regard it as a sociological cult though it is not the worst of sociological cults.

Romney is probably a laid-back Mormon (his convenient pro-abortion position in the blue state of Massachusetts). That makes him acceptable to many Christians. But that also makes him dangerous. The public accepts Mormonism because of their capable marketing. A President who is a Mormon makes Mormonism a non-cult. Regardless of whether Romney promotes a Mormon cause, the Mormon Church would love to gain respectability even if it were a nominal Mormon in the Whitehouse. I believe Romney as President will increase the number of Mormons as it becomes respectable.

One problem I have with a Mormon as President is that a Mormon has to adopt a set of beliefs from the BM that is completely irrational. This means we would have selected a person with a proven track record of inability to look at information rationally. I would not vote for Linus (in Peanuts) who believes in the Great Pumpkin, regardless of how successful he may be in business, or what Christian values he may uphold.

If I have to choose between a nominal Christian and a cultist, I would probably choose the nominal Christian. In my view, Romney is the worst possible Republican candidate. But why does he rank so high in the polls? Because the Mormons have done such a good job at creating a facade of respectability that we think they are just a different Christian group with a wacky past of

polygamy. It is not their past polygamy that should concern us. God gave allowance for polygamy. What God did not give allowance for was polytheism, or the pride that says, "I will be god." Don't get distracted by Mormon polygamy.

It is Mormon polytheism that is the bigger issue.

Brethren, do not be deluded by Mormon marketing. You are certainly free to think it is acceptable to vote in a Mormon. We are all entitled to our opinions, but we are not entitled to our own facts. All I ask of you is to form your opinion of Mormonism based on facts, not media representation, not Mormon brand marketing, not the opinions of vested politicians. Know the facts and form your opinion from there.

Is Mormonism a cult? I hope this article points you in the right direction to the questions.

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