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MORMONISM AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

Rick Anderson

Abstract: To many outside the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and to some of its members), the Church's teachings and practices appear not only socially and experientially constraining, but intellectually restrictive as well, given its centralized system of doctrinal boundary maintenance and its history of sometimes sanctioning members who publicly dissent from its teachings. Do these practices amount to a constraint of intellectual freedom? This essay argues that they do not, and offers several possible explanations for the commonly-asserted position that they do.

Recently a friend from whom I had not heard in many years contacted me through Facebook. He had come across an essay I had written in which I had expressed my testimony of the gospel and described how I had come to settle on it despite struggling with certain doubts and questions. My friend had long since left the Church and adopted a lifestyle quite aggressively at odds with its teachings, and he now took the opportunity to encourage me to switch sides. He reported that the good feelings I had described as being one side effect of gospel living and spiritual communion—feelings which I largely attribute to the influence of the Holy Ghost—are equally available to people living outside the strictures of the Church and priesthood covenants and that when enjoyed outside of

that context, they come with another, more important corollary benefit, which he characterized as “intellectual freedom.”

His message amounted to a missionary epistle: looking at me, he saw a person unnecessarily constrained not only socially and experientially (denying myself the kinds of associations and pleasures that he enjoys) but also intellectually (cutting myself off from inquiry and engagements that are available to those who have escaped the restrictions of Mormon commitment).

This was by no means the first time a friend or acquaintance has expressed either bemusement or outright incredulity about my spiritual life. I grew up far away from the centers of the Church and was one of only two active Mormons in my large high school on the outskirts of a major eastern city. I served a proselyting mission in a part of the world where Mormons were little known and even less understood. I have pursued a career in academia, where, for the most part, religious belief of any kind is assumed to be, at best, a cute and mostly harmless category error and, at worst, perniciously at odds with the life of the mind and with all that is best about the human spirit. So I have dealt with skepticism about spiritual things throughout my life. Nevertheless, this communication from my friend was a first for me: a message from someone who had grown up in the Church, served a mission, and later made the conscious decision to turn his back on what he had once believed, and who was now serving as a missionary for the other side, hoping to convince me to defect.

His message was lengthy, and in it he bore testimony, explaining how he had come to know that the Church was not true and that Joseph Smith was an impostor who had gotten caught up in his own pseudo-prophetic hype (in this case, the sacred text of conversion was Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*). I had encountered, worked with, and been friends with other disaffected and former Mormons, of course, but this

was the first time I had found myself the object of a direct and unambiguous apostate proselyting effort.

His invitation was not particularly tempting to me; I found his invitation to a life of chemical experimentation and sexual libertinism unattractive at virtually every level. Nor did I find my testimony shaken by our exchange, though it did make me sad and gave me cause for reflection. One aspect of his message in particular left me with a troubling question: why do so many people—both inside and outside the Church—associate gospel commitment with a restriction on intellectual freedom?

There are a number of possible explanations for this position. Here I will suggest three: the first (correlation) based on a more charitable interpretation of the motives of those who hold it, the second (confusion) on a relatively neutral interpretation, and the last (condescension) on a more negative assessment. These interpretations are meant to be neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

Correlation

The first answer is both obvious and reasonable: the Church is undeniably hierarchical, and its fundamental teachings are centrally determined and distributed. The “correlation” program¹—so much resented by many intellectuals both inside and on the margins of the Church—is specifically designed, in part, to define what is taught by Church officers and representatives and what may legitimately be said to represent official doctrine and policy. It is undeniable that correlation (or, indeed, any officially sanctioned system of doctrinal boundary maintenance) represents restriction. As a member of the Church one may *believe*, without sanction, any number of things that fall outside the realm of official or approved

1 Frank O. May, Jr., “Correlation of the Church Administration,” in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:323-325.

doctrine—but to *teach* such things in church as a youth leader or a class instructor or bishop would be to set oneself up for correction by those in authority over the Church. To resist such correction would mean, in all likelihood, being released from one's position as a leader or teacher, and in some cases might mean disfellowshipment or excommunication (the mechanism by which the Church separates itself from the teachings and/or behavior of a member who refuses to submit to its strictures).

Does correlation represent a restriction on intellectual freedom? In a way, yes—teaching is certainly an intellectual activity—but with two important qualifications. The Church's system of correlation puts restriction on

- a) what one may teach or publish (rather than on what one may think or believe),
- b) while one is a member in good standing of the Church (rather than on what one has the right to say or teach in general).

These two qualifications are extremely important.

First of all, it is essential to understand that members of the Church are given tremendous latitude in what they may *think or believe* as members. The Church teaches very specific things about, for example, the nature and character of God, what constitutes proper order in meetings, and how and to whom one should pray. However, members are almost never officially queried about what they believe. Some may believe that God is noncorporeal, others that it would be right and proper to open a sacrament meeting with prayer to our Heavenly Mother, others that the Church should never have renounced plural marriage. These members may harbor such heterodox beliefs indefinitely without sanction or any formal consequence, even if their beliefs are known to others. It is important to understand that while the Church espouses articles of faith, it imposes no creed. The only time a Mormon is asked by a Church authority

to account for his or her beliefs is in the interview for a temple recommend—and even in that context, the questions are mostly about behavior; those that deal with belief are strictly limited to the most fundamental truth claims of Mormonism, and address them only in very broad terms. The reality is that Mormons are free to believe all kinds of things, and many of us sitting in sacrament meeting might be surprised (and perhaps shocked) to know what private beliefs are harbored by the brothers or sisters sitting next to them.

Again, this is expected and fully tolerated in the Church. Only when heterodox beliefs are expressed as heterodox teaching does the person who holds those beliefs begin to run the risk of sanction—and even then, the risk only becomes serious if the person refuses to submit to correction by those the Church has designated to maintain doctrinal boundaries. Disagreeing with the Church is not cause for Church discipline; persisting, despite attempts at correction, in publicly teaching principles at odds with Church doctrine may be. This is not to say that what one believes does not matter; it matters very much, which is why the Church expends so much effort in teaching what it holds to be correct doctrine. It is only to point out that while the Church works hard to create belief in saving principles, it does virtually nothing either to root out or to punish incorrect beliefs that are privately held.

While disfellowshipment and excommunication may be experienced as harsh punishment by some Church members (and perhaps as a relief by others), it is important to recognize that such measures are not infringements of one's right to think or speak what one wishes; that right remains fully in place regardless of one's affiliation with the Church. It is, rather, an expression of the Church's right to decide what it will teach and who may speak on its behalf. All of us have the right to speak according to our conscience, but none of us has the right to insist on continued association with an organization whose

expressed tenets and principles are at odds with the ones we publicly teach. I can no more expect the Church to let me teach what it considers false doctrine in Sunday School than I could expect People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to let me hand out free bacon in its meetings. Correlation is, ultimately, not a restriction on intellectual freedom at all; it leaves no one less free to believe or teach whatever he or she wishes. Instead, it is a way for the Church to maintain the integrity of its teachings. Those who wish to espouse contrary teachings are completely free to do so—but the Church is also free to disassociate itself from them.

Confusion

A second possible answer to the question “Why do so many people associate gospel commitment with a restriction on intellectual freedom?” may have to do with confusion about the difference between behavioral and intellectual restriction. In my experience, outside observers of Mormonism (including my apostate friend) are particularly likely to conflate the two. When confronted with a person who, by embracing a religious discipline, denies herself free and unfettered access to sexual adventure, many of these observers see someone being held back not just from the full pleasures of life (which is alarming enough) but from valuable experiences that might broaden and deepen her social development. Encountering someone who declines to experiment with mind-altering substances, they see someone who is missing out on an opportunity to expand his intellectual universe. (The latter attitude has been particularly prevalent since the 1960s and 1970s, a period during which drugs—especially hallucinogenics—were touted for their “mind-expanding” properties.)

To be sure, there is an intimate connection between experience and knowledge; someone who participates in sexual or chemical experimentation certainly gains knowledge that

those who refrain from those activities do not have. What is less clear is whether such experiences result in growth that can meaningfully be characterized as “intellectual.” Intellectual freedom must mean more than simple behavioral license. Do I constrain my children’s intellectual growth by stopping them from walking into traffic? Do laws that forbid me to shoot my neighbor represent a restriction on my intellectual freedom? There is no question that someone who survives being run over by a car and someone who kills another person with a gun have both gained knowledge and experience that the rest of us have not. But have their intellectual horizons really been enhanced? Arguably, in fact, they have. Is that enhancement sufficient to justify the abandonment of parental guidance or the repeal of laws against lethal violence? If not, then the conflation of experience with intellectual growth—while to some degree understandable and even defensible—is one that should, perhaps, be regarded with some skepticism.

Condescension

So far I have proposed two answers to the question “Why do people associate gospel commitment with restrictions on intellectual freedom?” Neither of these two answers necessarily reflects poorly on the good faith of those who make that association; an honest person of good will might reasonably see the Church’s correlation program as intellectually restrictive, and might confuse mere behavioral license with intellectual freedom. But I see a third possible explanation for this view, and it is the more unfortunate one.

This explanation is rooted in condescension. In many cases, the conflation of religious commitment with intellectual restriction seems to arise from logic that goes like this: *No intelligent and well-informed person would believe such drivel, and no person of reasonable independence of mind would submit to correlation, so where religious belief and submission*

are found they must be the result of ignorance and moral weakness. Religious organizations being what they are, such ignorance may not be the result of native stupidity, but probably comes from being actively kept in the dark by religious leaders, refused access to complete information about the Church and its history, discouraged from asking difficult questions, and bullied into submission.

From this perspective, it is unthinkable that an intelligent and well-informed person might commit to the gospel *as a result of her intelligence and in light of relevant evidence*; instead, it would have to be *in spite of the believer's intelligence and the lack of evidence*. For someone committed to this view, intellectual limitation is less a consequence of religious commitment than it is an explanation for it: the idea that informed, open-minded, and strong-willed people might submit to religious discipline is absurd. For those who view religious belief in this way, the question "Why do people associate gospel commitment with a restriction on intellectual freedom?" is a virtual tautology, one as silly as asking why people associate famine with hunger or talent and motivation with high musical achievement. As one might expect, those who harbor this attitude find it threatening and upsetting when faced with what appears to be an intelligent, open-minded, well-informed believer. An encounter with such a person creates cognitive dissonance, which can be most easily resolved by attacking and discrediting the person whose presence has created it—or (less easily) by converting the believer into a nonbeliever.

I have now worked in and around academia for 25 years, as a staff employee at one private university and as a faculty member at three public universities. Throughout my career I have been dismayed by the degree to which I see this viewpoint taken as an article of faith, one built on foundational assumptions that are not to be questioned. I see two problems with this viewpoint, one superficial and one deep. The superficial

problem might be called a social one: it leads to obnoxious behavior. The deeper problem is an intellectual one: it is both uninformed and irrational. I will conclude by examining each of these problems.

As for the social ramifications of condescension: most of us (no matter what our belief system) struggle to find the right balance between, on the one hand, what we feel is an obligation to share what we believe is true and to warn others away from error, and, on the other hand, our obligation to be kind to others and respectful of their own differing beliefs. For most of us this struggle arises both from a sense that our own knowledge and understanding are imperfect (and that we should therefore be careful about getting too preachy with others) and from a desire to forge and maintain happy relationships with those around us. When we presume to know so much about the nature of reality and the universe that we can confidently correct anyone whose beliefs about these things differ from our own, we are likely to drive others away. Most of us, no matter what our religious, social, or political persuasions, do not want to do this, and so take a certain amount of care when expressing the view that we are right and those around us are wrong. Those who do not take care in that way are often difficult to be around. This is a real though fairly superficial problem.

As for its irrationality: because human perception and intelligence are limited in their scope of effectiveness, the things that can be understood and the questions that can be settled by means of logic, perception, and measurement are also limited. It should be obvious that for this reason, definitive support for a purely materialist worldview will never be forthcoming—its logic would simply be too circular. What we are capable of establishing and knowing by scientific and intellectual means is bounded by our physical and intellectual capacity. Mormonism, like most religions, deals with propositions about the existence and nature of things that are located beyond those

boundaries. This means both that the fundamental principles of Mormonism are not provable by science or logic, but also that they are not disprovable in that way.

None of this is to say that logic, physical evidence, and science have no role to play in our understanding of sacred things. If Central American archaeologists were to turn up metal plates containing the prophecies of Zenock, or if an early copy of *View of the Hebrews* heavily annotated in Joseph Smith's hand were to show up in a root cellar in upstate New York, most of us would need to reexamine some of our assumptions about Mormon origins. But neither event would definitively prove or disprove the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, or the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or the reality of premortal existence. Belief or *disbelief* in things that exist beyond the frontiers of our perceptual capacity will always be a matter of faith—faith that may be informed by more or less evidence and support, but faith nonetheless.

This is what takes anti-religious condescension out of the realm of mere rudeness and into that of irrationality. It is the condescension of one faith position towards another faith position, based on the fact that the latter is a faith position. As an intellectual stance it is internally inconsistent, bordering on incoherent. Ultimately, atheism is not logically defensible. From a purely intellectual standpoint—given the limits of human capacity—the only defensible position is agnosticism. And with agnosticism should come a certain degree of humility—enough humility, in any case, to short-circuit the kind of corrosive derision and condescension that those of the atheist faith too often direct at religious believers (and, it must be said, vice versa).

Conclusion

For those of us who are believers—whether in Mormonism or in any other religious tradition that makes truth claims

about a reality beyond the reach of physical perception—there is a serious problem and a daily struggle. It lies in the fact that the world in which we live bombards us constantly, relentlessly, and in a million different ways with evidence of its existence. Furthermore, we are constantly shown evidence for the silliness of believing in things that cannot be demonstrated scientifically or proven logically: we see gullible people taken in by religious charlatans who prey on their credulity; we see putatively supernatural phenomena debunked by new scientific knowledge and technologies; we encounter myriad truth claims about the supernatural that are in conflict with our own beliefs but seem, on the surface at least, no less reasonable. The message that “what you see is all there is” assaults our minds and our senses constantly.

By contrast, the message that “there is something more than this” comes to us much more quietly, much less predictably, and in a manner that can easily be confused with emotion. Unlike scientific evidence and logical inference, spiritual communication cannot be generated at will; we can make ourselves more or less available to it, and can place ourselves in situations in which it is more or less likely to come, but that is about all we can do. Fortunately for us—and I see this as an example of divine grace—it is also true that the things we do as Mormons to make ourselves spiritually available, and the places we go in which to open ourselves up to spiritual influence, provide us with ancillary blessings and benefits: as we serve others, we grow in love for them and in connection to them; as we take the sacrament and serve in the temple, our hearts are calmed and our minds become reflective; as we empty our lives of that which the gospel teaches us matters least and fill it with those things that matter most, a conviction of the truthfulness of the gospel distills upon our souls in much the same way that dew accretes to the stem of a flower—not by propositions communicated through a still, small voice, but in a

manner that seems unbidden and to have come from nowhere². These ancillary blessings and benefits create a spiritual and intellectual context that gives meaning and significance to the propositional messages of that still, small voice when they do arrive, and these experiences can create a conviction, or testimony, that these messages come from someplace other than either one's own mind or the aggressive and noisy world that badgers us so constantly to accept its authority as total and absolute.

A proselyting missionary from that world might argue that the benefits I have described are, first of all, self-deluding and, second of all, dwarfed by the pleasures and glories that the world offers. He might argue that when I serve in the Church and deny myself some of those pleasures and glories, I am simply increasing my investment in the Mormon value system and thus becoming less willing to question its validity. In strictly logical terms, I cannot muster objective and sharable evidence sufficient to prove him wrong. But in strictly logical terms, I am perfectly happy to leave the question open while I continue, in experiential terms, to reap the undeniable blessings of a life of gospel commitment. I cannot prove that the freedom (intellectual and otherwise) I experience as a Mormon is greater and deeper than the mere liberty I would experience outside the Church. But I see no reason (intellectual or otherwise) to trade the former for the latter.

Interestingly and perhaps ironically in the context of this essay, the Prophet Joseph Smith used explicitly sensory—even sensuous—language to describe what it feels like to recognize and embrace eternal truth. “I can taste the principles of eternal life,” he said,

and so can you. They are given to me by the revelations of Jesus Christ; and I know that when I tell you these

² See D&C 121:45.

words of eternal life as they are given to me, you taste them, and I know that you believe them. You say honey is sweet, and so do I. I can also taste the spirit of eternal life. I know it is good; and when I tell you of these things which were given me by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, you are bound to receive them as sweet, and rejoice more and more.³

I am a witness of the deep truthfulness of this statement. I cannot prove that what I am tasting are the principles of eternal life, but I can say without any doubt that they are delicious — and that their deliciousness is available to any who will come and see, and taste, and feel.

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3 Joseph Smith, Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1938, rpt. 1972), 355.

