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Latter-Day Living

What do you think of when you think of Mormons? Maybe at first it's religion and Utah. Maybe missionaries or community. Maybe you even think of the Tony Award-winning musical *The Book of Mormon*. As you think more, it might devolve into negative things, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia. You might think of a cult. But what do you really know about the Mormon church? Why do we think so negatively of it? The church is often mocked, made fun of, and is the source of many controversial press releases. In an article from Greenhaven Press, Christopher Hitchens wrote about how he believed that the Mormon church bared many similarities to a cult. He says that the church holds a "weird and sinister belief system" and compares the Mormon church to Scientology. He also mocks their beliefs about the second coming of Christ (Hitchens). In the musical *The Book of Mormon*, many songs make fun of or generalize the Mormon religion, such as the song "Turn It Off," which emphasizes homophobia in the Mormon church, or "I Believe," which makes fun of Mormons being devoted to their religion and mocks the beliefs and origins of the church (Trey). The worldwide popularity of the musical has created many negative beliefs about the Mormon religion. Though the church is far from perfect, the problem really arises when the individual people are put into boxes just for being Mormon. But we're getting ahead of the game. We should start at the beginning: the origins of the church and its beliefs.

Chapter 1: What is Mormonism?

The Mormon Church, also known as the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, was founded in 1830 in New York by a man named Joseph Smith. “[He] was trying to find out which church to join, and prayed about it, and he received an answer to his prayers, and had a vision of Saints of God and Jesus Christ,” explains Curtis Atkisson, a practicing Mormon living in San Francisco. “We believe the church of Jesus Christ, and we believe that it’s his church that was reestablished in modern times,” he continued, telling the story of the formation and beliefs of the church. In the 1800s, Smith and his followers were constantly on the move because of religious persecution. The church prospered in Illinois before locals were upset at the rumors that members of the church practiced polygamy, and chased them out of Illinois, killing Smith in the process. After this incident, the church settled where it still resides today, in Salt Lake City, Utah (Bailey).

It is important to remember that many of the teachings in the church sprout from Christianity, making many of the beliefs of the LDS Church similar to other churches that follow the Bible. In the early days of the church, many converts were students of the Bible, not the Book of Mormon. Later on in the church’s lifespan, church leaders emphasized the book more, creating a combination of scriptures and teachings (Reynolds 9). Today, the Book of Mormon is a very important scripture to the LDS Church, and both the Bible and Book of Mormon establish the many beliefs and practices of the church. A Mormon living in the Bay Area, Annie Shattuck, outlines these basic beliefs:

We believe that Jesus Christ is our savior and that it's through him that we will be able to live again someday, and we believe that he guides a leader, a prophet on the Earth today, and that through that prophet we receive council, revelation, about what we're supposed to do and how we're supposed to follow him. And so, ultimately, the goal is to live together with our families, someday in heaven, and so we believe that's possible through Jesus Christ. (Shattuck)

Spencer Atkisson, a 14-year-old member of the LDS Church, spoke about the values of the church. “So, I think it’s definitely to have integrity, that’s probably the main value,” he said. “But other values you could say like, you know, truth telling, being nice, being kind. Another one actually, which is kind of strange, is having pride in your job no matter what you do. So even if you’re like a refrigerator repairman, you know, like, have pride in that, and things like that.” The scriptures that state and solidify many of these ideas are The Articles of Faith. These articles stated core beliefs like having faith in God, following the gospel, honoring the law, being honest, and doing good works. (Lyon 623)

A very unique and distinguishing factor of the Mormon church is the belief in revelations – in other words, religious visions, or direct inspiration and guidance from God. “We believe that everyone should be trying to get inspiration and revelation to conduct their lives and help other people,” Curtis Atkisson articulated. “We believe that God continues to speak through revelations to humans and that we still need help and we still need guidance.”

One of the final and very important values emphasized by the LDS Church is family. “We believe that the family is the best unit, so you should prioritize your family over basically everything. I don’t really know how to explain it, but you’re supposed to like, put in your list of

priorities, family's supposed to be #1," Spencer Atkisson said. He also mentioned how this set him apart from many of his peers, as he spent a lot more time with his family than others. There are various ways that Mormons distinguish themselves from others, as their experience and daily lives are also different. So what is living as a Mormon like?

Chapter 2: Living as a Mormon.

The Mormon lifestyle isn't completely different from everyone else, but their religion gives them unique experiences and a slightly different daily life than other people. The Atkisson family has a very contrary experience, as they live in San Francisco, a very diverse city with all different flavors of race and religion. This diversity doesn't mean there aren't other Latter-Day Saints nearby, as LDS member Nettie Atkisson explains. "I mean the thing is, being in San Francisco, you're so close to big populations of Latter-Day Saints, like, Church of Jesus Christ members, there's so many, because California, Idaho, Wyoming, Southern California, there's tons of Mormon settlers that went out in those areas." Nettie claims. "Despite living a few states away from Utah, you can still feel the Utah influence here, for sure." Granted, the Mormon influence is there, but the diversity of the Bay Area affects how Californian Mormons live their church-going lives. Shattuck explains, "I actually really like being a Mormon in California...I get to meet a lot of people through my congregation. We call them wards. A lot of them have a very different backgrounds. They come from all over." In California, particularly in the Bay Area (where the interviewees cited in this paper reside), there is a hub of people of the Mormon religion, an estimated 100,000 members (O'Brien).

Though they live in California, they nonetheless continue to do the regular things a Mormon would do, such as church on Sundays, or if you're a teenager, seminary. "So seminary a class where you learn about different topics, so on every different year you go through a different book of scripture. So old testament, new testament, Book of Mormon, and then doctrine and covenants," Spencer Atkisson explains. He goes on to talk about the discussions he has with other church members that are in seminary, as they talk about the different things they observed or learned from the scriptures they read. It isn't always Spencer's favorite activity because, though much of it is online, there is one 6 a.m. class every week. "I'm not really quite fond of [seminary] because it's tiring to get up at 5:30 in the morning on Tuesdays, but yeah," he shrugged. Many Mormon teens have a similar experience to Spencer. In a study by researcher Christian Smith, it was found that Mormon children were more likely to keep the faith of their parents than kids of other religions, and were also more devoted, talking to their families about religion and praying more often (Riess 3). The family also attends church every Sunday, and because Sunday is their sabbath, they usually use the time to be together as a family, which sets them apart from other people who don't have specific days to do things like that (S. Atkisson).

Another factor of being part of the LDS church that affects the lives of church members is the law of health they have, called the Word of Wisdom. Nettie Atkisson explains, "A lot of people focus on what we can't do, but it's not just 'don't drink coffee, don't smoke, [and] don't do drugs,' it's also 'eat tons of vegetables[and] limit how much meat you eat'— it's a whole law of health." This law from the 1800s urges church members to think about the substances they put in their body, and to be wise about how they treat themselves. Many people who don't understand much about the church focus a lot on the don't's of the law and rarely think about the

reasoning (N. Atkisson). Shattuck spoke about how this law of health creates a slight problem in her social life as alcohol is prohibited by the Word of Wisdom. This created a disconnect between her and other people. “We don’t drink alcohol, for example, and that’s a big part of our culture in the US; people get together and they get drinks together,” she said. Because Mormons “only constitute about 2% of the American population” (Gilgoff), many Mormons have trouble connecting with their peers.

Another very important aspect of the Mormon life is the mission. Missions are an effort by the LDS Church to teach the gospel around the world and recruit new members. New missionaries train beforehand at missionary training centers and can be assigned anywhere in the world, from Texas to Paris. According to the church, a large amount of Mormons go on missions, with over 70,000 missionaries and 400 missions (“Latter-Day Saint”). Though some believe that missionaries force others to convert, Curtis Atkisson refuted that point, explaining that the first thing you are taught when training as a missionary is it does no good to force anyone into the church, and that people must come willingly and have their own experience. Nettie Atkisson mentioned how her mission to Argentina has still helped her today, saying that her learning of the language of Spanish has been useful. She also mentioned how important it was to solidify her faith, forcing her to ask tough questions about God and Jesus, and reflect inwards on her own beliefs. Shattuck expressed a similar view, saying that, “it made me think, is this something I really believe in?” The mission is an important rite of passage for many Mormons, and when asked if he would ever go on a mission, Spencer Atkisson mentioned why it would be beneficial to him: “I think it would just be cool to go out and learn stuff, and be in a different community and learn [about a] different culture and [a] different area.”

Chapter 3: Misconceptions and Discrimination

As Spencer Atkisson so aptly remarked, “Misconceptions. Where to start?” Every religion deals with many misconceptions about beliefs and practices, and the Mormon Church is no different. Some of these misconceptions have led to discrimination, something that is a part of the church’s history and still happens today.

Some of the smaller misconceptions can seem almost silly and ridiculous. Spencer Atkisson talked about how some people believed that Mormons did not brush their teeth on Wednesdays. Others think that Mormons are the same as the Amish. Both Spencer and Curtis Atkisson spoke about this misconception, and denounced it. A very common misconception about the current Mormon religion is polygamy, a man having more than one wife. When the Mormon Church first began, polygamy was allowed and practiced in the church, but today it is not and you would be kicked out of the church for it. Many believe it still happens and connect Mormons to polygamy, when in fact it is an outlawed practice (C. Atkisson).

One of the more recent misconceptions is that all Mormons hate gay people. This simply is not true. While there are still many in the church who are against the LGBT+ community, as time progresses, the younger generation has become more and more open to the community. Forty percent of younger Millennials who are part of the LDS Church said that same-sex marriage should be legal in all 50 states. This is a large shift forward when compared to the meager 20 percent of LDS Church members in the Boomer and Silent generation who agreed with that (Riess 144). However, this claim that the LDS Church is against gay people is not without validity. In 2015, church leaders at the LDS Church were told to treat gay couples as

“apostates,” defined as a person who renounces their religious beliefs or principles (“Apostasy”). Many believe the church is against gay people because in 2008, the church was against the legalization of same-sex marriage. However, this was not popular among many Mormons, as many left the church in 2015 due to the abrasion to the church’s policies (“Stung”). But the inclusion of these policies does not mean that every Mormon believes the same thing, just as not every Catholic person hates gay people despite past controversies about it. In her book *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church*. Jana Riess succinctly illustrates this dual nature:

In August of that year [2017], the LDS Church publicly supported the LoveLoud festival in Utah, building bridges with the LGBT community and proclaiming its commitment to “foster a community of inclusion” in society. A few weeks later, however, the church added its name to an amicus brief in support of a Colorado baker who refused to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex couple. (Riess 234)

The church has many paths it could go down in the future, and no definitive choice has been made. This change is slow, and the church seems to be taking two steps forward and one step back, as seen by the contradicting legislation in the quote. In the meantime, not every church member should be judged so quickly as a homophobe.

A final misconception is that women are treated badly or unfairly in the Mormon church. Similar to the LGBT issue, there is history to assert this claim. In the 1970s and 1980s, the LDS church helped to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, created to give further equality between men and women, doing this by using their organization’s money, power, and people to campaign against it (White). The church resisted second-wave feminism, has clearly defined gender roles,

and still describes itself as believing in the “traditional” family. However, many of these past rules are being changed and improvements are being made. Women were allowed to sit on the highest levels of church governance, parental leave from LDS Church employment was expanded and paid leave is now offered (Bailey), and new teaching programs are working to join boys and girls together in the teaching of ministering and other church lessons in order to create more equality and more leadership opportunities for girls (Riess 95-96). A lot of the gender roles or mistreatment of women in the church also really depends on the bishop, a high priest with authority over the local church (“Bishop”). Because bishops are volunteers, there is a large variety. Some are very sexist and some are extremely inclusive. It depends on where you are and who your bishop is (N. Atkisson). Nettie Atkisson describes this phenomenon across religions very well, saying, “there is though, a misconception that women are treated poorly, [but] I think people think that sometimes of Muslim women if they wear a hijab, or some Jewish women, that you’re oppressed and that you’re unhappy in what you’re doing, and someone has forced you into this, and you have no control of your life.” Everyone is different and has different experiences.

These misconceptions about how Mormons treat women can sometimes lead to very poor experiences. The belief that all Mormons are sexist and that Mormon women are oppressed led a boy to slap Spencer Atkisson. “One kid slapped me, because he thought I was sexist, and then I asked him why, and then he had no reason,” Spencer said. This was after the kid learned that Spencer was part of the LDS Church. Not all bad experiences are physically violent, though. Nettie Atkisson described a photoshoot she was on in New York, and how the models were not very kind to Mormons. Since the photoshoot was for Utah-based Franklin Covey, the models

made remarks like, “Thank goodness we’re not doing this in Utah cause you can’t drink coffee in Utah! And, oh my gosh, everybody in Utah is so ugly! Plus they’re so weird!”(N. Atkisson). She mentioned other New York experiences where similar things happened when people learned she was from Utah. “When I was on photoshoots in New York, and people found out I was from Utah, they’re like, just, oh my gosh what an idiot, she must be so stupid, oh we don’t need to respect her, she’s nobody we need to worry about”(N. Atkisson). People’s misconceptions can become extremely hurtful to others, as they judge someone based on one single fact about them rather than their character and integrity. Curtis Atkisson talked about this, saying he was typecasted because of his religious beliefs and how he wanted to be seen as an individual rather than be clumped together with the label “Mormon.” He also talked about how his wife, Nettie, would get death threats online for expressing her beliefs, and how many Mormons he knew were fired from their jobs because of their beliefs (C. Atkisson). And the Atkissons are not the only ones. An article from CNN claimed that “nearly half of American Mormons say they face a lot of discrimination in the United States”(Gilgoff). It also states that “six in ten [Mormons] say their fellow Americans as a whole are uninformed about the LDS Church” (Gilgoff).

This religious discrimination traces very far back in Mormon history. When founder Smith and his followers travelled to Missouri, they were faced with major prosecution and forced to flee (Batten). In fact, in Missouri, it was legal to kill someone of the Mormon faith until 1976 (C. Atkisson). The people of the church were also chased out of Illinois and were forced to go to Utah, very far away from the east coast where the majority of the country’s population was at the time. All of this was due to prosecution of Mormons for their religious beliefs (Batten).

Conclusion: Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover

Essentially, the Mormon church is much more complex than the stereotypes given to it over the years. Mormons have faced discrimination due to these misconceptions. At the end of her book, Riess explains how there are two roads that the church could go down: inwards towards themselves, or outwards towards the world. It could become a contained culture, or expand to reach other cultures (Riess 233-234). The church may have already begun down a path of further expansion, as the children of gay parents are now able to be baptized and blessed, reversing a 2015 decision (Bailey). But that is just the church's future. Many members of the church have already gone down a path of acceptance inspired by their religion. Spencer Atkisson said, "The religion teaches, you love everyone like yourself, God loves everyone equally, and I think that applies to everyone, no matter race, status in society, sexuality, anything like that."

"[If] you meet one more Mormon, you've met *one* Mormon. They are all so different," Nettie Atkisson said. This sums up a lot of what is important when learning about other people and other religions, and not putting people into boxes. When that happens, you end up with misconceptions and discrimination, people saying ignorant things and generalizing entire groups, such as saying all Mormons are sexist or all people from Utah are ugly. But when you get to know people, get to know a religion, get to know the day-to-day lives and the beliefs, you get one step closer to understanding. Researching with accurate and varied sources is important too. Simply looking something up and finding cheap answers can lead to further misconceptions (S. Atkisson).

Personally, I believe that in the end, if religion helps to guide someone to be a better person, do the right thing, and be more loving, then we should find a way to learn and understand

rather than bash one another simply for believing or not believing or having a certain faith rather than another. Learning about experiences different than your own and expanding your horizons is beneficial to everyone. When asked if it was worth it, Curtis Atkisson eloquently explained the church's positive effect on his life, wrapping up everything with simplicity:

Sometimes, yeah would it be easier, you know? Maybe not to believe, and it might be, in ways, in other ways it might not be, there's other benefits that I think accrue to a life of, a purposeful life of faith, but it's been worth it, I find it helps provide a lot of meaning in my life, and purpose and direction and sort of, framework, you can think of it as maybe the soundtrack to your life, and for me it's been important and helpful for me personally.

(C. Atkisson)

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