

## **AFTEREFFECTS OF COMING OUT OF MORMONISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM**

By  
Janis Hutchinson

NOTE: The word “*sect*” will be used when referring to the mainline LDS Church. The word “*cult*” will be used when referring to Mormon Fundamentalism, a radical offshoot of the LDS Church.)

This article is not intended to degrade individuals in the Mormon Church, but to specifically explain the aftereffects of leaving a tightly structured religion and its very different doctrines, so that when Christians find former members entering their church they will understand what they are going through and be able to help.

Many former members have said, “*If I had known about the aftereffects of coming out of the Mormon Church, I never would have left!*”

This was how I felt during the first few years of my difficult transition. Unaware that professional help was available, I found myself faced with the frustrating task of restoring my life. After coming out of two aspects of Mormonism—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the mainline Utah church), and a radical offshoot group of Mormon Fundamentalism, which I refer to as a definite cult, it took approximately eight turbulent years to sort things out, rid myself of Mormon baggage, and reach the point of feeling I was on a par with the rest of the human race. It was a very traumatic experience.

In the early stages, discouraged at my slow progress, I was tempted to return to the mainline Church to which I belonged to for 35 years.

The years spent in that church were not as bad as the Mormon Fundamentalism—that is, there was no physical abuse. But cult-like, the Mormon Church repressed independent thinking, forbid questioning, taught unbiblical doctrines, required blind obedience, and deceived members regarding its history. Because I had burned the last bridge behind me by requesting my excommunication, I knew I could not return. And I certainly had no inclination to return to Mormon Fundamentalism.

Mormon Fundamentalism, the more extreme of the two, practiced a United Order where everyone was required to give 100% of their goods and finances. It exacted rigid and demanding rules, required robot obedience, promoted poor living conditions, and tightly curtailed free will.

In that group I was held prisoner for nine months in a small 8x10 room after they caught me sneaking away to a Christian church. I was accused of “spiritual adultery,” “worshipping at the altar of Baal,” and was ordered to repent of my sin and renounce the Christian Jesus. I refused. Never could I deny Christ! My health deteriorated rapidly. I grew very thin, slipped in and out of deep depression, suffered through crushing disappointments, mental and emotional agonies, unanswered questions, and found my

faith shattered in suspecting that Mormon doctrines I had believed in for so long, might be wrong. I felt let down and cheated when I realized the truth. I lost all incentive to live. (See my story, *Escape From the Cult* .)

Eventually, I was found unconscious and at that point nearly died. The leader, concerned that my death might become a reality and bring in a police investigation, then saw to it that I was given better food. I slowly regained enough strength to plan my escape.

Nevertheless, in spite of my improvement, I was left with prolonged health problems. I had to wear a neck brace to control crippling pain spasms in my neck and back. A severe hemorrhage required six blood transfusions. With a completely paralyzed colon, I faced a possible colostomy and later underwent surgery for other related matters.

At the point of my exodus, I felt I was free and my problems over—but not so. I was unaware of the length of time it takes to overcome the emotional aftereffects.

I was facing eight years of disorientation, flashbacks, conflicting emotions, nightmares, irrational behavior and continuing health problems. I grappled with disorientation, an inability to relate to people, and was in constant fear that the doctrine of “Blood Atonement” would be carried out on me. Plus, I had anxiety attacks and recurring nightmares that the Fundamentalist leader would find me and force me back.

I also had to deal with two painful and disabling kinds of culture shock:

Societal culture shock—trying to cope with reentry into society. I found stores and people foreign, like they were from another planet. Plus, after nine months of isolation I had to learn how to verbally communicate all over again.

Religious culture shock. Hoping to find a substitute for the Mormon Church in a traditional church and pastor, I was unprepared for the jolting encounter of entering a very different kind of church. Struggling to overcome my disappointment in not finding the pastor's experience comparable to Joseph Smith's (direct revelation from heaven, similar doctrines, etc.), I lay awake at night agonizing over the emotional tug-of-war between wanting to harbor Mormon beliefs, yet embrace new ones that were biblical.

In addition, I was tormented with “what if” questions: What if the Book of Mormon is true! What if Joseph Smith was really a prophet! What if I become a daughter of perdition by leaving!

Further, I was plagued with the thought that Mormonism's longevity and success must prove it had a divine origin and I must return. If I didn't, God would disown me. Daily, I struggled with the temptation to go back—not to the Fundamentalists—but to the Mormon Church.

In addition, I suffered losses—the idea of extra-biblical revelation; a leaders' claim of supernatural contact with God; the absence of the Mormon community; friendships;

goals; absolute answers; self-esteem; sacred myths; elite status—all the things that once convinced me I belonged to God’s true church.

Hurled into a state of bereavement, I went through the stages of grief similar to a widow(er) losing a spouse. I experienced the death of my Mormon identity, self-image, basic needs, securities, a cult leader as father/mother figure, strong causes, heavenly rewards, and living prophets. Having no immediate substitutes to fill the void affected a critical sense of tragedy as I underwent one psychological crisis after another.

Further, I had to deal with Christians who did not understand my distress and who thought I should overcome my problems in less time. They also belittled my former LDS membership, not realizing that a former member still retains a degree of loyalty and will be offended by their remarks. To them, I was an exasperating paradox. *“How can she miss the sect when she knows it was wrong?” “How can she be happy to be free, yet want to return?”*

Failing to understand that I was a victim of psychological enslavement, their consensus was that I was possessed of a “cult devil.” Accused of this too soon can drive a new convert back. Christians, including pastors with all their training in counseling, are unprepared to address the problems that new converts experience. They may be knowledgeable in how to biblically refute a sect’s doctrines, but as far as giving effective help afterward they are at a loss. Even counter-cult organizations are ineffective in doing this, since their main focus is disseminating literature and go no further.

Often I’m asked: *“What was the most difficult aspect of having been in the Mormon Church and Mormon Fundamentalism?”* Admittedly, the one where I was held prisoner was horrendous. But I have to say that the worst part was the emotional turmoil upon coming out. Dealing with all the psychological aftermath proved to be the most soul-wrenching, excruciating experience of my life. Contributing greatly to this assessment is the fact that during that intense and turbulent time I had no idea why I was suffering, although I could describe my symptoms.

If someone had only explained to me that what I was going through was “normal,” and that I wasn’t “losing my mind” or “cracking up” as many former sect and cult members have expressed, it would have facilitated a faster recovery. It was only later, after much research and talking with other ex-members, that I gained an understanding of the normalcy and inevitability of the painful coming-out process.

Every former sect member who has contacted me, including ex-Mormons, has one common lament: *“If there were only someone who understood what I’m going through and could help me on a one-to-one basis. Not even my pastor understands!”*

There is a desperate need for Christians to become knowledgeable about the transition process, in order to provide needed support.

While it goes without saying that the best helpers are those who were once sect members

or ex-cultists, individuals who have never been in them can also qualify. All it takes is caring, a willingness to study the phenomenon, and to make oneself available. This, plus educating the victim about the aftereffects of coming out, can reduce the time of recovery. I strongly recommend my book *Out of the Cults and Into the Church: Understanding and encouraging ex-cultists* (available on Amazon) which describes the transitional problems in detail, and gives specific instructions on how to help.

The following is taken from my book:

### **LOSSES EX-CULTISTS EXPERIENCE**

- loss of extra-Biblical revelation
- loss of a leader's supernatural contact with God
- loss of a divinely called leader
- loss of friends and community ties
- loss of believing one is right
- loss of belonging to the "only true church"
- loss of absolute answers
- loss of sacred myths
- loss of elite status
- loss of respect (in the Christian community)
- loss of being called to positions by revelation
- loss of high goals
- loss of self-esteem
- loss of the sect leader (disappointment in the Pastor)
- Loss of community bonding (clan-like)

**MORE AFTEREFFECTS** (I did not necessarily go through every one of these, but I list them all because they are typical of what others have experienced.)

- Sleepless nights;
- Conflict between harboring cherished beliefs, and at the same time trying to erase the sect's indoctrination
- Torment of wondering if it was a mistake to leave
- Plagued with the thought that the sect's continued success must prove it had a divine origin
- Hiding problems from Christians working with them
- Dealing with misconceptions of Christians who believe ex-members' problems occur before conversion, not after
- Recurring nightmares
- Suicidal tendencies
- Experience two syndromes: Loss and Grief, and the Death and Dying
- Disorientation
- Fear the sect's retaliation for leaving
- Unable to let go of the sect's sacred stories
- Memory loss
- Hallucinations

- Feel they are “cracking up”
- Behave as if a death occurred (death of their cult)
- Culture shock (societal and religious)
- Inability to break mental rhythms of chanting and meditation (specific cults)

**IF NO HELP, THEY WILL DO ONE OF FOUR THINGS:**

Stay in church and be miserable  
Start church-hopping  
Drop out from Christianity, entirely  
Return to the sect

END

Ms. Hutchinson holds a B.Th. and M.A. in Theology, and is a frequent speaker on Christian TV and radio talk shows, in college classrooms, churches and seminars, and has personally counseled former cult members.

Her book, *Out of the Cults and into the Church* (Kregel 1994), is the first book to detail the difficult problems ex-cultists from various fringe religions face, particularly in adjusting to Christian churches. The book is also designed so that it can be handed to new converts who will, for the first time, be able to understand their problems and why they are having them.

She is also author of, *The Mormon Missionaries: An inside look at their real message and methods* (1st ed. Kregel 1995; 2nd ed. Cross & Pen Ministries), and a Spanish version, *Misioneros Mormones*. This book unmasks the evangelizing plans of Mormon missionaries, reveals step-by-step procedures and strategies, and exposes purposely concealed doctrines. This book is a must for anyone investigating the Mormon Church. It is also excellent for ex-members who need confirmation that they made the right choice in leaving.

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