

IS MORMONISM A CULT?

by Kim Siever

There are many Web sites on the Internet devoted to spreading the message that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a cult. Oftentimes these “articles” use subjective definitions of the word cult in order to further their message.

In this paper I attempt to explain exactly what a cult is and whether such a definition also applies to the LDS faith. In addition, I attempt to determine how much of the definition applies to Christianity as a whole.

Before I begin, I must point out that members of the LDS Church esteem Jesus Christ to be their leader, not Joseph Smith. For that reason, members are often confused by an insistence by some non-LDS to draw a distinction between LDS and “Christians,” as if the one group is not simply a subset of the larger group.¹ But for the sake of argument, I will distinguish Christianity and the LDS faith. Let us begin.

The American Heritage Dictionary (AHD) defines the word *cult* as:

- A system or community of religious worship and ritual.
- The formal means of expressing religious reverence; religious ceremony and ritual.

This is a more traditional definition, one that is not necessarily what comes to mind when people hear the word *cult*. Thus AHD has also included a more “modern” definition:

- A religion or religious sect generally considered to be extremist or false, with its followers often living in an unconventional manner under the guidance of an authoritarian, charismatic leader.

If we just left this paper to hinge solely on this final definition, which is what many Christians seem to do, then both the LDS faith *and* Christianity can both be considered cults.



Dr. Michael Langone, editor of *Cultic Studies Journal* compiled a list of characteristics to help define a cult. In the balance of this paper I will use Dr. Langone’s list, mentioning if each characteristic applies to Christianity and/or the LDS faith and why.

The group is focused on a living leader to whom members seem to display excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment.

Christianity: No longer. But this definition could be applied to Christianity in its early years and during its inception.

LDS: While Latter-day Saints do focus on their current prophet, their commitment is not excessive.

The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members.

Christianity: Yes. Christ gave numerous charges to His followers to go out and teach the people throughout the world and to baptise them. Christian missions that continue to fulfil this commandment are set up throughout the world.

LDS: Yes. There is a proselytising system set up in the LDS Church that has over 60,000 missionaries throughout the world trying to bring people into their Church. Lay members are also told they have the responsibility to share the gospel with their friends and families.

The group is preoccupied with making money.

Christianity: Many Christian sects collect monetary donations from their members. I wouldn’t label it as a preoccupation.

LDS: The LDS Church has a tithing system where its members donate 10 percent of their increase. I wouldn’t label it as a preoccupation.

Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.

Christianity: This is only apparent in verbal persecution of those who decide to leave Christian sects. In times past (particularly the Middle Ages), violence and even death were often end results of dissent.

LDS: Questioning and doubt are not discouraged—in fact questioning is encouraged in many instances of LDS canon—in personal circumstances, excommunication may result in instances where individuals encourage dissent among the Church's members.

Mind-numbing techniques (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, and debilitating work routines) are used to suppress doubts about the group and its leader(s).

Christianity: Prayer is encouraged throughout Christianity. Some Christian sects practice repetition of phrases as a means of retribution or regular worship. Speaking in tongues occurs in the meetings of some Christian denominations.

LDS: Prayer is encouraged among Latter-day Saints.

The leadership dictates sometimes in great detail how members should think, act, and feel (for example: members must get permission from leaders to date, change jobs, get married; leaders may prescribe what types of clothes to wear, where to live, how to discipline children, and so forth).

Christianity: I can't think of instances where Christian's actions are dictated in any of the above examples. However, the Bible teaches that Christians should act as their leader (Christ) and prescribes a list of guidelines to help them do so.

LDS: Latter-day Saints are not dictated to with regards to the above examples either, except maybe in the area of clothing. —While Latter-day Saints are encouraged to wear modest, unrevealing clothing, such encouragement cannot be viewed as a dictatorial mandate.

Members of the LDS Church do not require permission from leaders to date, change jobs or to get married; however, it is required to be interviewed by local Church leaders in order to enter a temple (necessary for those who want to marry in the temple).

The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s), and members (for example: the leader is considered the Messiah or an avatar; the group and/or the leader have a special mission to save humanity).

Christianity: Christ is considered the Messiah and as a Saviour among His followers. As mentioned previously, Christians try to witness and proselytise to non-Christians. Christians also believe that non-believers will be consigned to hell, while those who accept Jesus as their Saviour will be saved into heaven.

LDS: Latter-day Saints do not consider Joseph Smith or current leaders to be messianic. They do, however, also have programmes to bring people into their church. Latter-day Saints believe that everyone who has not denied the Holy Ghost will be able to be saved into a heaven.

The group has a polarized us-versus-them mentality, which causes conflict with the wider society.

Christianity: This is apparent among many Christians, particularly those more extreme. This was more predominant in earlier times when all non-Christians were considered heathens and of a lower status.

LDS: Many Latter-day Saints congregate, particularly in higher concentrations of believers, and in some cases going as far as limiting the services they use (doctors, mechanics, dentists, etc) to those provided by other Latter-day Saints. In areas of low LDS concentrations, this phenomenon is not as common.

The group's leader is not accountable to any authorities (as are, for example, military commanders and ministers, priests, monks, and rabbis of mainstream denominations).

Christianity: Prophets and apostles were accountable to Christ and God.

LDS: Joseph Smith and subsequent LDS prophets and apostles were and are accountable to Christ and God.

The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify means that members would have considered unethical before joining the group (for example: collecting money for bogus charities).

Christianity: No.

LDS: No.

The leadership induces guilt feelings in members in order to control them.

Christianity: Any guilt is taught to be a result of the Holy Spirit and necessary for repentance.

LDS: Any guilt is taught to be a result of the Holy Spirit and necessary for repentance.

Members' subservience to the group causes them to cut ties with family and friends, and to give up personal goals and activities that were of interest before joining the group.

Christianity: Christ taught that He had come as a sword to set family members at variance with each other.² He also promised increase and exaltation to those who sacrificed family and friends for His sake.³ New converts give up only goals and activities not in harmony with Christian principles.

LDS: Converts to the LDS faith are sometimes "disowned" by family members who do not agree with the denomination's teachings. New converts give up only goals and activities not in harmony with LDS principles.

Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group.

Christianity: This would not be the case among all members of Christianity though many do end up devoting significant portions of their personal time to humanitarian efforts.

LDS: Lay members fill positions in the LDS Church. There is no paid clergy. In this respect, Latter-day Saints often devote personal time to the Church. This is the case with almost all members.

Members are encouraged or required to live and/or socialize only with other group members.

Christianity: This is not encouraged; though many Christians do this anyway.

LDS: Latter-day Saints are encouraged to choose their friends wisely, and local leaders will encourage young members to date only those of their own faith. They are, however, encouraged to befriend others not of their faith.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is not to label Christianity as a cult as many do to the LDS faith. Nor is it to prove that articles that label the LDS faith as a cult are correct in their presentations. The purpose behind this paper is to show that many, if not all, objective cult definitions that can be applied to the LDS faith can also be applied to Christianity. Articles that perpetuate the belief that the LDS faith is a cult only serve to elicit visions of soothsaying, witchcraft and Satanism into readers' minds. True Christians would never lead others to such erroneous beliefs.

FURTHER READING

Lindsay, Jeff. "Is the LDS Church a Cult?" www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_cult.shtml (10 October 2001).

Peterson, Daniel C. and Ricks, Stephen D. *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints*. Provo: FARMS, 1992.

Robinson, Stephen E., *Are Mormons Christian?* Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991.

Wells, Robert E. *We Are Christians Because...* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985.

NOTES

1. By most standards, the LDS can be viewed as a denomination within the larger classification of Christianity, much as one would view Protestants, or, more particularly, Lutherans, Baptists, or Catholics.

2. Matthew 10:34-38.

3. Matthew 19:29.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim Siever has been an active member of the Church since his parents converted in 1978. He served in the Utah Provo Mission and has held various leadership positions in the Church following his return. Since 1996, Kim has been actively involved in the online LDS

community. In addition to the many LDS Web sites he has created and maintains, he has frequently participated in various forums to defend and discuss the LDS faith. Kim and his wife have been married since 1995 and are the parents of two children.

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The Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research (FAIR) is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing well-documented answers to criticisms of LDS doctrine, belief and practice. Seeking to assist the lay member and scholar alike to respond to intentional and well-meaning attacks on individual faith, FAIR helps publish articles and books that defend the LDS church, operates a Web site that receives thousands of visitors

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