

Leaving Church: Resisting religious authority and community in online-offline dimensions

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Abstract

Membership in religious organizations often entails dedicated attention to its dogma, moral vision, sacred leadership and community, yet some members ultimately choose to leave. In light of the recent rising and unprecedented number of Mormon church resignations, this paper examines the motivations and experiences of those who choose to leave the church, including the underexamined role of digital and social media in the disaffiliation process. Drawing from rich interview data with ex-Mormons, results will discuss their exit tactics of resistance as well as the extent and ways in which they (re)appropriate traditional and new religious texts, and connect to new networks in their transition.

Keywords

Online Religion, Religious Authority, Disaffiliation, Mormonism, Turning Points

Membership in religious organizations often entails dedicated attention and acceptance of its basic dogma, ultimate moral vision, sacred leadership and community. Yet some members choose to leave their religious organizations, resist religious authorities and (re)appropriate religious texts as they exit the church.

Of particular interest here, are the unprecedented and rising numbers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) members who are disaffiliating from their organization. Disaffiliation is typically used to describe individuals who have formally resigned their church membership, in the case of the LDS, that would refer to those who have asked to have their names removed from the church manifest (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989). At a recent General Conference meeting, LDS Church leadership reported that the number of members leaving is at the highest it has been in the 175 year history of the church (Carlson, 2012, para. 1), which consists of about 14 million members worldwide (Phillips, Cragun, Kosmin & Keysar, 2011).

This phenomenon creates a relevant and timely need to examine the religious disaffiliation process, including the previously underexamined role of the Internet in religious resistance and transitions. As members disaffiliate, they are seeking out new sources of knowledge, information and support. Online support groups, and sometimes their off-line counterparts, provide a way for those in faith transition to connect with others. Additionally social media like Facebook and Reddit, allow disaffiliated members to share their new identity profiles, create alternative and critical texts, as well as share their resistance

tactics and experiences. Because the LDS church has a strict hierarchy and bureaucracy, and is characterized by some as having exclusionary organizational norms, (McBride, 2007), digital and social media may play a significant part in facilitating access to alternative religious information, widening the possibilities for members to encounter different religious ideas, symbols and practices beyond that which is available in their “stake,” which is composed of five to sixteen neighborhood “wards” of 500 or less members.

Indeed, prior research studies on internet and religious authority highlight how religious authority, including virtual “cults”, is challenged by online religious activity that provide exposure to alternative viewpoints and debates on official teachings (e.g. Dawson, 2000, Piff & Warburg, 2005), which weakens the “hierarchy chain of command” from visionary leaders to grassroots groups (Barker, 2005, p. 70). However, reviews of more recent research suggest that the extent of members’ deconversion and enervation of religious authority in light of digital media may be less straightforward and profound (Cheong, 2013; Cheong & Ess, 2012). The internet may have, to some extent, facilitated changes in the personal and organizational structures by which religious leaders and members operate. But active and accommodative practices by some clergy, and related to their engagement with digital media, may enable them to reconstruct the legitimacy and informational norms to adapt to the changing religious sphere (e.g. Cheong, Poon & Huang, 2012.) Consequently, religious followers particularly members who are increasingly skeptical and disbelieving, face complex challenges in negotiating online, offline and oftentimes competing spiritual texts and authoritative performances, even as firm dissenters attempt to resist official dogma, and oppose organizational culture and commitment.

In line with the theme of this year’s AOIR conference, this paper will discuss the motivations and experiences of individuals who choose to leave church and their exit tactics of resistance, including the extent and ways in which they (re)appropriate traditional and new religious texts, and connect to new networks in their disaffiliation process. Prior research on religious disaffiliation have focused on demographic variables such as education level (e.g. Caplovitz & Sherrow, 1977), socio-psychological traits like rebellion against parental control (e.g. Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1993) and life events where positive life experiences, such as job promotion, are associated with increased faith while negative experiences, such as death of a family member, are associated with loss of faith (Albrect and Cornwall, 1989). For example, Bahr and Albrect (1987) conducted in-depth interviews with 30 former Mormons to explore the stages of disaffiliation. They found that there was no single reason for disaffiliation; however, lifestyle and belief conflicts were the most common reasons cited for disaffiliation as well as family needs, such as attending the same church as their spouse (Bahr & Albrect, 1987). They extended Brinkerhoff and Burke’s (1980) typology to add a third dimension, “rejection”, to the previous two-dimensional scale of religiosity and communal identification. This typology allowed the researchers to identify patterns of disaffiliation, the most common of which they termed “drift,” or “a gradual, often inadvertent, disaffiliation from Mormonism” (Bahr & Albrect, 1987, p. 193).

Yet the dominant emphasis in trait-based and stage research on religious disaffiliation is less illuminating if we want to understand what it is like to content with, and leave a religious organization. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the role of the digital and social media in these religious transitions, although some recent research on ex-Mormons (e.g. Burnett, 2012) point to the importance of discussion boards and websites during the disaffiliation process. Therefore, this study will investigate Mormon exit narratives, as narratives lead us to a deeper understanding of “individual experience, especially in relation to significant transitions” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 245). Results from interviews among ex-Mormons who have been disaffiliated from the LDS church for at

least one year, will discuss the temporal and online-offline ways in which ex-Mormons are not only consuming critical texts but also reinterpreting and contributing to alternative discourse.

In doing so, this paper contributes to the growing body of digital media research on user centered resistance and appropriation, as well as to religion online research. While earlier studies on the Internet and religion studies tend to focus on the emancipatory potential of virtual faith communities, more recent third and fourth waves of research are lodged in the historical and contextual circumstances of online faith behaviors, attending to intimate online-offline connections in spiritual appropriations of digital media (Campbell & Lovheim, 2011, see also the Special issue of *Information, Communication & Society*, on Religion and the Internet, December 2011). Larger implications of this study will also address the reconfiguring of meaning and participation for individuals in other authoritarian forms of organization.

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